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Linux Breaks Into Small Business Out Of The Server Farm & Onto The Desktop

In the past few years, Linux has gained a great deal of publicity, especially in the Web-server application space. But the generally accepted wisdom has been that small businesses would be slow to adopt Linux for a number of factors. But now, that appears to be changing, as small companies look for alternatives to expensive upgrades and constantly increasing hardware requirements. What once was seen as an upstart OS fit only for fanatics and hobbyists is quickly becoming a part of many small business IT strategies.

So just what is driving this transition from proprietary solutions to open source? According to Jupiter Media, the most common assumption, that it is a decision based solely on the low or free cost of the software, is not the leading factor bringing Linux into SMBs. Instead, the most frequently cited factor (at 23%), in a recent survey of small and medium-sized businesses commissioned by Jupiter, was a philosophical appreciation of the open-source methodology.

Equally surprising was the number of small businesses that have brought Linux into the workplace environment. A full 26% of these companies have at least one Linux server somewhere on their network, and 19% have begun to use Linux for desktop applications.

■ Cost, Bugs Cited As Factors

One major reason for the intrusion of Linux into the traditionally Microsoft desktop space (cited by 14% of respondents in the survey) is cost. Joe Wilcox, a senior analyst with Jupiter Media, says that this is becoming a more important factor as small businesses try to stay competitive. "You're looking at your older machines, thinking about 'Gee, I have to upgrade them. Am I going to have to pay for a bunch of boxes of Windows? That's gonna be expensive.' Then you walk into CompUSA, and there's Linux sitting there on the shelf, for as many users as you want, for 49 bucks, as opposed to \$199 for a copy of XP Pro." And because Linux can often run on hardware that has become too slow to run the latest versions of Windows, it can extend the life of workstation investments.

Another factor for switching to Linux, named in the survey by 20% of small businesses, is too many problems with Windows. Evidently, some SMBs believe that Linux will provide a more reliable user experience for their employees. But according to Wilcox, there are still some stumbling blocks preventing more widespread adoption. "Only 22% of SMBs, that is, companies with less than a thousand employees, have a full-time IT person. For the smallest business, less than 10 employees, which is the largest part of the market, only 10% have a full-time IT person. So, for a lot of them, Linux is just going to be too complex. For example, Linux is a lot better at driver support than it used to be a few years ago, but you can still run into all sorts of hiccups."

■ An SMB Faces The Transition

An example of a small business looking at Linux more actively is Benefit Systems, headquartered in Indianapolis. BSI, which provides third-party healthcare claim administration for self-insurers, currently runs a mix of NetWare, Win2000, WinNT, and HP-UX Unix servers, with a 60/40 split of WinXP Pro and Win98 desktop machines for the 50 users at the site.

The first application that brought Linux into the building was eMail, according to CIO Dan Bent. "I'm known for being fiscally conservative, to put it politely, so the low cost of acquisition was really attractive to me. I took an old machine I was prepared to scrap [a P 120 with 64MB of RAM, a former fileserver] and loaded FreeBSD and sendmail on it. I was amazed at how simple it was and how well it performed. I added Sophos Anti-virus to it, and I had an email solution that was meeting my organization's needs with far less support effort than the previous solution."

The next major step that BSI is considering is moving the desktop users to Linux. Although many of the applications used in-house run dumb terminal applications that can be easily accessed from Linux, there are a number of potential roadblocks to consider.

"Since we're in the evaluation stage of the project, integration issues are a primary concern," says Bent. "One of the criteria for the project is that we must provide the same quality and range of services that we currently provide. This implies replacing Novell's excellent file and print services with Samba and Linux print services. We have some applications, notably the IMR Alchemy imaging application, which have been developed exclusively for a Microsoft environment. The solution we select will have to support those applications. Our users exchange documents and spreadsheets with our many business partners; we cannot add complexity to this process or any of our business processes, so a thorough analysis that includes end-user participation is required. In the end, we may not go to Linux desktops at all, but the costs are compelling." ■

by James Turner

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