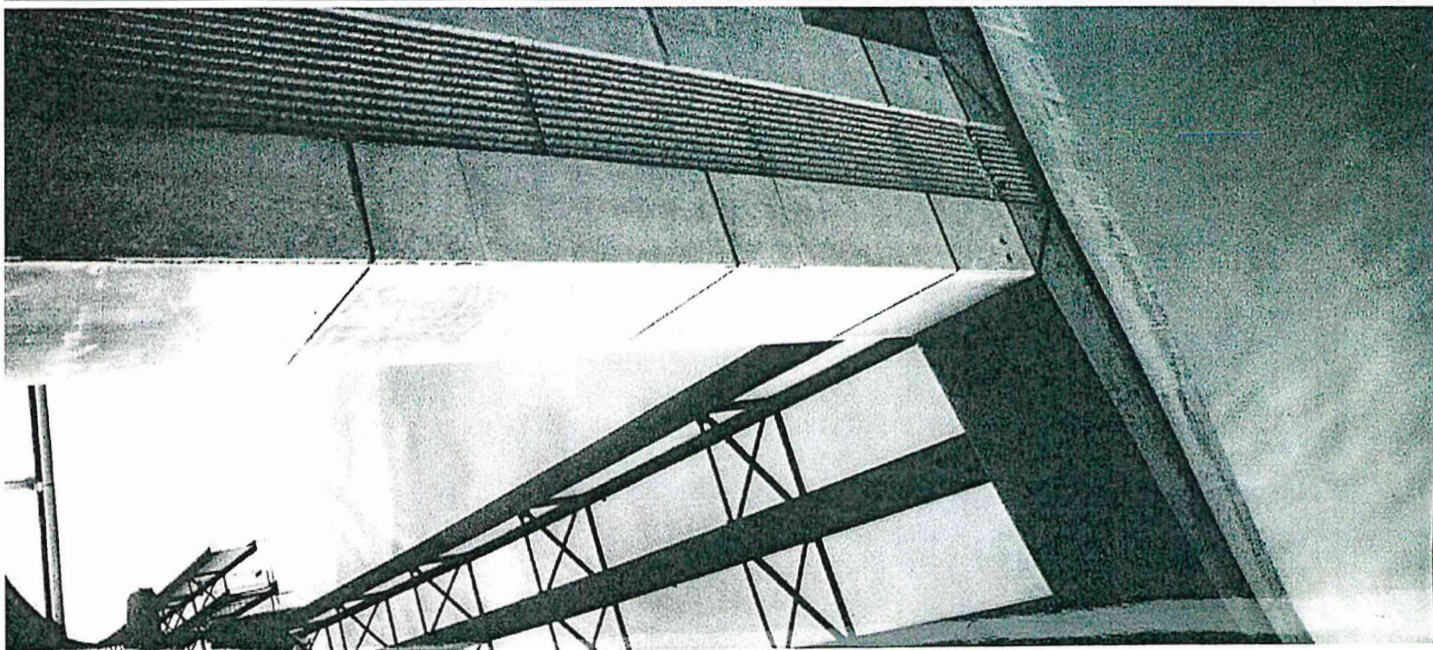


Jim Geier

Second
Edition

Wireless LANs

Implementing High Performance IEEE 802.11 Networks



Wireless LANs, Second Edition

Jim Geier

SAMS

201 West 103rd St., Indianapolis, Indiana, 46290 USA

Wireless LANs, Second Edition

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Overview

PART I	Wireless Networks—A First Look	5
1	Introduction to Wireless Networks	7
2	Wireless Network Configurations	33
3	Overview of the IEEE 802.11 Standard	63
PART II	Inside IEEE 802.11	91
4	IEEE 802.11 Medium Access Control (MAC) Layer	93
5	IEEE 802.11 Physical (PHY) Layer	125
PART III	Deploying Wireless LANs	163
6	Wireless System Integration	165
7	Planning a Wireless LAN	205
8	Implementing a Wireless LAN	253
	Glossary	299
	Index	319

Contents

Introduction	1
Audience	1
The Organization of This Book	2
Updates to This Book Compared to the First Edition	3
PART I Wireless Networks—A First Look	5
1 Introduction to Wireless Networks	7
Wireless LAN Benefits	8
Mobility	8
Installation in Difficult-to-Wire Areas	9
Increased Reliability	12
Reduced Installation Time	12
Long-Term Cost Savings	13
Wireless LAN Applications	13
Retail	14
Warehousing	14
Healthcare	15
Hospitality	17
Home and Small Office	17
General Enterprise Systems	18
Wireless Services	18
Wireless LAN Technologies	19
IEEE 802.11	19
HiperLAN	19
HomeRF SWAP	20
Bluetooth	20
Wireless LAN Implications	21
Multipath Propagation	21
Path Loss	22
Radio Signal Interference	22
Limited Battery Longevity	25
System Interoperability	26
Network Security	27
Application Connectivity Problems	28
Installation Issues	29
Health Risks	30
Wireless LANs: A Historical Perspective	31

2	Wireless Network Configurations	33
	Wireless LAN Architecture	34
	Medium Access Control (MAC) Sublayer	35
	Physical Layer	36
	Wireless LAN Components and Systems.....	46
	End-User Appliances	46
	Network Software	47
	Wireless Network Interface Card	48
	Wireless Local Bridges	50
	Antenna	51
	The Communications Channel	53
	Peer-to-Peer Wireless LANs	54
	Multiple Cell Wireless LANs	55
	Wireless Metropolitan Area Networks	56
	Radio-Based Wireless Point-to-Point Network	57
	Laser-Based Wireless Point-To-Point Networks	58
	Radio-Based Wireless Point-to-Multipoint Networks.....	60
3	Overview of the IEEE 802.11 Standard	63
	The Importance of Standards	64
	Types of Standards	64
	Institute for Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE)	65
	Benefits of the 802.11 Standard	66
	The IEEE 802 LAN Standards Family	69
	IEEE 802.2 LLC Overview	70
	IEEE 802.2 LLC Services	70
	LLC/MAC Layer Service Primitives.....	76
	Introduction to the IEEE 802.11 Standard	77
	IEEE 802.11 Topology	79
	Independent BSS (IBSS) Networks	79
	Extended Service Set (ESS) Networks	79
	IEEE 802.11 Logical Architecture	82
	IEEE 802.11 MAC Layer	82
	IEEE 802.11 Physical Layers	82
	IEEE 802.11 Services	83
	Station Services	83
	Distribution System Services	85
	Station States and Corresponding Frame Types	87

PART II Inside IEEE 802.11 91**4 IEEE 802.11 Medium Access Control (MAC) Layer 93**

IEEE 802.11 MAC Layer Operations.....	94
Accessing the Wireless Medium	94
Joining a Network	101
Providing Authentication and Privacy.....	103
MAC Frame Structure	107
Overall MAC Frame Format	107
Frame Control Field	109
MAC Frame Types	114
Management Frames	114
Control Frames	119
Data Frames	123

5 IEEE 802.11 Physical (PHY) Layer 125

Physical Layer Architecture	126
Physical Layer Operations	127
Physical Layer Service Primitives.....	127
Carrier Sense Function	128
Transmit Function	129
Receive Function	129
IEEE 802.11 Frequency Hopping Spread Spectrum (FHSS)	
Physical Layer	130
FHSS Physical Layer Convergence Procedure	130
FHSS Physical Medium Dependent (PMD) Sublayer	132
IEEE 802.11 Direct Sequence Spread Spectrum (DSSS)	
Physical Layer	137
DSSS Physical Layer Convergence Procedure (PLCP)	
Sublayer	137
DSSS Physical Medium Dependent (PMD) Sublayer	139
IEEE 802.11 High Rate Direct Sequence Spread Spectrum	
(HR-DSSS) Physical Layer	145
HR-DSSS Physical Medium Dependent Sublayer	146
IEEE 802.11 Orthogonal Frequency Division Multiplexing	
(OFDM) Physical Layer	151
OFDM Physical Layer Convergence Procedure	152
OFDM Physical Medium Dependent (PMD) Sublayer	153
IEEE 802.11 Infrared (IR) Physical Layer.....	158
IR Physical Layer Convergence Procedure (PLCP) Sublayer	159
IR Physical Medium Dependent (PMD) Sublayer	160

PART III Deploying Wireless LANs 163**6 Wireless System Integration 165**

Wireless System Architecture	166
Network Distribution Systems	166
IEEE 802.3 Carrier Sense Multiple Access (CSMA)	167
IEEE 802.5 Token Ring	173
ANSI Fiber Distributed Data Interface (FDDI)	175
Wide Area Networking Concepts	176
Private Versus Public WANs	178
Roaming Protocols	181
Communications Protocols	183
Transmission Control Protocol (TCP)	183
Internet Protocol (IP)	185
Issues with TCP/IP over Wireless LANs	189
Mobile IP	189
Connectivity Software	193
Terminal Emulation	194
Direct Database Connectivity	197
Intranet-Based Connectivity Software	199
Middleware	200

7 Planning a Wireless LAN 205

Managing a Wireless LAN Implementation	206
Establishing Project-Management Principles	206
Planning a System Project	207
Executing the Project	222
Requirements Analysis Steps	225
Eliciting Information	226
Defining Requirements	228
Updating the Project Plan	233
Types of Wireless LAN Requirements	233
Questions for Defining Wireless LAN Requirements	238
Analyzing the Feasibility of a Wireless LAN	241
Performing a Preliminary Design	242
Developing a Business Case	243
Making the Decision to Proceed	248

8 Implementing a Wireless LAN 253

Designing a Wireless LAN	254
Assessing Technologies	255
Technology Assessment Parameters	256
Technology Evaluation Methodology	261
Selecting Products	262

Verifying the Design	263
Documenting the Design	269
Procuring Components	270
Preparing for Operational Support of a Wireless LAN	274
Documenting Plans for Operational Support	277
Preparing for the Transfer to Operational Mode	277
Installing a Wireless LAN	278
Planning the Installation	279
Staging the Components	282
Installing the Components	283
Testing the Installation	287
Performing Testing	289
Finalizing the Project	295
Summary	298

Glossary 299

Index 319

Wireless Networks— A First Look

PART



IN THIS PART

- 1 Introduction to Wireless Networks 7
- 2 Wireless Network Configurations 33
- 3 Overview of the IEEE 802.11 Standard 63

Wireless Network Configurations

CHAPTER

2

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Wireless LAN Architecture 34
- Wireless LAN Components and Systems 46
- Wireless Metropolitan Area Networks 56

Wireless LAN Architecture

Most wireless LANs operate over unlicensed frequencies at near-ethernet speeds using carrier sense protocols to share a radio wave or infrared light medium. The majority of these devices are capable of transmitting information up to 1,000 feet between computers within an open environment, and their cost per user ranges from \$100 to \$500. In addition, most wireless LAN products offer Simple Network Management Protocol (SNMP) to support network management through the use of SNMP-based management platforms and applications. Figure 2.1 illustrates the concept of a wireless local area network interfacing with a wired network.

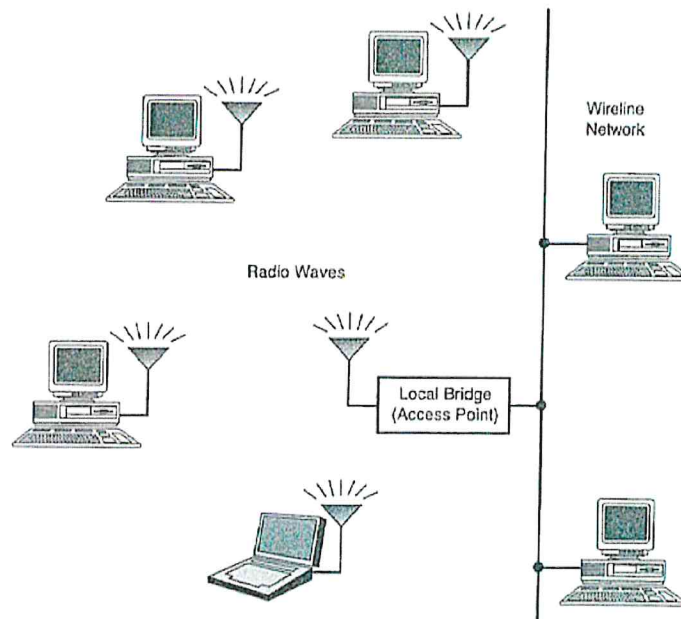


FIGURE 2.1

A wireless local area network provides connectivity over the airwaves within a local area, such as a building.

Wireless networks perform functions similar to their wired ethernet and token-ring counterparts. In general, networks perform the following functions to enable the transfer of information from source to destination:

1. The medium provides a bit pipe (a path for data to flow) for the transmission of data.
2. Medium access techniques facilitate the sharing of a common medium.

3. Synchronization and error control mechanisms ensure that each link transfers the data intact.
4. Routing mechanisms move the data from the originating source to the intended destination.
5. Connectivity software interfaces an appliance, such as a pen-based computer or bar code scanner, to application software hosted on a server.

Figure 2.2 illustrates the logical architecture of a wireless LAN.

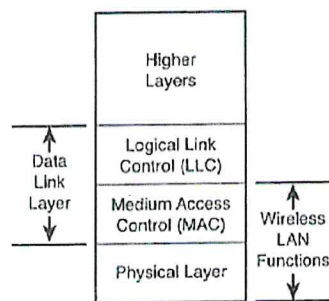


FIGURE 2.2

A wireless local area network provides functions related to the Medium Access Control (MAC) and Physical layers of a network's architecture.

Medium Access Control (MAC) Sublayer

Medium access control, which is a Data Link layer function in a radio-based wireless LAN, enables multiple appliances to share a common transmission medium via a carrier sense protocol similar to ethernet. This protocol enables a group of wireless computers to share the same frequency and space. A wireless LAN MAC provides reliable delivery of data over somewhat error-prone wireless media.

As an analogy, consider a room of people engaged in a single conversation in which each person can hear if someone speaks. This represents a fully connected bus topology where everyone communicates using the same frequency and space. To avoid having two people speak at the same time, you should wait until the other person has finished talking. Also, no one should speak unless the room is silent. This simple protocol ensures that only one person speaks at a time, offering a shared use of the communications medium. Wireless systems operate in a similar fashion, except the communications are by way of radio signals. Figure 2.3 illustrates the generic carrier sense protocol, commonly known as *Carrier Sense Multiple Access (CSMA)*.

- Handheld scanners and data collectors
- Handheld printers

NOTE

When evaluating appliances for use with a mobile application, be sure to consider the ergonomics of the unit. You certainly won't be able to realize any of the benefits of a wireless network if users don't use the system because of appliances that weigh too much or are difficult to use.

Network Software

A wireless network consists of software that resides on different parts of the network. A network operating system (NOS) such as Microsoft NT Server, hosted on a high-end PC, provides file, print, and application services. Many NOSs are server oriented, as shown in Figure 2.10, where the core application software and databases reside. In most cases, the appliances will interface via TCP/IP with application software or a database running on the NOS.

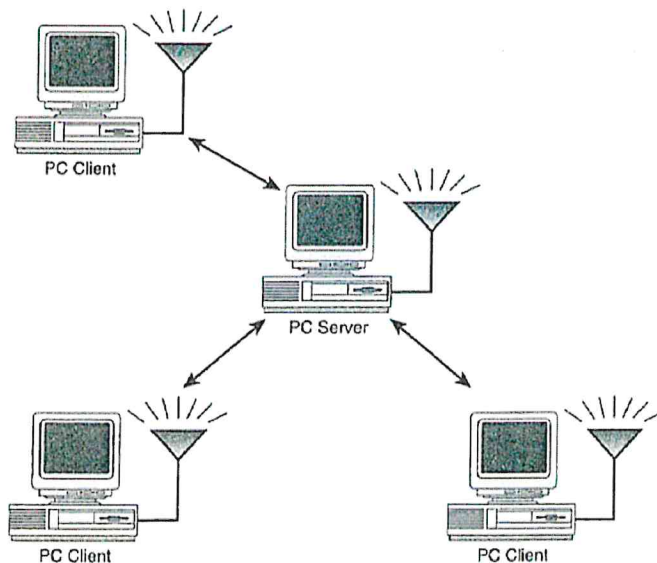


FIGURE 2.10

The server-based network operating system provides a centralized platform for applications and data storage for mobile users.

Client software, located on the end-user's appliance, directs the user's commands to the local appliance software or steers them out through the wireless network. The software residing on a wireless appliance is very similar to software that runs on a wired appliance. The main difference is that it is important to develop the wireless software to optimize the use of the wireless network's relatively small amount of bandwidth.

The software performing application functions can run on a server/host, the appliance, or a combination of both. In some cases, such as with applications running on an IBM mainframe, IBM AS/400, or a UNIX-based host, the wireless appliances may need to run terminal emulation. This makes the appliance act as a dumb terminal, simply interfacing the keyboard, screen, printer, and so on with the application running on the host. With client/server systems, the software on the appliance may perform part or all of the application's functionality and merely interface with a database located on a server, such as Microsoft NT Server.

NOTE

A wireless network appears to be transparent to application software and operating systems on the network. As a result, applications written for a wired network generally can run without changes over a wireless network.

In some cases, a gateway running middleware is necessary to provide an interface between the appliance and the application software running on the server. The appliances communicate with the host/server through the gateway. The gateway acts as a proxy for the various appliances. The advantages of using the gateway are as follows:

- **Better RF Throughput** With the presence of a transport and application gateway, the appliances communicate with the gateway by using a lightweight protocol that is wireless friendly, unlike TCP/IP.
- **Reliability** Since the gateway proxies all the appliances, any outages in communication due to the appliances roaming out of range are transparent to the host/server.
- **Longer Battery Life** When the appliances are idle, the network software does not have to send out keep-alive packets periodically to keep the connection to the host/server open. This will be done by the gateway.

Wireless Network Interface Card

Computers process information in digital form, with low direct current (DC) voltages representing data ones and zeros. These signals are optimum for transmission within the computer, not for transporting data through wired or wireless media. A wireless network interface couples the digital signal from the end-user appliance to the wireless medium, which is air, to

Wireless LANs provide unique benefits to many organizations, but with the increased popularity and acceptance of mobile communications—made most visible by the proliferation of mobile handheld devices—the need for support and tools for maintaining network integrity has also grown. The IEEE 802.11 standard provides the requisite structure for wireless network interoperability and stability.

Wireless LANs, Second Edition provides both a context for understanding how an enterprise can benefit from the application of wireless technology and the proven tools for efficiently implementing a wireless LAN. Readers can use the real-world solutions detailed throughout the book to model their own networks. Designers and implementers will learn the considerations that must be addressed at each stage of the process.

Jim Geier is an independent consultant, assisting firms with the development of wireless network products and integration of wireless networks into corporate information systems. Jim's 20 years of experience have dealt with the analysis, design, software development, installation, and support of numerous client/server and wireless network-based systems for retail, manufacturing, warehousing, healthcare, education, and airline industries throughout the world. Jim is the author of three other books: *Wireless LANs* (1999, MTP), *Wireless Networking Handbook* (1996, New Riders), and *Network Reengineering* (1996, McGraw-Hill), as well as numerous articles for publications such as *Network World* and *Communications System Design*. He was an active member of the IEEE 802.11 Working Group responsible for developing international standards for wireless LANs.

LEARN THE CONCEPTS...

Based on the most recent developments in the field, *Wireless LANs, Second Edition* gives information system managers, network engineers, designers, and architects vital up-to-date information on how to plan, configure, and install wireless networks, including

- Coverage of the latest applications, benefits, and implications of wireless LANs.
- Detailed explanations of the IEEE 802.11 protocol operation and frame types, including the newer IEEE 802.11a and IEEE 802.11b standards.
- Authoritative advice on how to define, design, and install wireless LANs for supporting high performance multimedia applications.
- Case studies that provide real-world insight into the best practices of deploying a wireless LAN.

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