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AT&T's Donovan: Traffic from 'millions' of wireless customers now running on SDN architecture

October 8, 2015 | By [Phil Goldstein](#)

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AT&T ([NYSE: T](#)) is currently running traffic from "millions" of its wireless customers over its software-defined network (SDN) architecture, according to John Donovan, senior EVP of AT&T's technology and operations.



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Donovan

In August at AT&T's analyst day, Donovan had said that "the first software-defined networking thing we did was that mobile packet core. And we're starting to move large amounts of traffic in our mobile network onto a software-defined architecture."

"I don't have a specific percentage to share right now, but we are currently running traffic from millions of wireless customers over our software-defined network," he told *FierceWireless* this week. "We'll have more to say about that soon. And eventually we want

to migrate the majority, if not all, of our wireless customers to our next-generation architecture."

Donovan said that the first network services AT&T will virtualize this year include portions of its connected car program, as well as its VoIP and MVNO services.

AT&T has publicly stated that it wants to virtualize 5 percent of its network functions by the end of 2015 and 75 percent by 2020, which Donovan said the carrier is on track to do. Like other carriers, AT&T is embracing SDN and network functions virtualization (NFV) to speed up the deployment of new services, make the allocation of network resources and bandwidth more dynamic and flexible, and cut down on network costs by de-coupling network software from proprietary hardware.

"No part of our network will be unaffected. We've catalogued the hundreds of network functions that we manage, and decided which will be relevant in the future and which are becoming obsolete," he said. "Of those 200 critical future functions, we plan to move 75% to this new software-defined architecture in the next five years. The 5% of network functions that we plan to virtualize in 2015 includes

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elements of our mobile packet core, the heart of our mobile network."

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Unlike Verizon Wireless (NYSE: VZ), Ericsson (NASDAQ: ERIC) and some other major wireless players, AT&T has not said that it is going to be testing 5G technologies and has not laid out a roadmap for deploying 5G services, which are not even standardized yet, and likely won't be until 2018 or 2019. Donovan made clear, however, that AT&T views SDN and NFV as key building blocks for 5G networks.

"5G is still a relatively undefined technology at this point," Donovan said. "But if we want to enable the sorts of capabilities and speeds that some people envision for 5G, then we need to first create a software-enabled network that can expand and adjust in near-real time to meet demand."

Donovan noted that video traffic on AT&T's wireless network doubled in 2014 alone, and now makes up the majority of its wireless traffic. "At the same time, the Internet of Things is exploding," he added. "Those are two very different usage models: lots of little sips of data versus unpredictable huge gulps. SDN and NFV enable us to serve both use cases."

AT&T is working with a variety of vendors, both large and small, on its "Domain 2.0" initiative, which is designed to drive SDN and NFV adoption in the company's network as part of its virtualization drive. AT&T is working with Amdocs, Affirmed Networks, Ericsson (NASDAQ: ERIC), Juniper Networks, Metaswitch, Tail-F Systems and Affirmed Networks, and in December 2014 added Brocade Communications Systems, Ciena and Cisco to its list of vendor partners on the project.

"We've stated before our commitment to encouraging disruptive innovation in this space and will continue to work with traditional telecom vendors, as well as startups, small companies and open source communities," Donovan said, explaining the company's NFV and SDN vendor strategy. "Additionally, we have been very open with our shift to SDN and NFV and vendors know we're going down this path to a software-based network."

Donovan said that "in addition to making our network more efficient by building a software-centric network, our hope is to push the industry toward a software-based network approach. We recently made [several vendor announcements](#) related to SDN and our Network on Demand service. We're seeing a lot of interest from innovators both big and small. In addition, we're collaborating closely with the open source community. By moving the key functionality of our network into software, that opens the ecosystem to a much broader array of potential collaborators."

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