

# Evaluating SD-WAN Service Providers

By: Ashwath Nagaraj

As the pace of migration to the cloud increases, enterprise executives are looking to expert partners to effect digital transformation. It's essential to make the right choice, which of course starts with knowing what to look for in your partner.



When evaluating an SD-WAN service provider as part of a digital transformation initiative, enterprises must consider three essential factors before making a purchase decision. The service provider under evaluation must be able to guarantee agility, application performance, and network security.

## Agility and Application Performance

The last thing enterprise executives need is a problem with their network that halts business operations. It's obvious why: for most companies, if their Internet connectivity and communications are down, their businesses are handcuffed. A service provider under consideration therefore needs to be responsive and flexible as well as able to effectively transfer the organization's existing data and applications.

A major concern of enterprise executives is a provider's ability to resolve performance and connectivity issues. According to the "[2019 State of the WAN](#)" report, Aryaka found that two of the top three biggest fears enterprise leaders face when considering a digital WAN transformation are difficulty in managing or maintaining the network, and slow access to cloud services and SaaS applications.

These both tie into an overarching theme of the report, which is about increasing network complexity. In today's rapidly evolving, digital-first environment, network complexity is here to stay. That's why, while it is inevitable for some issues to arise during change, having someone who knows how to help makes a huge difference.

According to a recent [McKinsey & Company study](#), about 28 percent of business owners reported complexity as a major hurdle in digital transformation. CIOs interviewed in the study said they can't staff employees with the necessary skillsets to handle complex network migrations. A managed SD-WAN solution provider with a global footprint should be able to handle complicated network processes—and therefore help the company through the critical stages of transformation.

That's why enterprises should look for—and value—agility. At its most basic, an agile enterprise is able to quickly adapt to a changing environment: how they do business, who they partner with, and how quickly they can adapt to the competition or changing political dynamics, to name just a few business objectives that demand agility for best results or to gain competitive advantage. An agile WAN becomes a major component of this, with the ability to quickly bring up new sites and applications, either on-prem or via pre-wired links to the public cloud.

Also critical to agility is the ability of the enterprise to select what data and applications to transfer, as well as to determine the where and when of the transfer. In many cases, this knowledge may not exist in advance, so any solution must be flexible enough to handle an enterprise's changing requirements. Given that every enterprise has a unique structure to its data, and that disruption can happen if the data and its structure are not transferred correctly, enterprise executives must receive assurance

that their selected service provider will handle their data with care and ensure that no interruptions occur during the process.

SD-WANs must be configured so that businesses notice improved network performance as an immediate, tangible benefit. This means, firstly, that the service must provide equal or better application performance than that offered by the existing data center architecture. It must offer the flexibility to adapt to the enterprise's existing workflows, and not the other way around.

This is accomplished via preconfigured connectivity to multiple IaaS, PaaS, and SaaS providers, optimizing performance for far-flung employees. And, depending on what services a business depends on most, certain cloud providers in certain geographies may hold an edge over others. In any case, as more enterprise applications move to the cloud, the flexibility of an SD-WAN offering with integrated multi-cloud connectivity delivers the required performance and, as a business outcome, increased productivity.

This cloud connectivity enables the promised agility of the cloud consumption model, where enterprises no longer deploy and manage their applications but instead consume them as a cloud-delivered service, thereby reducing their legacy application footprint and overlap. A managed SD-WAN service leveraging a network consumption model follows the same paradigm, where the enterprises consume rather than construct their WANs. The two—network and cloud consumption—make for a powerful combination that offers enterprises the agility required and ensures that the WAN doesn't stand in the way of their digital transformation.

## Network Security

Choosing the best managed SD-WAN provider also requires inspecting a company's compliance requirements and its ability to secure the enterprise's applications and data.

Solution providers must assure potential customers of their abilities to securely transfer a company's network to a cloud-based solution. By continually evaluating and certifying their performance, solution providers can assure clients that their expertise will lead to a successful outcome. To avoid any surprises, enterprise executives should do their research into how well these providers audit their services.

Additionally, global enterprises face unique legal landscapes wherever they conduct business, which means their WAN partners must be certified to operate and protect information around the world. Many global regions present unique networking or communication challenges. The WAN provider under evaluation should be able to:

- Provide certifications that they can handle compliance regulations from country to country,
- Provide intact connection through political or economic developments, and
- Protect data during the transfer to digital transformation.

The digital network transformation process can also leave data vulnerable to security attacks, which can lead to organizational crises and result in a company's loss of credibility, in addition to the high cost of data breaches. Ensuring a solution provider has the necessary certifications, such as SOC2 or PCI, or is adhering to local regulations such as GDPR or CCPA, is the best way for a business to put customer data concerns to rest and manage risk.

It is also crucial that existing organizational network security be compatible with an SD-WAN solution provider. Third-party security providers existing in organizational workflows may not sync up to a newly designed digital network connection, which falls on CIOs and CTOs to resolve. As the intermediary between security options and networking solutions, these enterprise executives must work with both parties to determine whether security packages in place will continue to be effective after a significant change to the network.

As the face of organizational data protection evolves with the strategies and capabilities of those orchestrating data attacks, SD-WAN providers can show their security benefits by demonstrating an up-to-date security compatibility program.

Ensuring a potential SD-WAN partner's ability to work with existing security offerings is a necessity to avoid a potential security crisis. As with the workflows and business processes mentioned earlier, SD-WAN security must adapt to the enterprise's requirements—not the other way around.

The growing shift in organizational storage and connectivity to the cloud requires that enterprise executives know exactly what qualities to look for in a WAN partner. By ensuring agility, compliance and security are priorities to the SD-WAN provider under evaluation, enterprise executives can save crucial time and money and help prevent a digital transformation initiative from becoming a costly failure.