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NetMotion joins the fray in secure remote access with new zero trust offering

AUGUST 27 2020

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Over the past 18 months, we have chronicled the rise of zero trust network access, which offers an alternative to traditional VPNs for remote access. NetMotion is the latest to enter the space with a new platform that combines its ZTNA tech with its flagship mobile VPN offering to target firms with hybrid networks and multiple use cases for secure access.

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Introduction

Over the past 18 months, we have chronicled the rise of software-defined perimeter (SDP), which has become essentially synonymous with a closely related term, zero trust network access (ZTNA). Each offers remote access technology as an alternative to traditional VPNs (for simplicity, we will use SDP for the remainder of this report). The Covid-19 outbreak and related work-from-home (WFH) phenomenon have underscored the demand for secure remote access, manifest in the emergence of several new SDP offerings from the likes of Google, Wandera, Forcepoint and Pulse Secure. Enterprise VPN provider NetMotion is the latest to join the fray, releasing a new platform that combines its SDP technology alongside its flagship mobile VPN offering to target firms with hybrid networks and multiple secure access use cases.

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Even by cybersecurity standards, the SDP sector is becoming absurdly crowded, and given the recent entry of established vendors into the mix, pure-play SDP startups might have a brighter future as acquisition targets than as stand-alone contestants – although several recent in-house-developed offerings from established players might temper those expectations. It's thus becoming clear that secure access providers that can address multiple user personas and use cases spanning both traditional VPN and SDP could have an advantage, particularly insofar as providing customers with a smoother migration path from existing investments.

The broader long-term question is whether SDP itself is sufficient to drive more expansive zero trust strategies, or will it become subsumed within the emerging secure application service edge category that spans both network access and network security, both delivered as a service. NetMotion's mobility background offers a variety of traffic optimization features that could give it differentiation versus its peers, and thus is well-suited for highly distributed networks with roaming users – although its agent-based technology might not be the best fit for BYOD-heavy environments.

Details

Carlyle Group-backed NetMotion was founded in 2001, and was primarily known as providing highly fault-tolerant UDP-based mobile VPNs for industries that can't tolerate downtime or that experience frequent reconnections and logins – including airlines, utilities, first responders, package delivery services and hospitals. To provide a quality user experience, the vendor's VPN features tunnel persistence and patented session persistence that can reduce the amount of times roaming users spend reconnecting and reauthenticating to available networks – as well as video and audio optimizations that can withstand up to 50% packet loss – and link layer optimization to help optimize bandwidth. More recently, NetMotion focused on mobile worker productivity with products aimed at mobile performance management, mobile analytics and monitoring of various metrics such as network speed, device status, application type and web usage.

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The company believes VPNs will remain a staple for remote access for the foreseeable future, and considers SDP a complementary tool that can unlock new use cases. Its SDP has been in stealth mode since late 2019, and NetMotion has spent over three years and tons of engineering and development effort on the new platform, which was intended to enable customers to maintain visibility and control without tunneling all of their traffic. Its SDP builds on many of the features and technology in its VPN offering, which it combines with SDP in a single interface with a single client, management console and policy engine.

The SDP blueprint laid out by the Cloud Security Alliance calls for a three-tier setup that includes a client, gateways and a controller. However, in lieu of a controller that typically acts as the ‘quarterback’ of remote access decisions, the firm deploys the same agent for both its VPN and SDP to make all access decisions based on a continuous risk assessment of every device connected to NetMotion. It assembles a variety of data points such as the application being accessed, the device’s security posture, what network the device is connected to, etc., to make contextual decisions on whether to grant access to a particular resource. NetMotion also has technical integrations with unified endpoint management specialists for bidirectional data exchange.

Additionally, the company provides gateways that can be installed on-premises or in the cloud and essentially function as a ‘microperimeter’ around target resources to enforce the access decisions made by the endpoint. Target applications (both on-premises and SaaS) are completely invisible to the public internet, and can only accept inbound connections from a NetMotion gateway. Admins also have the ability to allow low-risk user traffic to go directly to the internet, route to a NetMotion gateway for higher-risk transactions, or even spin up a tunnel to enhance network performance.

The vendor’s SDP can run as a service in the cloud or as an on-premises option, and given its mobile background, can also work across public or home Wi-Fi, 5G and LTE connections. Additionally, NetMotion has experience with network optimization algorithms to help improve performance and reliability for mission-critical traffic.