

# LOW LATENCY SWITCHING: THE RACE TO ZERO!

By: Glen Feller,  
ONPATH Technologies

In today's highly competitive world, firms from every industry, both public and private, continually seek to leverage ever higher operational benchmarks in order to innovate and stay ahead of the pack.

One lesson learned through many years of case studies on maintaining a crucial lead and sustainable advantage is that firms must operate at a lightning-fast pace when bringing new products to market, processing information, executing transactions, and servicing their customers.

This white paper focuses on technology that can be leveraged to reduce network latency, and lower the time to complete transactions. It highlights physical layer switching (PLS) as one such technology that can be employed to reduce latency.

## WHY IS LOW LATENCY IMPORTANT?

If there's one thing history has taught us over the years, it is that speed is king. One of the earliest examples of the quest for speed was illustrated when the founder of Reuters Press Agency cornered the financial information market by using a fleet of pigeons to quickly and accurately deliver news and stock prices to and from telegraph terminals – minutes mattered. Seconds became the focus by the 1980's as companies chose communications network service providers based on their SLA's (service level agreements). In the last decade, financial firms have learned that trade transactions were won or lost by milli seconds (ms) or micro seconds ( $\mu$ s). Today, nanoseconds (ns) can make the difference between winning and losing business. This trend to reduce latency, and make it more consistent for all priority traffic, shows how firms must leverage the fastest communications technologies available to achieve success.

There are many examples of businesses that leverage high-speed communications technology as an integral part of their success. Product manufacturers leverage their test lab environments to bring products to market faster, complete regression testing, and support their customers by instantly re-creating their dynamic topologies. High frequency quantitative trading firms, financial information exchanges, military battlefield information systems, cyber security firms, media and news outlets, research networks, search engines, and Cloud Networking companies claim the network is their business. These businesses all have a common denominator: *speed*.

## WHAT IS NETWORK LATENCY AND HOW IS IT MEASURED?

In the network context, latency is defined as delay - an expression of how much time it takes for a unit of data to get from one designated point to another. Latency is measured accurately from point A to point B with precision test equipment, such as a time synchronized traffic generator or analyzer, as shown in *Figure 1*. Alternatively, some companies such as service providers may measure and define latency in terms of total round-trip time (RTT).

The main contributors to network latency include:

**Transmission path delay:** The medium itself introduces delay as data travels through it.

- High-performance network propagation speeds are approximately 5 nanoseconds (5 ns) per meter, or 5 microseconds (5  $\mu$ s) per kilometer, so the shortest distance between nodes is critical.
- Although optical fiber and copper cables have similar propagation speeds, optical fibers can carry much higher data rates over much longer distances without the need for regeneration and further delay.

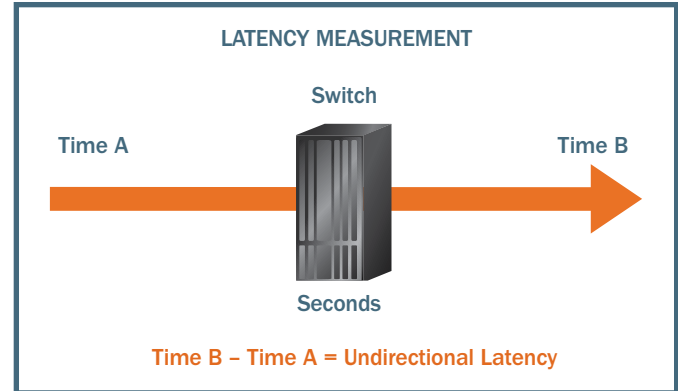


FIGURE 1. Latency measurement

**Processing delay:** Intermediate devices such as switches, routers, firewalls, gateways, load balancers, etc. need additional time to inspect and/or switch traffic between networks. *Figure 2* shows the latency by three common device categories.

- Physical Layer (Layer 1) switches with an all optical switching fabric offer pure fiber to fiber switching. These have the lowest latency in the industry at 5 ns
- Layer 1 switches with an electrical switch fabric also add multicast and TAP (test access ports) functionality across fiber to fiber, fiber to copper, and copper to copper connections. These range between 50 and 100nsec
- Layer 2/3 switches add delay on the order of 1 to 50 microseconds ( $\mu$ s) depending on the amount of packet processing, with an average of 30  $\mu$ s.

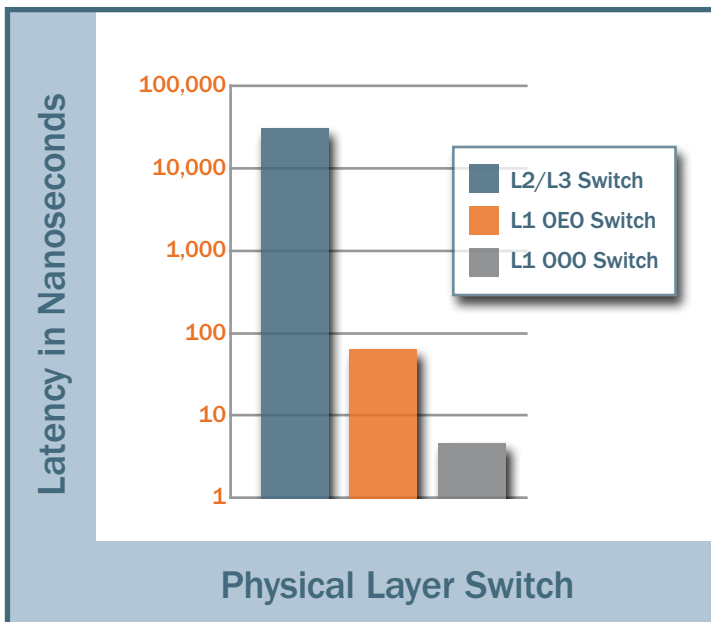


FIGURE 2. Average latency comparison

Architecting data applications to run at wire speed is critical for many of today's business needs. While bandwidth (the bit capacity through a given media) does not represent the speed at which data travels from one point to another, it does affect latency when the utilization of that bandwidth increases. Many of today's L2/L3 devices have the benefit of sharing network bandwidth and the disadvantage of being oversubscribed. Oversubscription represents having less data capacity than the sum of the I/O (input/output) interfaces. Network engineers should be cognizant of the capacity of networking devices in their design and try to avoid oversubscription of such devices.

## HOW CAN PHYSICAL LAYER SWITCHING HELP?

There are two options traditionally accepted in the industry for network infrastructure interconnection or switching:

**Manual Patch Panels** - are cheap and easy to start small, but offer no automation or intelligence.

**Layer 2/3 Switches** - are accepted for general networking, however they can add significant latency and cost.

When you need more than a patch panel but less than a Layer 2/3 switch, there is another option often overlooked – the **Physical Layer Switch**. Unlike a L2/L3 switch, which is burdened with packet processing decisions, a Physical Layer Switch (PLS) is an OSI Layer 1 switch in which all interfaces can transmit and receive simultaneously at the maximum line rate without dropping traffic or processing packets. PLS allows moves, adds, and changes to be executed precisely and in an automated fashion, with very high consistency across the network. In addition, physical layer switching is also protocol independent, so the latency is consistent across data rates and protocols. The consistent low latency is generally kept in a very small range of +/- 1 ns for all-optical switches and +/- 5 ns for electrical physical layer switches.

Testing and monitoring of the network traffic becomes seamless with physical layer switching since all ports can be multicast or tapped. Utilization of all equipment, within the test lab, data center, and cloud environments increases as well, which in turn saves money and increases productivity.

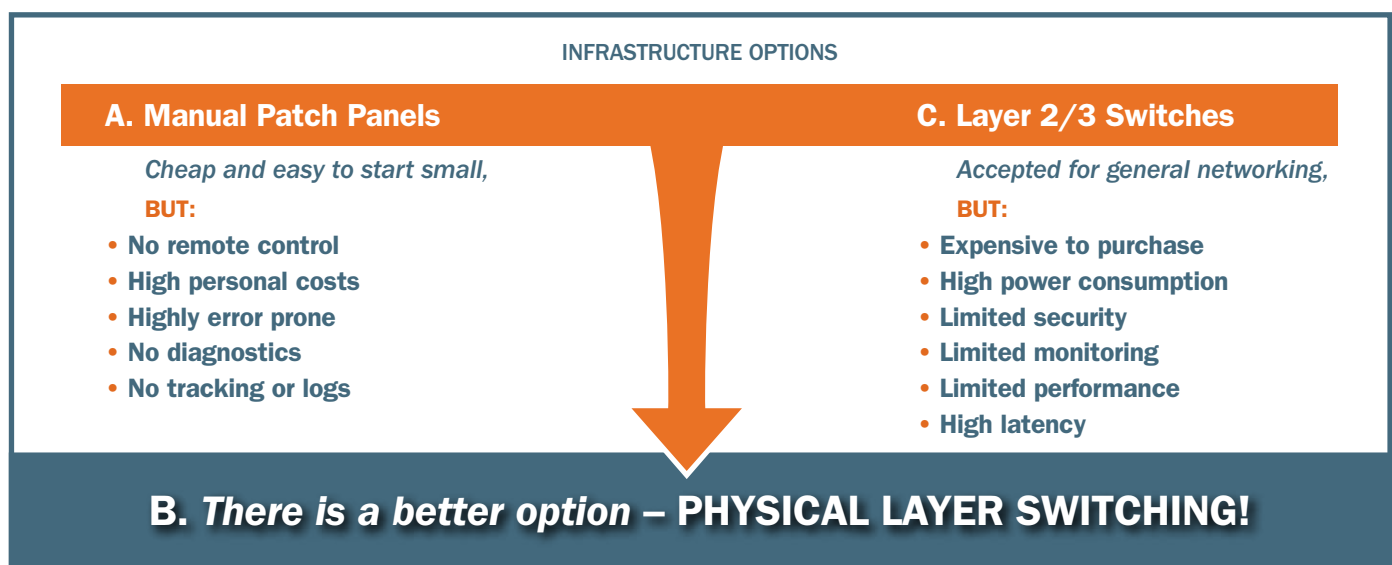


FIGURE 3. Traditional infrastructure options

When network architects or test lab managers look for obvious places to begin seeking lower latency and higher throughput advantages, the access layer becomes an area of focus in identifying these measured latency improvement gains. For every added network layer beyond the access layer, it is important to consider just how much latency or data transmission lag-time is added, in contrast to a flatter network design using PLS technology.

### LATENCY BENEFITS FROM LAYER 1 SWITCHING

- **Up to 1,000x lower latency than layer 2 switches or layer 3 routers**
- **Always 100% line rate performance and no oversubscription**
- **High consistency of latency across the switch or network paths**
- **High consistency of latency across speeds (ie GE and 10GE)**
- **High consistency of latency across protocols (ie GE, Fibre Channel, SONET)**
- **Easy TAP connection across networks and measurement tools**

FIGURE 4. Primary latency benefits from layer 1 switching

## USING A PHYSICAL LAYER SWITCH TO REDUCE LATENCY BY UP TO 1,000X

As discussed before, L2/L3 switches and routers process packets, and hence contribute to increased network latency. In addition, small scale switches require multiple network hops which further amplifies latency. On the other hand, PLS technology does not involve packet processing and can scale to thousands of high-speed ports. As companies migrate to higher speed host interfaces, replacing some or all of the access-layer L2/L3 switching with a Physical Layer Switch could decrease latency by as much as one thousand times.

## CONCLUSION

Businesses that care about speed need to be designing high-performance networks with Physical Layer Switching. Layer 1 switching offers an innovative solution for reducing latency and cost, while increasing performance. This unique technology offers more than a patch panel and less than a layer 2 switch to provide the best performance for latency sensitive applications.

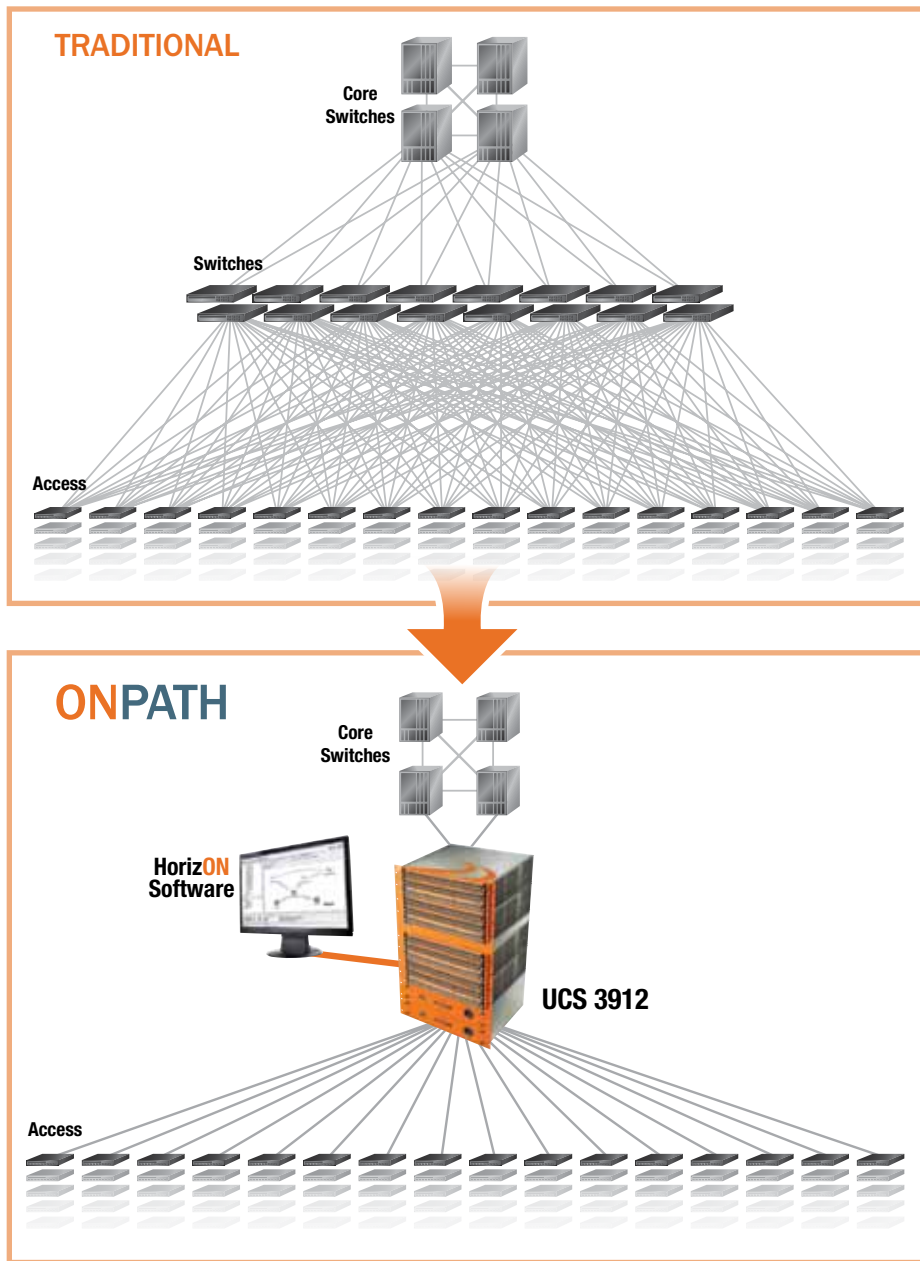


FIGURE 5. Using a physical layer switch to reduce latency up to 1,000x



## ABOUT ONPATH TECHNOLOGIES

ONPATH Technologies is the leading provider of scalable connectivity and monitoring solutions for high-performance networks. With a history spanning over 25 years, ONPATH is a spin-out of Brocade Communications' physical layer switch business. ONPATH's Universal Connectivity System™ and HorizON™ Software deliver an advanced platform that automates and secures data center and test infrastructure to help network managers conserve time, increase utilization, and save money compared to manual patching or complex mesh switching architectures. Our patented switching technology and advanced software deliver the industry's most scalable, secure connectivity solution with the most in-depth view of your network. Scalable from 8 to 4,096 non-meshed ports, independent of your speed or protocol requirements, ONPATH delivers the flexibility and security required by today's data centers and the investment protection necessary for those of tomorrow. ONPATH currently has over one million installed ports throughout Fortune 1,000 and Government customers.

For more information on how ONPATH can help you with your initiatives, contact us today for an engineering application review or network consultation.

2000 Lincoln Drive East  
Marlton, NJ 08053  
609.518.4100

[info.request@onpathtech.com](mailto:info.request@onpathtech.com)  
[www.onpathtech.com](http://www.onpathtech.com)