

Virtualization to the power of two

F5's recent acquisition of Acopia Networks adds important file virtualization capabilities to its product lineup. Dan Matte, senior vice president of marketing at F5, and Christopher Lynch, senior vice president of data solutions at F5 and former president and CEO of Acopia, spoke with writer Paul Gillin about how the combined solutions bring F5 closer to the vision of the application-aware network.



F5's Chris Lynch (left) and Dan Matte discuss the acquisition of Acopia and the role of file virtualization.

Q Why is file virtualization so important right now?

A Chris: Business trends like Web 2.0 are creating massive amounts of data, but it is difficult to manage that much storage manually. File virtualization is an insulating layer that enables you to modify and grow the storage layer without impacting users. When you have that layer in place, you can enforce policies within the network so that systems, not people, are managing the policies.

Q What's the difference between file and storage virtualization?

A Chris: Storage virtualization is about storage management and file virtualization is about data management. Storage virtualization encompasses block storage: groups of ones and zeroes. Files add information that helps you better understand what's being stored.

F5 optimizes the application layer and with Acopia, we also optimize the file layer. Ninety percent of the applications in the enterprise address files. So the relationship between Acopia and F5 is very complementary.

Q Should an enterprise virtualize both files and storage at the same time?

A Chris: Ideally, yes. If you're not managing the data layer below the application

layer, you're just moving the bottleneck. If you virtualize both, you can manage the actual user experience.

Q Which customers will derive the most benefit from file virtualization?

A Chris: Anybody who's consuming file-based data. Early adopters have been financial services companies like Merrill Lynch and Bear Stearns, oil and gas companies like British Gas, telecom companies like British Telecom and Comcast, and content companies like Yahoo.

Q Does file virtualization add any network overhead?

A Chris: Quite the opposite. We're creating a new level of efficiency in data flow that actually optimizes the network. You don't need to unnecessarily traverse the network or have redundant data to optimize access. We reduce the amount of traffic and eliminate bottlenecks.

Q How does file virtualization relate to application-aware networks and application management?

A Dan: Acopia extends F5's vision of how

the application-aware network can play in all facets of the data center. We can provide a layer of insulation or abstraction that protects every layer from failure or from something that happens in another layer.

Q What changes should customers expect to see as a result of this combination?

A Dan: Our existing customers will have access to this great file virtualization technology, and Acopia customers will learn more about the F5 product line. Over time, people will gain benefits from these products working together.

For example, WANJet, our solution that speeds up data over a WAN, and FirePass, our solution for distributing data across the WAN, can deliver some tremendous benefits when combined with virtualization.

Q How does this acquisition differentiate F5 from the competition?

A Dan: We're the only company in the market that has a fluent way of adding value to the traffic between users and the files they're accessing. The big IT vendors aren't in the conversation between the user and the application; they're blind to what the applications are doing. The pure file virtualization companies might be part of the conversation, but if something goes wrong on the network, they don't necessarily know about that.

Q What are the next steps?

A Dan: We're looking at how we can better utilize the vast amount of data that we manage: report on it, analyze performance, and isolate problems. We're also looking at how we can consolidate some of our technologies. *