

# Network Virtualization for Large-Scale Data Centers

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The growing use of cloud technology by large enterprises to support their business continuity planning (BCP) and disaster recovery planning (DRP) is leading to an increase in the scale of the systems used by data center operators. As this increase in scale progresses, it is becoming more and more difficult to build virtual and physical networks using existing technologies. For example, the number of virtual local area networks (VLANs) that can be built in a data center using VLAN technology is limited to 4094 because of the bit length limit of a VLAN ID. With physical networks, inefficiencies in network line use due to the use of Spanning Tree Protocol (STP) switching and the complexity of network design are becoming issues. In this paper, we summarize the conditions and technical requirements faced by large-scale data centers. We also discuss various approaches to meeting these requirements such as extending the number of virtual networks and building physical networks using an alternative to STP switching, compare them, and discuss their characteristics.

## 1. Introduction

The demand for high availability information processing and services such as data storage and Web hosting provided by an enterprise is increasing due to increasing emphasis on business continuity planning (BCP) and disaster recovery planning (DRP). High availability information systems require sophisticated design and operation, so enterprises are migrating to cloud services, and the scale of cloud data center systems is increasing.

There are various types of services offered by cloud service providers, including software as a service (SaaS), platform as a service (PaaS), and infrastructure as a service (IaaS). With IaaS in particular, multiple tenants (users) share use of the same physical system, so individual systems tend to increase in scale. With recent improvements in server performance, 20 or more virtual machines (VMs) can run on a single physical server. Regarding networks, 10 Gigabit Ethernet is becoming mainstream for server network-interface cards (NICs), so there is a need for even larger capacity and integration.

In this paper, we discuss networking requirements

related to the increasing size of data centers, methods for increasing the scale of network virtualization, and methods for building physical networks.

## 2. Requirements faced by large-scale data centers

Cloud-based IaaS providers currently operate on a scale of several hundred host servers and several thousand VMs.<sup>1)</sup> For discussion of the requirements large-scale data centers will face in the future, we have estimated the average scale of large-scale data centers between 2015 and 2020, as shown in **Table 1**. This data center scale will lead to several technical requirements.

- 1) Integrated management of server, storage, and network resources linked to a cloud operating system (OS).
- 2) Automatic configuration changes linked to live migration.
- 3) Isolation exceeding 4094 tenants (virtual networks).
- 4) Avoidance of traffic congestion.
- 5) Layer 2 (L2) network extension between remote data centers.

**Table 1**  
Average scale of large-scale data centers between 2015 and 2020.

Item	Sub-item	Reference value
Servers	Number of VMs	20 000 or more
	Number of physical servers	1024 or more
Storage	Storage per VM	75 GB or more
	Total storage	500 TB or more
	Number of storage devices	2×2 or more
Network	Number of tenants	2000 or more
	Number of virtual networks (VLAN, VXLAN, etc.)	8000 or more
	Connection points with Internet	2 or more
Facilities	Number of data center locations	2 or more

It will also lead to two business requirements.

- 1) Avoid vendor lock-in (avoid devices dependent on a single operator to capture business; adopt schemes supporting multiple vendors).
- 2) Support small start and scalability.

It should be possible to increase usability for end users and reduce customers' capital expenditure (CAPEX) and operational expenditure (OPEX) by creating large-scale data center IaaS that meets these requirements. In this paper, we discuss approaches and methods for meeting the technical requirements listed above.

In the next section, we discuss the use of IaaS infrastructures that manage servers, storage, and networks centrally, addressing technical requirements 1) and 2).

### 3. System structures for IaaS infrastructure

Data centers are actively moving to cloud technologies. The expected change in cloud system architecture is illustrated in **Figure 1**. Server, storage, and network resources are conventionally managed by separate departments. However, since virtual switches are implemented within the OS of hosts to support communication between VMs, it is more efficient to manage VMs and virtual switches together on a server. Moreover, VMs are often dynamically moved to a different server (i.e., "live migration"), so network settings must be changed automatically when a VM is moved. This means that there will be growing use of cloud operations management software ("cloud OS")

to integrate the management of server, storage, and network resources.

In particular, there is growing use of the OpenStack open source OS and the CloudStack open source infrastructure, which support a wide range of virtual infrastructure software and hardware products. As a result, systems that were conventionally built using hardware from only one vendor ("vendor lock-in") can now be built using hardware from various vendors.

In the next section, we address the VLAN limitation problem and present three possible approaches to solving it, addressing technical requirements 3) and 5).

## 4. Network virtualization for large-scale data centers

IaaS infrastructure technology, as with server virtualization technology, enables an independent network to be built for each tenant (the group or company using the service), as shown in **Figure 2**, so it requires network virtualization.

However, as mentioned above, the number of virtual networks (number of IDs) is limited to 4094, so large-scale data centers are becoming too large to be supported. Each tenant typically uses four or five VLANs depending on the structure of their systems, so only up to about 800 tenants can be supported in a single VLAN environment.

### 4.1 Approaches to network virtualization

Possible approaches to solving this problem include interconnecting VLAN environments, using label switching between VMs, and using L2 over L3

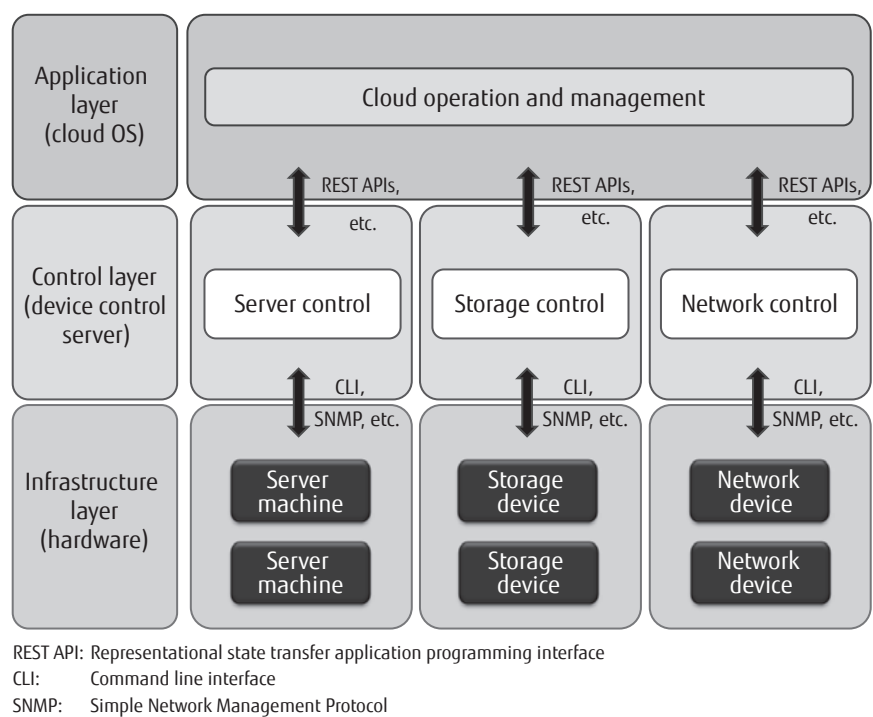


Figure 1  
Cloud system architecture.

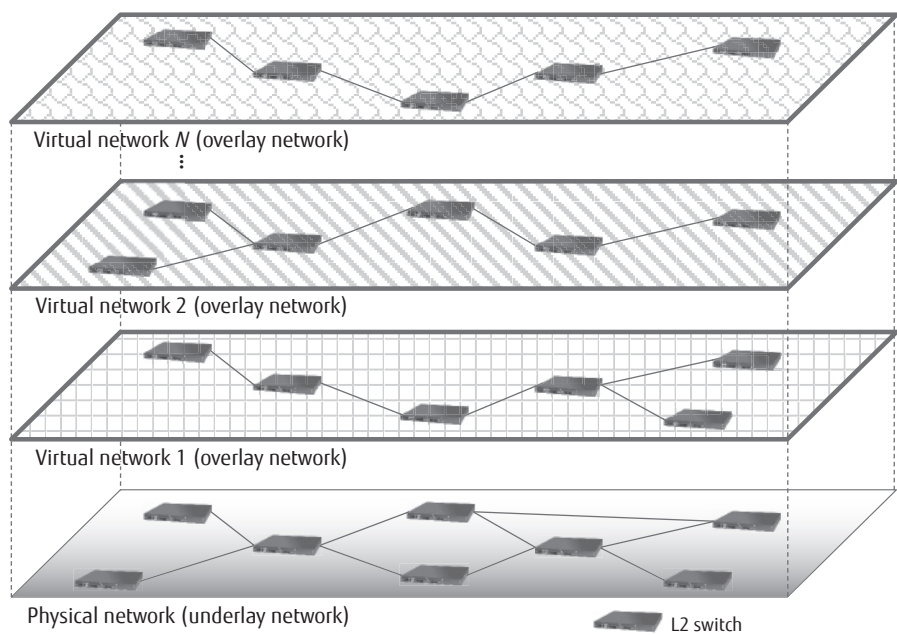


Figure 2  
Network virtualization.

tunneling.

- 1) Interconnecting VLAN environments  
The system scale could be increased by linking

multiple VLAN IaaS systems. The VLAN IDs for a given tenant are restricted to a single VLAN environment, and the IDs in other environments can be used by other

tenants. A VLAN ID conversion switch could be placed between environments to enable virtual systems spanning multiple VLAN environments to be built. With this approach, the number of virtual networks could be increased 4094 at a time by providing two-way connections between VLAN environments. Virtual networks could also be extended between data centers by using technologies such as virtual private LAN service (VPLS).

#### 2) Label switching between VMs

Communication among each tenant's VLANs could be controlled by using multiprotocol label switching (MPLS) rather than conventional VLAN switching. The physical network in the data center could be built using MPLS, and labels could be created for each tenant and/or each link between servers, thereby enabling packets to be transmitted between VMs. MPLS shim header labels have 20 bits, so over one million virtual networks could be built. Virtual networks spanning data centers could also be implemented using MPLS.

#### 3) L2 over L3 tunneling

L3 tunneling could be used instead of conventional VLAN switching to control communication between the VMs within each tenant. The number of virtual networks that could be configured is theoretically limited by the bit length of the tunnel identifier. For example, it is 24 bits for VXLAN,<sup>2)</sup> so over 16 million virtual networks could be built. Since only L3 connectivity needs to be guaranteed for interconnecting virtual networks between remote data centers, virtual networks between remote data centers could be implemented by L2 over L3 tunneling using existing L3 technology.

## 4.2 Comparison of network virtualization approaches

The advantages and disadvantages of the three approaches to network virtualization are summarized in **Table 2**. Since each has particular strengths and weaknesses, it is important to examine the requirements and network characteristics of customers carefully and consider which approach is best in each case.

#### 1) Interconnecting VLAN environments

Since the connections are made using existing L2 technology, networks can be built using L2 switches. This means that there is lower latency than in networks built using router-based methods.

#### 2) Label switching between VMs

Since the network is built using MPLS, its topology is more flexible than that of one built using VLAN switching, which is basically limited to a tree network topology due to the use of switches.

#### 3) L2 over L3 tunneling

Of these three approaches, the L2 over L3 tunneling approach is the most compatible with existing networks. Tunnels are terminated at a virtual switch within a server or at an external hardware switch, so intervening network devices can be conventional L2 or L3 network devices. This means that existing network devices do not need to be replaced, so the cost of introducing this approach is lower. However, terminating tunnels at VMs within servers requires the use of virtual switches within the server. Such switches can have lower performance, which increases latency and reduces throughput.

Task definition and framework regulation for L2 over L3 tunneling is currently in progress in the Network Virtualization Overlay 3 working group (NVO3

**Table 2**  
Comparison of approaches to network virtualization.

	Connecting VLAN environments	Label switching between VMs	L2 over L3 tunneling
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses conventional VLAN, new technology not needed</li> <li>• Existing know-how can be used.</li> <li>• Low-latency, L2-based networks can be built.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds L3 network, so network design is very flexible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing equipment, other than virtual switches, can be reused and can be built at low cost.</li> <li>• Physical network can be built independently of virtual networks.</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires connection such as VPLS between data centers</li> <li>• Must use equipment from one vendor to introduce latest load balancing technology (TRILL)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires expensive network equipment</li> <li>• Virtual switches within servers must support MPLS.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance degraded by tunnel-header overhead</li> <li>• Must support jumbo frames</li> <li>• Requires support for bidirectional IP multicasting between data centers</li> </ul>
Decision factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low latency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Network design flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Price and compatibility with existing equipment</li> </ul>

WG) of the IETF. Standardization discussions include several possible tunneling methods, such as VXLAN,<sup>2)</sup> NVGRE,<sup>3)</sup> and STT,<sup>4)</sup> so it is important to keep abreast of future changes.

In the next section, we discuss infrastructure for the physical networks (underlay networks) that support virtual networks (overlay networks) and ways to avoid traffic congestion, addressing technical requirement 4).

## 5. Physical network infrastructure supporting virtual networks

There are also various approaches to building the physical networks that support virtual networks, and it is important to select a suitable one. Increased traffic between servers due to an increasing number of VMs on servers is a concern, so the ability to increase the capacity of physical networks is needed.

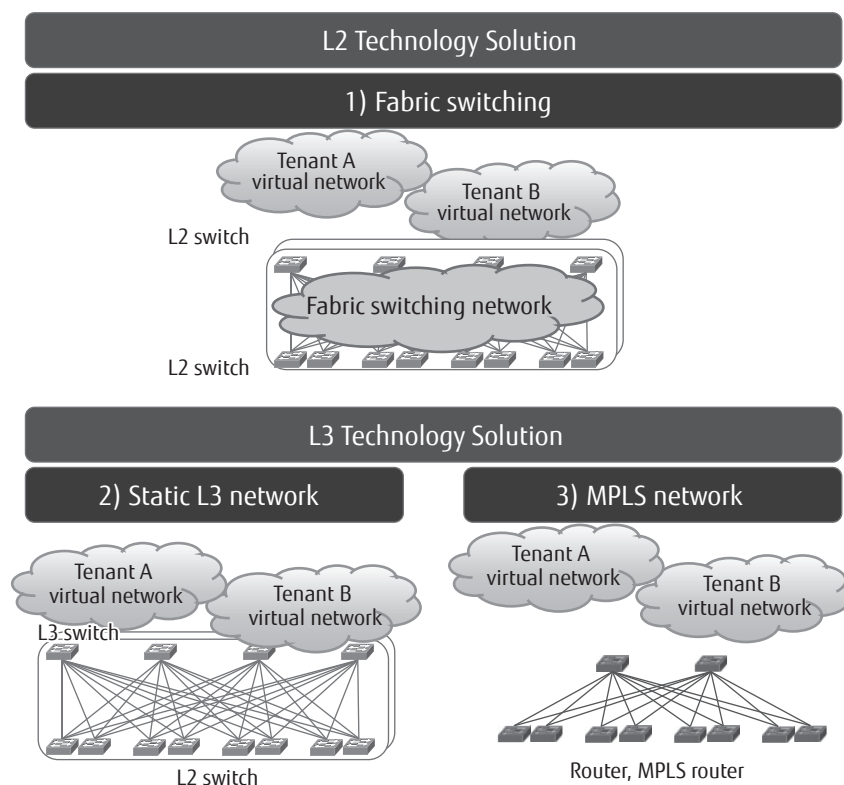
Normally, data center networks are organized in rack housing and consist of two layers, with a top-of-rack (ToR) switch in each rack and an aggregator switch accommodating the ToR switches, or into three layers, with an additional core switch that connects the

aggregator switches. In structures using conventional Spanning Tree Protocol (STP) switching, line waste occurs due to blocked ports, so it is important to build an efficient network, i.e., a loop-free one.

The approaches typically used to build virtual networks upon L2 and L3 networks include using fabric switching, using a static L3 network, and using an MPLS network. The resulting network configurations are illustrated in **Figure 3**.

### 1) Fabric switching

With this approach, multiple fabric switches are controlled using a single virtual switch. Instead of using STP switching, the switches use a switching technology based on Intermediate System to Intermediate System (IS-IS) routing (Shortest Path Bridging [SPB] and the Transparent Interconnection of Lots of Links [TRILL]) over Ethernet topology. This results in transmission based on a routing table without loops that can reach the destination, so the network is used more efficiently. The cost per route can be controlled, and loads can be distributed over multiple routes to avoid traffic congestion.



**Figure 3**  
Configurations of physical networks built using typical approaches.

## 2) Static L3 network

Networks that can explicitly specify the amount of traffic that goes to each aggregator switch are built by aligning multiple aggregator switches gathering traffic from ToR switches in parallel and specifying the IP address of an aggregator switch as the next-hop address. This load balancing reduces traffic congestion.

## 3) MPLS network

Networks are built using IP routing and MPLS, so loops are avoided, resulting in effective network usage. MPLS traffic engineering (MPLS-TE) can be used to balance the load over multiple routes and thereby avoid the concentration of traffic.

To build the virtual networks described in the previous section, VLAN environment connection, a L2-based technology, can be combined with fabric switches, label switching between VMs can be combined with MPLS networks, and L2 over L3 tunneling can be combined with any of the approaches because the virtual network is independent of the physical network.

The relationships between these approaches to building virtual and physical networks are shown in **Figure 4**. Fabric switches are built using L2 switches, so networks can be built with lower latency than with the other approaches. Static L3 networks can be built

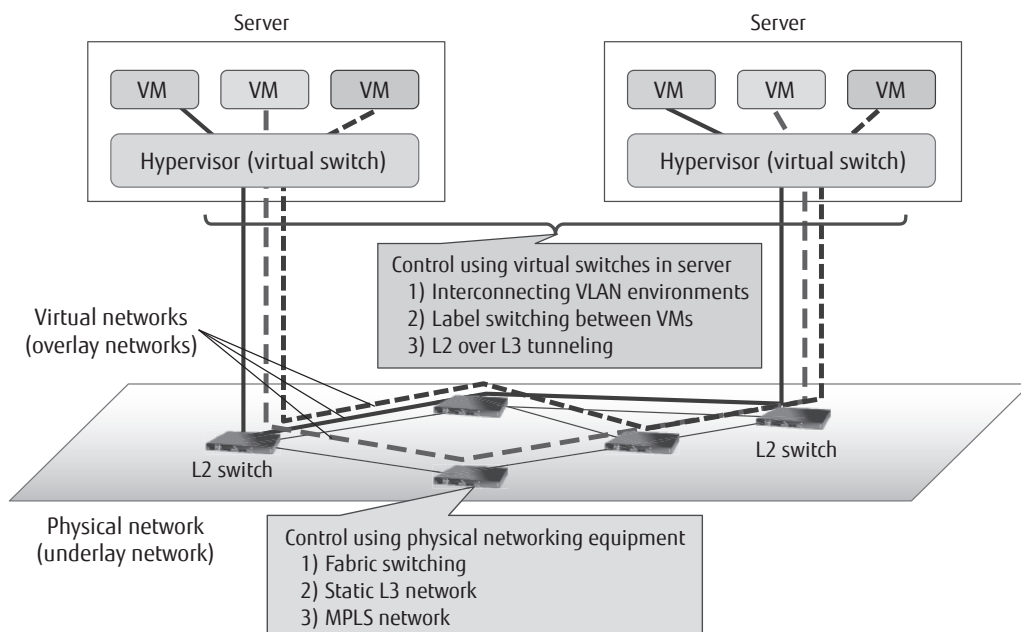
by combining existing L2 and L3 switches, resulting in lower cost and more stable operation. MPLS networks are built using MPLS, so network design is more flexible than with the other approaches. There are many actual examples, so operational risk for the network is low.

The advantages and disadvantages of each approach are summarized in **Table 3**. As with the approaches to building virtual networks, it is important to examine the requirements and network characteristics of customers carefully and consider which approach is best in each case.

In the next section, we discuss unified management of the virtual and physical networks we have discussed with respect to building an IaaS infrastructure.

## 6. Unified management of physical and virtual networks

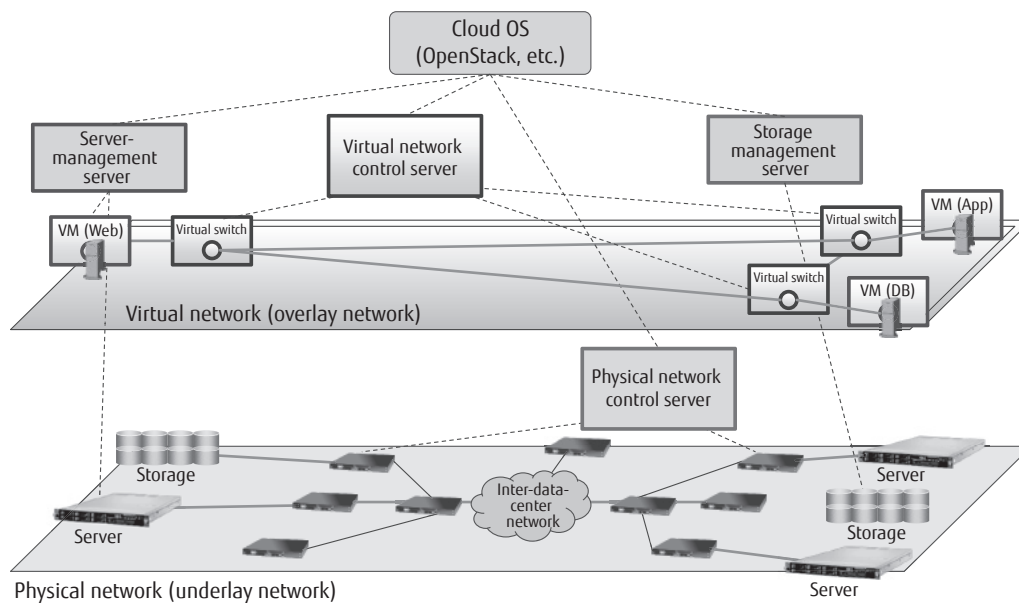
Network devices were conventionally configured by sending commands to one device at a time. The differences in command syntax between vendors make the work of configuring and/or modifying a network costly in terms of both time and money, so there is a desire to be able to control network devices centrally from a control server. Existing protocols for such control include command line interface (CLI) protocols and the Simple Network Management Protocol (SNMP).



**Figure 4**  
Relationships between virtual network and physical network structures.

**Table 3**  
Comparison of approaches typically used to build L2 and L3 networks.

	Fabric switching	Static L3 network	MPLS network
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low latency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low cost through use of existing equipment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible network design</li> <li>• Low risk due to using existing technology</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires products from single vendor</li> <li>• With TRILL, already 20 bytes of overhead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Configuration process difficult due to static configuration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Latency is relatively long due to use of routers and L3 switches.</li> </ul>
Decision factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost and low latency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compatibility with existing networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Network design flexibility and low operating risk</li> </ul>

**Figure 5**  
Unified management of IaaS system using cloud OS.

Both the physical network and the virtual networks of each tenant need to be controlled by a control server. Control of physical and virtual networks can be concentrated on a single control server, or separate servers can be provided to distribute control.

Cloud OS software for controlling not only the network but also the servers and storage devices in IaaS infrastructures is expected to become mainstream in the future. Current cloud OS products include OpenStack and CloudStack, which are open source, and several vendor-specific products. One advantage of the open source cloud OS options is that they avoid vendor lock-in, so devices from various vendors can be combined freely on the basis of cost and functionality. An advantage of the vendor-specific cloud OS option is that many vendors offer vendor-specific extensions for

functionality and administration that improve usability. It is important to select an appropriate cloud OS on the basis of the customer's functional and performance requirements.

An image of unified management in an IaaS system using a cloud OS is shown in **Figure 5**.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed various approaches to implementing virtual networks that can support large-scale systems. We also discussed approaches to building physical networks that can support such virtual networks.

The servers and storage devices used in data centers will continue to increase in density, and ultra high-speed interfaces (10 Gb/s or more) will become

mainstream. This means that traffic design will become even more important than it is now. For example, the placement of VMs should be carefully designed so as to localize traffic between VMs and to control traffic flowing into aggregation and core switches.

We will continue to research and develop network technologies that stabilize data center operation as data centers continue to increase in scale.

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