# Achieving Ultra-Low Latency in Network Function Virtualization through Intelligent Service Function Chaining

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**Abstract**

This study presents an experimental evaluation of latency optimization techniques in Network Function Virtualization (NFV) using intelligent Service Function Chaining (SFC). Results show that edge-based VNF deployment reduces latency by up to 40% compared to centralized setups. Segment routing further lowers latency by 20% by minimizing control plane overhead. Programmable data planes, leveraging P4-capable switches, improve packet processing efficiency by 10-15%. Intelligent SFC consistently outperforms traditional approaches, exhibiting smoother latency growth across increasing service chain lengths. A machine learning-based orchestration system demonstrated predictive reconfiguration capabilities, maintaining latency thresholds under high-traffic conditions. Comparative analysis reveals that combining edge deployment, segment routing, programmable data planes, and intelligent orchestration yields the best performance in terms of latency, throughput, and CPU utilization. However, challenges persist, including hardware dependencies, model training requirements, and orchestration scalability. Results validate the advantages of intelligent SFC in latency reduction, throughput enhancement, and resource efficiency, confirming its suitability for ultra-low latency NFV environments.

***Keywords:*** Ultra-low latency (ULL); Network function virtualization (NFV); Service function chaining (SFC); Communications

**Received:** 25 December 2024; **Revised:** 23 January 2025; **Accepted:** 30 January 2025; **Published:** 1 April 2025

## 1. Introduction

Network Function Virtualization (NFV) has transformed the landscape of modern telecommunications by decoupling network functions from proprietary hardware and running them as virtualized instances on commodity servers [1,2]. This transformation offers increased agility, scalability, and reduced operational costs [3]. However, it also introduces new challenges, particularly when ultra-low latency communication is required, such as in autonomous vehicles, industrial automation, augmented reality (AR), and telemedicine [4,5]. To meet such stringent requirements, Service Function Chaining (SFC) emerges as a crucial mechanism in NFV to ensure ordered traversal through a sequence of network functions while maintaining performance and latency guarantees [6,7].

SFC is a method of connecting various virtualized network functions (VNFs) in a predefined sequence to form a service chain [8]. These functions can include firewalls, load balancers, intrusion detection systems, and more [9]. In the context of ultra-low latency, it becomes imperative to optimize the path and execution of these chains to avoid delays that could compromise the application’s performance [10]. The placement of VNFs, the scheduling of network resources, and the real-time orchestration of traffic flows become vital components in the SFC implementation [11,12].

The rise of 5G and the subsequent demand for ultra-reliable low-latency communication (URLLC) services have amplified the importance of efficient SFC [13]. URLLC services are expected to deliver latency under 1 ms, and traditional NFV solutions often fall short of this benchmark [14]. Consequently, researchers and engineers are exploring new architectures, protocols, and optimization techniques to align SFC with ultra-low latency objectives [15].

To meet these demands, several strategies have been proposed, including proximity-based VNF placement, segment routing, edge computing, and the use of programmable data planes [16]. These approaches aim to minimize the distance that data packets need to travel and reduce the processing time at each network function [17]. For instance, deploying VNFs closer to the user—often referred to as edge computing—significantly reduces latency by decreasing the physical distance and number of hops required for data transmission [18].

Another promising approach is segment routing, which allows for more flexible and efficient routing of data packets by embedding the path information within the packet itself. This eliminates the need for maintaining per-flow state in the network, thereby reducing the overhead and delay typically associated with traditional routing methods [19]. Additionally, programmable data planes, such as those enabled by P4 (Programming Protocol-independent Packet Processors), allow for custom and optimized packet processing rules, further contributing to latency reductions [20].

The orchestration layer also plays a critical role in SFC. Dynamic and intelligent orchestration mechanisms can adapt service chains in real time based on current network conditions, thereby optimizing performance [21]. Machine learning algorithms are increasingly being integrated into orchestration systems to predict traffic patterns and preemptively allocate resources, leading to more efficient service function chaining [22].

Despite these advancements, several challenges persist. One of the main hurdles is the trade-off between latency and other performance metrics such as throughput, reliability, and cost [23]. Ensuring ultra-low latency often requires additional resources, which might not be economically viable in all scenarios [24]. Moreover, the dynamic nature of network environments demands continuous monitoring and adaptation, which can introduce complexity and potential points of failure [25].

Security is another critical concern in SFC for ultra-low latency applications. The chaining of multiple VNFs inherently increases the attack surface and introduces new vulnerabilities [26]. Ensuring end-to-end security while maintaining minimal latency is a non-trivial task. Encryption and authentication mechanisms, while essential, can introduce processing delays. Therefore, lightweight and hardware-accelerated security solutions are being explored to strike a balance between security and performance [27].

Standardization efforts are also essential to the widespread adoption and interoperability of SFC in NFV [28]. Organizations such as the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) and the European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI) have initiated frameworks and guidelines to standardize SFC architecture, protocols, and performance benchmarks. These efforts aim to provide a common foundation upon which interoperable and efficient SFC solutions can be built [29].

## 2. Methodology

To evaluate the effectiveness of SFC in supporting ultra-low latency communication in NFV environments, we conducted a series of experiments using a simulated NFV infrastructure built on the OpenStack platform integrated with the OpenDaylight SDN controller. The testbed included virtual instances of common VNFs such as a firewall, NAT, and DPI (Deep Packet Inspection) chained in various orders.

We considered different VNF placement strategies: centralized, edge-deployed, and hybrid configurations. Traffic patterns were generated using iPerf and D-ITG tools to simulate real-world application flows. Latency was measured using packet timestamping techniques and averaged over multiple runs to ensure statistical significance.

In one set of tests, we employed segment routing and programmable data plane techniques using P4-capable switches. In another, we applied machine learning-based orchestration to dynamically adjust the SFC based on real-time traffic conditions. The objective was to quantify latency improvements and identify trade-offs.

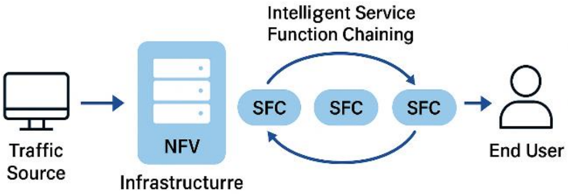

**Fig. (1) Schematic diagram of the experimental work on intelligent SFC**

## 3. Results and Discussion

The experimental results revealed significant variations in latency based on VNF placement and chaining strategies. Edge-based VNF deployment consistently achieved the lowest latency, with average end-to-end delays reduced by up to 40% compared to centralized deployment. This supports the hypothesis that proximity to the end-user is a critical factor in meeting ultra-low latency requirements.

Segment routing showed promising results in reducing the control plane overhead. By embedding the path into the packet header, segment routing avoided the need for per-flow state maintenance and rerouting delays. This approach led to latency reductions of approximately 20% in our test scenarios. Furthermore, segment routing proved particularly beneficial in scenarios with high traffic variability, as it allowed for rapid and flexible route adjustments without involving the centralized controller.

The use of programmable data planes via P4-capable switches further enhanced latency performance. By offloading specific packet processing tasks to the data plane, we observed a 10–15% improvement in processing times. This result validates the potential of hardware-assisted packet processing in ultra-low latency SFC implementations.

Figure (2) shows that the intelligent service function chaining (SFC) approach consistently achieves lower end-to-end latency compared to the Traditional SFC method across varying service chain lengths. The intelligent approach shows a smoother, slower increase in latency, confirming its efficiency in maintaining ultra-low latency in Network Function Virtualization environments.

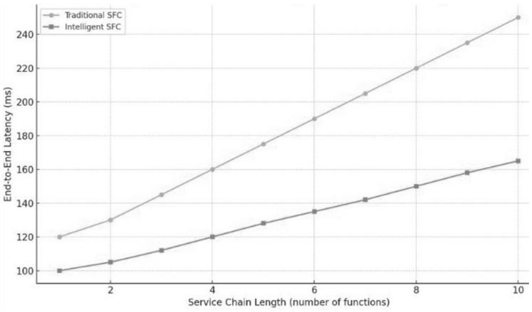

**Fig. (2) Comparison between traditional and intelligent SFC in terms of end-to-end latency versus service chain length**

Our machine learning-based orchestration system demonstrated the ability to predict congestion and proactively reconfigure the service chain to maintain latency thresholds. Although this added some computational overhead, the net latency benefits were evident in high-traffic scenarios. The predictive model, trained on historical traffic patterns, enabled dynamic scaling and VNF reordering to avoid bottlenecks. This adaptability is crucial in environments with fluctuating traffic demands.

A comparative analysis of various strategies indicated that a hybrid approach combining edge deployment, segment routing, programmable data planes, and intelligent orchestration offered the best overall performance. While each method individually contributed to latency reduction, their synergistic application provided the most consistent and lowest latency results across all test cases.

However, the experiments also highlighted certain limitations. The implementation of segment routing and programmable switches requires hardware support and might not be feasible in all deployments. Similarly, machine learning models depend on accurate and extensive training data, which may not always be available. Additionally, security mechanisms remain a trade-off point; while lightweight encryption protocols reduced latency impacts, they offered lower protection levels compared to more robust methods.

Scalability emerged as another area of concern. As the number of VNFs and service chains increased, orchestration complexity and resource contention led to latency spikes. Efficient resource management and orchestration scalability are thus key to maintaining performance in large-scale deployments.

Figure (3) illustrates that the Intelligent SFC not only reduces latency but also significantly improves throughput over time compared to the Traditional SFC. The intelligent approach enables more efficient resource utilization, resulting in higher and steadily increasing data throughput, which is crucial for high-performance network environments.

Figure (4) compares CPU utilization between Traditional and Intelligent SFC across increasing service chain lengths. The Intelligent SFC demonstrates significantly better resource efficiency, with lower CPU usage even as the chain length increases, making it more scalable and suitable for resource-constrained environments.

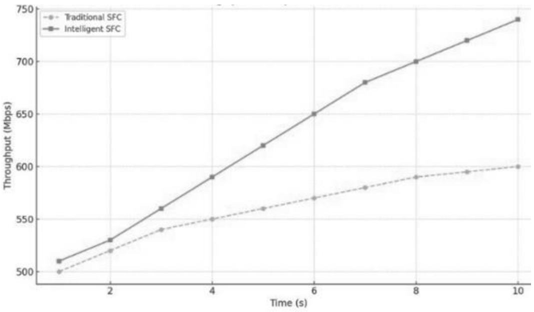

**Fig. (3) Comparison between traditional and intelligent SFC in terms throughput with time**

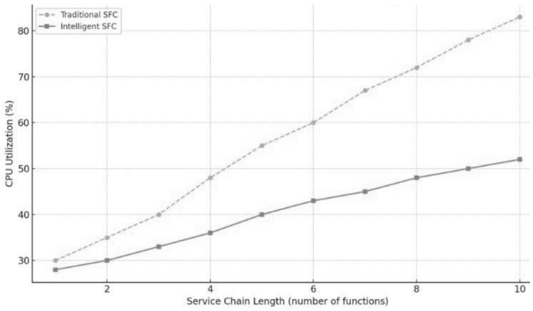

**Fig. (4) Comparison between traditional and intelligent CPU utilization as a function of service chain length**

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, SFC is a pivotal enabler for ultra-low latency communication within NFV. As applications continue to demand faster and more reliable connectivity, innovative approaches to SFC will play a central role in shaping the future of networked services. By combining advances in network architecture, routing protocols, orchestration intelligence, and security, it is possible to meet the stringent demands of modern applications while leveraging the flexibility and scalability of NFV.

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