LUMEN®

Preparing Your Network for 800G in the AI Era

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Executive Summary

AI infrastructure is evolving and expanding rapidly, redefining core connectivity requirements for throughput, latency consistency, and scalability.

As GPU clusters multiply and span metro and regional environments, AI workloads increasingly extend beyond a single facility. Distributed training environments now require ultra-high-capacity optical transport to move massive volumes of data between clusters.

These interconnected clusters form **AI corridors**—high-density routes where GPU synchronization, model training data, and inference workloads generate intense data exchange.

In this environment, high-capacity optical transport is no longer simply a connectivity layer. It is a strategic performance enabler that directly impacts GPU utilization, workload scalability, and time-to-revenue for AI services.

Network performance increasingly determines whether expensive GPU investments deliver their full value or remain idle waiting for data.

800G wavelengths represent an important planning milestone for infrastructure leaders designing AI-capable networks through 2026 and beyond. While not every organization requires 800G today, infrastructure decisions made now will directly influence both operational efficiency and long-term competitiveness.

For **GPUaaS and NeoCloud operators,** network readiness becomes critical. If the network underperforms, new AI region launches can be delayed and available GPU capacity may remain underutilized.

This white paper explores why 800G transport will play a pivotal role for AI infrastructure builders. It examines the demand shifts driving ultra-high-bandwidth requirements, the emerging limitations of 400G networks, and how organizations can adopt a phased strategy for preparing their infrastructure for the transition to 800G.

1

The AI Infrastructure Shift

AI model training has evolved from single-facility environments into geographically distributed infrastructure.

GPU clusters increasingly span multiple data centers within metros and across regions, driven by an expanding ecosystem that extends beyond traditional hyperscalers. Today's AI infrastructure builders include:

1. Neocloud providers delivering GPU-as-a-Service (GPUaaS) platforms for training, fine-tuning, and inference
2. Data center operators (DCOs) enabling high-density colocation and interconnection ecosystems in campus environments
3. Digital infrastructure investors funding new AI-optimized mega data centers and power infrastructure

As AI models grow in size—with leading architectures now reaching trillions of parameters—and training datasets expand dramatically, traffic patterns inside and between facilities are changing.

Traditional north-south application traffic is increasingly overshadowed by east-west data movement.

Massive GPU-to-GPU exchanges are required to synchronize parallel model training across distributed compute clusters.

Many AI deployments now concentrate traffic along specific high-capacity routes known as AI corridors. These corridors carry large-scale synchronization traffic between GPU hubs and data centers.

When these corridors experience bandwidth constraints, the consequences extend beyond technical performance. Network limitations can become a business constraint, preventing organizations from monetizing newly deployed GPU capacity at market demand levels.

This evolving traffic profile introduces new requirements for core networks:

- Tight inter-data-center synchronization to keep distributed GPUs operating in lockstep
- Latency consistency to minimize jitter across routes
- Throughput stability during peak AI workloads such as model checkpoints and data ingestion
- Predictable scaling on high-density corridors where AI traffic concentrates

In modern AI infrastructure, the network fabric has become part of the performance equation, not simply a transport layer.

Who Should Be Planning for 800G?

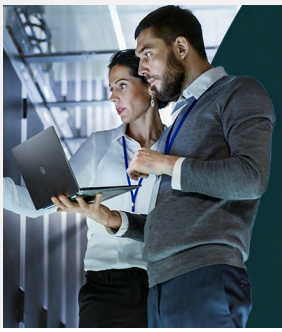
Organizations most likely to require 800G connectivity in the near term include:

NeoCloud / GPUaaS Providers

Operators delivering GPU-as-a-Service platforms must plan for massive east-west data movement between GPU clusters, frequent synchronization across distributed training environments, and high-capacity inter-data-center connectivity that keeps expensive GPU resources fully utilized.

Data Center Operators

AI-focused data center campuses require scalable data center interconnect (DCI) and metro transport capable of supporting high-density GPU deployments, multi-site clusters, and predictable low-latency connectivity between facilities.



Digital Infrastructure Investors

Organizations funding new AI-optimized data center builds must plan network architectures that can scale alongside rapidly growing AI workloads, ensuring backbone capacity and optical transport infrastructure are ready for the next generation of high-performance compute.

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When Transport Becomes a Performance Variable

Historically, network upgrades followed aggregate traffic growth. Capacity expansions were implemented when overall utilization approached predefined thresholds.

AI environments fundamentally alter this model.

In distributed training, thousands of GPUs operate simultaneously, exchanging data in synchronized cycles. As GPU performance increases, the tolerance for network delays or variability decreases.

Even minor slowdowns in data delivery can create cascading performance degradation across large clusters. When GPUs must wait for delayed data from peer nodes, the entire training process slows.

This leads to several challenges:

Longer synchronization cycles

Training iterations extend when parameter updates arrive at different times across nodes.

Underutilized GPU infrastructure

High-end GPUs represent significant capital investment. If the network cannot deliver data fast enough, these assets sit idle.

Delayed innovation cycles

Longer training runs extend time-to-market for AI applications and services.

Recognizing transport as a performance variable allows organizations to avoid scenarios where network constraints limit the potential of cutting-edge hardware.

Forward-looking infrastructure builders increasingly align network upgrades with GPU deployment cycles.

Use Case: GPU-as-a-Service (GPUaaS)

GPUaaS providers operate distributed GPU clusters across multiple facilities to support customer training workloads.

As cluster sizes grow, synchronization traffic between GPU nodes increases dramatically. High-capacity optical transport ensures distributed training jobs run efficiently while maintaining high GPU utilization—directly influencing revenue and service performance.

3

Where 400G Architectures May Encounter Friction

400G wavelengths have delivered major capacity gains across modern networks and will remain appropriate for many deployments.

However, organizations experiencing rapid AI growth are beginning to encounter limitations.

Throughput Headroom Compression

Large-scale training jobs involving thousands of GPUs can generate enormous synchronization traffic. A route that once appeared future-proof at 400G can approach saturation quickly when AI workloads scale.

Latency Sensitivity

As compute speeds increase, tolerance for latency variability decreases. AI training environments increasingly require predictable low-latency transport to maintain synchronized workloads.

Corridor Concentration

AI traffic tends to concentrate along a limited number of critical routes. These AI corridors can experience congestion even when average network utilization appears moderate.

Incremental Scaling Complexity

Scaling a network through incremental additions introduces operational complexity and cost. Over time, this piecemeal approach can become difficult to manage.

800G transport significantly expands the performance ceiling by doubling per-wavelength capacity and improving spectral efficiency.

Fiber Infrastructure Matters

While much attention focuses on wavelength speeds and optical equipment, the underlying fiber infrastructure plays a critical role in determining how effectively high-capacity transport technologies such as 800G perform.

Factors such as fiber characteristics, span design, route diversity, and splice quality influence key optical impairments—including attenuation, chromatic dispersion, and signal noise—that ultimately determine achievable reach, spectral efficiency, and overall network performance. As wavelengths scale from 400G to 800G and beyond, these physical properties of the network become increasingly important.

Optical technologies such as **reconfigurable optical add-drop multiplexers (ROADMs)** further enable dynamic routing of wavelengths across complex networks, allowing operators to efficiently direct capacity where it is needed while maintaining signal integrity across long-haul and metro environments.

Looking ahead, innovations such as **hollow core fiber** promise additional performance improvements by reducing latency and optical nonlinearities, offering a glimpse of how the physical network may continue evolving to support future generations of ultra-high-capacity transport.

Lumen's extensive fiber footprint, combined with ongoing route expansion, route diversity, and advanced optical engineering—including ultra-low-loss (ULL) fiber deployments and carefully engineered span design—provides a strong foundation for supporting next-generation transport technologies such as 800G across both metro and long-haul networks while maintaining the operational headroom required for long-term network performance.

4

800G as a Planning Milestone — Not a Reactive Upgrade

Viewing 800G purely as a faster version of 400G underestimates its significance.

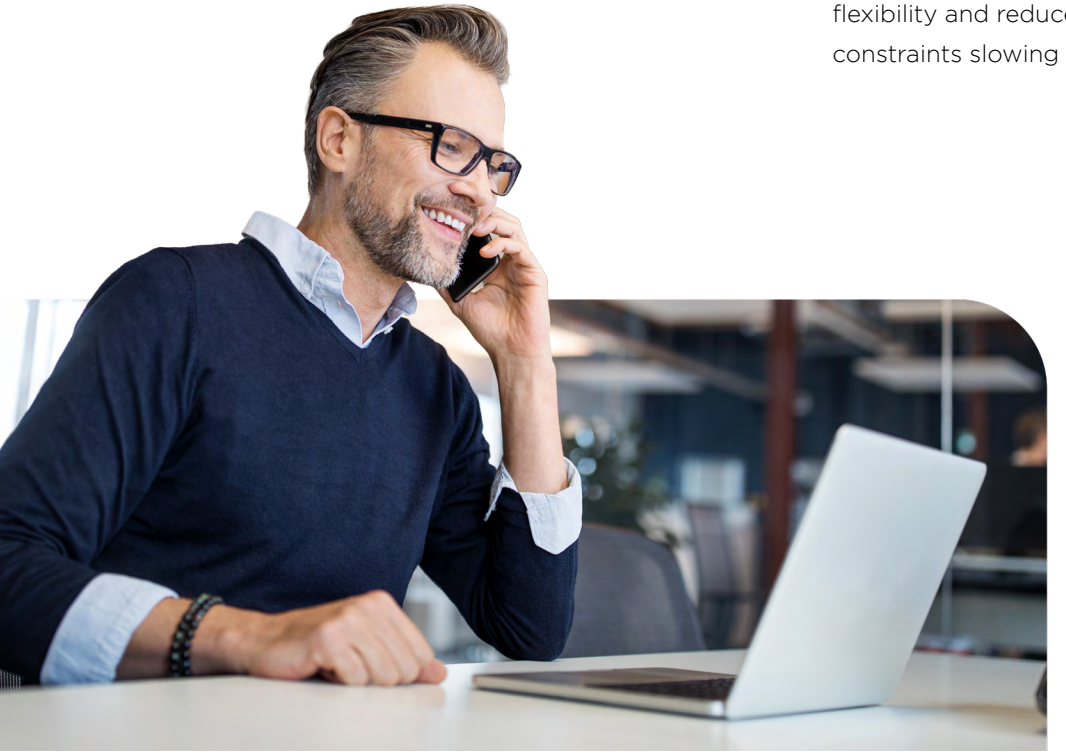
800G represents a strategic planning milestone for organizations building AI-ready infrastructure for the next decade.

Optical network upgrades occur over multi-year cycles. Waiting until demand peaks can compress planning windows and force reactive decisions.

By incorporating 800G into near-term planning, organizations can:

- Align network capacity with projected AI growth
- Integrate upgrades into capital planning cycles
- Design phased migration strategies from 400G
- Coordinate infrastructure readiness with partners and providers

Treating 800G as a deliberate milestone preserves flexibility and reduces the risk of network constraints slowing AI deployments.



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Engineering the Next Capacity Layer

Meeting AI-driven bandwidth demands requires more than faster transponders. It requires coordinated upgrades across the network architecture.

The Lumen Network is progressing toward **800G wavelength capability across high-demand routes by the end of 2026.** This evolution includes:

- Optical layer enhancements
- Network capacity expansion across metro and long-haul routes
- Metro-to-core architectural alignment
- Support for phased customer migration paths

Delivering 800G at scale requires advanced coherent optical technologies capable of supporting high-capacity transport with consistent performance across metro and long-haul environments.

Lumen is enabling this transition through deployment of **Ciena's WaveLogic 6 coherent optics platform,** which supports 800G wavelengths across long-haul networks and up to 1.6 Tb/s in metro environments.

This technology enables higher capacity density while maintaining signal integrity across long distances.

6

A Practical Framework for 800G Readiness

Organizations evaluating 800G should adopt a phased approach:

PHASE 1

Workload and Synchronization Assessment

Analyze current and projected AI workloads.

Identify where distributed training traffic originates and where synchronization sensitivity is highest.

PHASE 2

Capacity Corridor Analysis

Map high-density AI corridors and evaluate headroom on critical routes.

Identify localized bottlenecks that may be masked by network-wide averages.

PHASE 3

Core Network Alignment

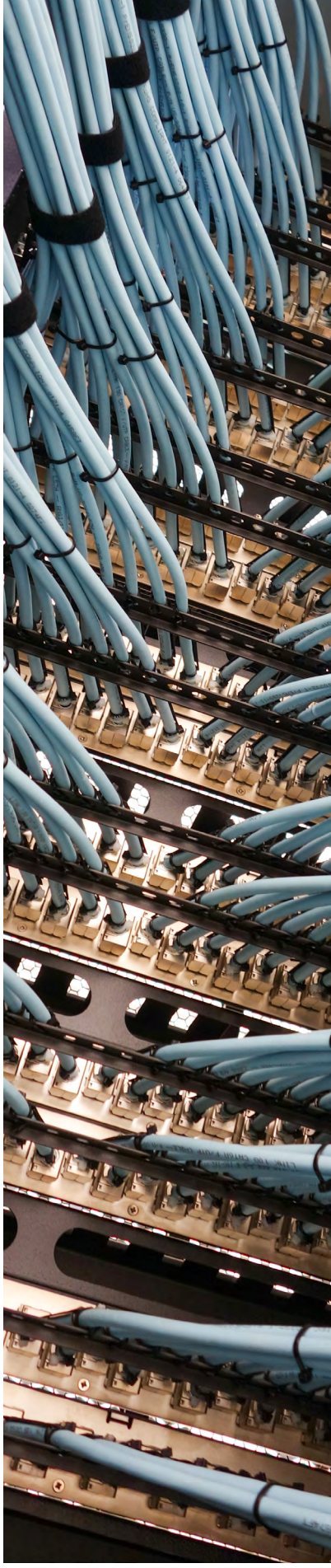
Assess the readiness of existing routing and optical infrastructure to support higher-capacity transport.

PHASE 4

Phased Deployment

Prioritize upgrades along the most heavily utilized corridors and expand capacity in alignment with expected AI workload growth.

This structured approach allows organizations to scale deliberately rather than reacting to unexpected capacity constraints.



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Designing for Sustained AI Scale

The rise of AI represents a sustained shift in infrastructure demand rather than a temporary surge.

Every advance in AI—from larger models to faster compute—drives additional network load. Network architecture must evolve accordingly.

800G wavelengths provide the architectural headroom needed to support continued growth in AI workloads while maintaining performance consistency.

Organizations that begin planning now will position their networks to support the next generation of AI infrastructure without encountering performance bottlenecks.

Assess Your 800G Readiness

Organizations evaluating the role of 800G in their AI infrastructure strategy should begin assessing their network architecture today.

Lumen and Ciena combine advanced optical technology with large-scale network expertise to help organizations plan and execute the transition to next-generation transport.

Schedule a consultation to explore how your organization can begin preparing for the transition to 800G and ensure your infrastructure can support the next decade of AI innovation.

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About Lumen

Lumen is guided by our belief that humanity is at its best when technology advances the way we live and work. We deliver a fast, secure platform for applications and data to help businesses, government, and communities deliver amazing experiences.

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