After promising support for Matter and Thread, Level launches a Wi-Fi bridge instead

This week, smart lock maker Level announced a new Wi-Fi bridge for its locks to enable “remote access and integrations with smart home technology platforms,” including Amazon Alexa and Google Home. Welcome to 2015, Level.

Instead of embracing what are being touted as the future technologies of the smart home — Matter and Thread — Level has released the a $79 Wi-Fi bridge that plugs into an outlet and acts as a bridge between its lock’s Bluetooth radio and your internet router, so it can be controlled remotely and work with cloud-enabled smart home platforms.

Why is Level resorting to the old ways when it could implement Matter and Thread?

The Wi-Fi bridge was developed for the earliest smart locks (the August Lock got one in 2015) as a band-aid solution to the power-sucking effects of Wi-Fi on a smart lock’s battery. (Changing the batteries in your door locks every couple of months is not fun.) The bridge has since largely been abandoned by most manufacturers because it adds confusion, complexity, and price. No one wants a single-purpose Wi-Fi bridge taking up an outlet in their house when there are other, better solutions out there. Thread seems like one of those solutions, especially for a battery-powered device like a smart lock.

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So, this move puzzled me at first. Level’s pitch is simplicity, a smart lock that doesn’t look like a smart lock. All the lock’s tech is packed inside the deadbolt, not plugged into an outlet. And they have the tech they need for Matter and Thread in there already.

Last year, Level co-founder and CTO Ken Goto told me that “all Level Locks are 100% hardware compatible with Matter, and Thread will be supported in future releases because of this. We are excited that Matter has recently been certified and are watching this closely to release this capability in a firmware update soon.”

Adding Matter-over-Thread to its locks would *also* enable remote access and interoperability with more smart home platforms for Level (it currently only works with Apple Home and Ring through Amazon Sidewalk). Plus, Thread has advantages such as lower power consumption and increased range (it’s a mesh network), and Matter works entirely locally, so there’s no cloud dependency.

So, why is Level resorting to the old ways with a Wi-Fi bridge, when it could implement Matter and Thread? When I asked Goto about releasing the Connect rather than the promised support for Matter and Thread, he said, “Wi-Fi enablement was an important request from our customers for remote access and integrations with smart home technology platforms. We are still investigating solutions of Matter-over-Thread, and we will make sure to get in touch once we know what adoption looks like for Level.”

Reading between the lines here, it seems that Level, like other smart lock manufacturers such as Schlage and Yale, feels that both Matter and Thread are still too under-baked and

over-complicated to fully unleash on its customers.

“We are still investigating solutions of Matter-over-Thread.”

Adding Thread to Level would allow for out-of-home control through a Thread border router, but compatibility across border routers is messy. Level would have to make sure customers connected to the *right* Thread border router and not another one somewhere in their home. While Matter would allow support for multiple platforms, Level’s customers would also need a Matter controller from the right platform for it to work.

Factoring in all these complications and opportunities for confusion, you can see why offering a $79 Wi-Fi bridge seemed like the easier option, even in 2023. Where Matter and Thread have woefully over-promised and underdelivered is not in the technology per se but in the simplicity. The new smart home standard is supposed to make buying, setting up, and using smart home products easier. So far, it’s 0 for 3.

https://www.theverge.com/2023/10/17/23920848/level-lock-connect-wifi-bridge-matter-over-thread