

4. 2004 - The Year of the Linux Desktop

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2004 marks the onset of a new era of robust open source desktops in the enterprise. Is the Linux desktop really ready for prime time?

This question has been asked and answered at the Desktop Linux Conference in Boston earlier this year. Heavyweights including IBM, OSDL, Intel, Dell, Nokia, HP and Red Hat pitched that Linux is indeed ready for the enterprise desktop.

Despite the rush to celebrate a coming-of-age party, market analysts indicate that Linux has yet to make serious progress in the corporate or consumer desktop market. According to IDC, Linux desktops in 2003 increased from 1.7 to 2.8 per cent of the market. Microsoft, with over 90 per cent market share, contends that it will hold ground by continuing to be innovative and competitive.

The rate of adoption, however, may now be ready to change. Market trends show that 43 per cent of corporations surveyed in the US, Europe and Japan are willing to consider Linux on their desktops and laptops. Recently IBM's CEO Sam Palmisano proclaimed that IBM would switch entirely to Linux desktops to support its 319,000 strong workforce. Oracle is making the switch too. For some, then, Linux is a serious alternative to Windows on the desktop.

Knowledge Workers First

The open source desktop has definitely become attractive to specialised groups. Stock exchanges, banks and scientists and engineering groups are adopting the open source desktop first. In the US, the knowledge worker market is estimated to be about 40 million strong. But it is when the Linux desktop is used by the office secretary and mail room clerk that Microsoft will encounter serious market share issues.

Keys to Success

Richness of applications, interoperability, localization and customer support for the open source desktop are the keys to wider use.

Increasingly rich portfolio of applications are driving corporate and consumer interest in the Linux desktop. OpenOffice, Mozilla, KDE, Gnome desktop, Evolution - all open source software applications - have steadily grown in robustness, functionality, ease-of-

use, accessibility and localization. Sun Microsystems positions its Java Desktop System (JDS) as a complete alternative to corporations wanting to diminish dependence on Microsoft. JDS includes a Gnome desktop environment, StarOffice Office productivity suite, Mozilla browser, Evolution mail and calendar application and Java 2 Platform Standard Edition (J2SE), all on top of the latest Linux operating system. OpenOffice, the open source twin of Star Office, is now the most popular open source desktop application suite with more than 16 million users and localization in more than 30 languages.

Red Hat's Enterprise Linux workstation emphasises interoperability with Microsoft file formats to ease enterprise migrations to Linux. Standardization of file formats ensures office-suite interoperability and document exchange. Red Hat is also working on a new open desktop release, which will refine the user interface and offer more office productivity tools, such as "search" and "instant messaging".

Novell, in a spree of acquisitions, is positioning SUSE-based services tools and Ximian applications - such as Evolution for mail and calendaring - to empower the enterprise.

Localization will further encourage desktop adoption, especially for non-English speaking markets. Since proprietary software vendors tend to ignore smaller, local markets, open source desktop localization projects are practical and cost-effective solutions. In Asia, OpenOffice, Mozilla and Linux Desktop localization efforts are promoting the widespread adoption of Linux desktops.

Support is the final key to desktop adoption. All enterprise desktop vendors now provide customer support at the same level as traditional product support. Non-enterprise desktop support is still ad-hoc and is usually realised by a mix of Linux enthusiasts, e-mail and local consultants.

The Linux desktop has established a beachhead in the enterprise! Open source desktop projects, in collaboration with large software vendors such as IBM, Novell, Red Hat and Sun, are positioning the desktop landscape for a disruptive technology takeover. World domination - one desktop at a time!