

E-COMMERCE SPECIAL REPORT:

Linux (Finally) Ready for the Desktop

By Robyn Weisman
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Yankee Group analyst Laura DiDio said the SMB (small and medium business) segment of the Windows installed base is most likely to consider or commence a wholesale migration to Linux desktops.

Ignoring a personal entreaty (and a 15 percent licensing discount) from Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, the city of Munich, Germany, decided recently to migrate its 14,000 PC desktop users from Windows to the Linux platform.

Laura DiDio, senior analyst of application infrastructure and software platforms at the Yankee Group, told the E-Commerce Times that the Munich decision has a great deal of symbolic public relations value.

"Munich is one of the largest cities in Germany, the country with the strongest economy in Europe," DiDio said, adding that government organizations in Europe have long been proponents of open source systems as an alternative to Microsoft offerings.

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Already Switching

Of course, Munich is not the only entity switching to Linux for the desktop. According to Forrester analyst Ted Schadler, shipping giant FedEx now runs its Web applications and e-mail on Linux.

Giga/Forrester analyst Stacey Quandt told the E-Commerce Times that tech-oriented organizations, such as the Johnson Space Center and the U.S. Census Bureau, also are using Linux on their desktop computers, and several insurance and financial services firms are evaluating Linux as a desktop alternative.

Has Linux finally matured into a viable desktop alternative to the Windows monolith? And will increasing adoption of this open source OS have a snowball effect in more and more organizations?

Growing Interest

Deb Woods, director of product marketing at Red Hat, told the E-Commerce Times that Red Hat's sales have been increasing steadily across the board, month over month and quarter over quarter. Although most businesses have not made an enterprise-wide switch from Windows to Linux, numerous companies have migrated various aspects of their business, such as workstations, to Linux.

However, Woods said, Red Hat's current Linux offering provides applications and support that an average office worker easily could utilize.

Included with Red Hat's desktop Linux platform are the Mozilla Web browser, project planning tool MrProject, MailClient for e-mail, and OpenOffice, a suite of business applications similar to Microsoft Office that Woods said is quite capable in any enterprise environment.

In addition, Red Hat's user interface is no more difficult to use than Microsoft Windows, according to Quandt. She said she knows several people who have computers that dual-boot between Windows and Linux, and she has yet to hear from anyone who stopped using Linux because of interface issues.

Pricing and Compatibility

Linux proponents often cite cost containment as a reason to migrate from Windows. Quandt said that while using Linux on the client side can be less expensive than using an equivalent Windows system, overall cost depends on two factors: the types and combinations of applications a company is trying to support, and how many users will be accessing the platform.

Notably, alternative business productivity suites, such as OpenOffice, do not yet offer completely seamless compatibility with Microsoft Office documents, though they are moving in this direction. Still, a lack of perfect compatibility may stop certain enterprises from leaving the Windows environment.

Most Likely To Switch

DiDio said the SMB (small and medium business) segment of the Windows installed base is most likely to consider or commence a wholesale migration to Linux desktops, largely because SMBs are not saddled by tremendous physical infrastructure issues or the need to alter hundreds of thousands of desktops already running Windows-based applications. On the other hand, those factors are more likely to affect large enterprises' decisions about operating systems, causing them to be more conservative in their actions.

"Switching over to Linux is a less challenging and less expensive proposition for [these small- and medium-size businesses]," DiDio noted.

She also pointed out that companies might begin to use the Linux desktop as a complement to their main Windows setup. For example, an enterprise might switch a couple of remote departments to Linux and Sun's StarOffice office productivity suite. Then, as the company tries out future cost-cutting methods, it might ask itself how Star Office has worked in the test situation. In this way, Linux may slowly infiltrate the enterprise desktop, too. **END**

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