



Network Sharing Finally Happening in the US After Years of Delays: Panelists

After years of questions, network and infrastructure sharing is starting to see success in the U.S., building on a model that's already popular in Europe, panelists said Wednesday during a Broadband Breakfast webinar. The discussion comes as the Alliance for Telecommunications Industry Solutions launches the Open Access Network Forum, which it said will provide a venue for ISPs, open-access infrastructure providers and their technology partners to work together on the “principles, architectures, and operating models needed to scale open-access fiber in North America.”

Ashley Poling, vice president of business development at COS Systems, said the software company started saying 10 years ago that network sharing was coming, and it's happening now. COS is a member of the new ATIS forum, which will help “establish global standards so this becomes less muddy,” Poling said. “Everyone is kind of doing the same thing, kind of doing things differently.”

North America is seeing a “movement to shared infrastructure that we haven't quite seen here before,” Poling added, noting that the terms "open" and "shared" were always considered “dangerous in the past.” The market is consolidating and “looking to maximize revenue.”

George Wellings, president of network access partnerships at SiFi Networks, said the company was a “pioneer” in launching open access networks in the U.S. starting 12 years ago. The market “has evolved rapidly,” and in recent months, SiFi has seen significantly more interest in open networks, she said.

Wellings said that when she started at the company five years ago, U.S. ISPs weren't enthusiastic and would ask, “What is this voodoo rubbish you're bringing from Europe?” She was “a bit disheartened” by the initial reaction, but “over time, we've proven the model.” SiFi is now active in 11 cities in five states, she said. “We have big ambitions to grow that,” but the competition for fiber infrastructure “is really heating up.”

Open access “is going to be the future of infrastructure,” Wellings predicted. Consumers will need access to fiber as bandwidth demands only continue to grow, she added.

1Finity America, which is part of Fujitsu, is “really focused” on shared infrastructure and supporting networks across North America, said Gregg Shepperd, its senior engagement leader for managed network services. Standards are important, he said, and “the key thing” is getting as many ISPs involved as possible. “Everybody’s objective is to get subscribers,” because “if you’ve got a fiber network, and you don’t have subscribers, you have a problem.”

Walter Tustin, Crown Castle's federal funding program manager, said that in the wireless world, multiple carriers share the same towers. Major carriers committed to that concept by selling all their towers 10 years ago to tower companies, he noted. Crown Castle’s business model is “network sharing,” though open access “is tricky” with “different definitions,” he said. “We’re happy that industry is moving to a little bit more of a shared model.”

Element8 Executive Vice President Jonathan Van said the company got started in 2020 through a consolidation of wireless ISPs and started its buildout in North Texas. It now covers parts of seven states. Around the time element8 got started, Tarana Wireless came out with its G1 outdoor base node, he said, and there was “a split in the market” between new-generation and legacy fixed wireless.

“The biggest change is we went from a world of rural [WISPs] that was less competitive, somewhat capacity constrained, to a world where we’re capacity unconstrained,” Van said. “We have plenty of towers” and a retail business “serving tens of thousands of customers,” but the company could serve 500,000 subscribers on its network. Element8 sees open networks as a business model where it could offer capacity to other companies, he added.

“This is about maximizing revenue,” Poling said. “This isn’t because in Europe they did it, so it should be happening here.”