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Microsoft picks Aruba for next generation WLAN

By John Cox, Network World, 06/13/05

Microsoft has chosen Aruba Networks to upgrade the company's global wireless LAN .

The deal means that Microsoft will replace over 5,000 Cisco Aironet access points worldwide with Aruba's thin access points and WLAN switches. It's also a setback for Cisco's pricey recent acquisition of Aruba's archrival, Airespace .

Besides being a vitally important win for Aruba, the Microsoft deal will be seen as a blue chip stamp of approval on the use of WLAN switches and thin access points for large-scale WLAN deployments.

Instead of popping corks on expensive champagne bottles, Aruba executives including CEO Don LeBeau, a former Cisco honcho, personally served up ice cream and toppings to employees, after announcing the news at the company's Sunnyvale, Calif. headquarters.

Neither Aruba nor Microsoft released information on the value of the contract or the total cost of the deployment. According to Aruba, the WLAN will cover 277 buildings, in 60 countries, supporting 25,000 employees and an estimated 100,000 wireless-equipped devices.

Acting on a 1999 mandate from Chairman Bill Gates, Microsoft's IT group was one of the first, besides Cisco itself, to deploy a WLAN on such a massive scale. Lacking centralized management, security, and even a power-over-Ethernet standard, Microsoft was forced to create from scratch many of the features taken for granted today in state-of-the-art WLANs.

Microsoft's RFP on the network upgrade drew bids from nearly every vendor in the industry.

According to Aruba executives, Microsoft put all the vendors through the wringer with an extensive competitive benchmark tests. The tests focused on a wide range of enterprise wireless issues: scaling, roaming between access points, user performance, manageability. Security was the focus of a second battery of tests. Microsoft was identifying vulnerabilities in two categories, LeBeau says. One category was "bugs" or flaws that could be addressed by writing some new code.

The second category was vulnerabilities or features inherent in a vendor's product architecture and

therefore not easily changed. LeBeau pointed to Aruba's capacity to handle encryption and decryption in the switch, as opposed to the access point. Microsoft preferred Aruba's approach because is minimized moving and managing encryption keys through the net.

The decision is a blow to Cisco, which is not only Microsoft's WLAN provider, but its network infrastructure provider. Cisco was obviously unable to convince Microsoft that either of its two WLAN offerings was suitable. One is the Structured Wireless Aware Network (SWAN) strategy announced two years ago, based on separate WLAN modules running in Cisco Catalyst 6500 LAN switches. The other is Airespace, one of the pioneers in the WLAN switch market.