

Adopting a Penguin

by Frank Welder
Linux Program Manager
Avnet Hall-Mark, IBM Division

Linux Enters the Enterprise

Aspirations for Linux as an operating environment for businesses date back to its inception in the late 1990s by Linus Torvalds, who designed Linux as a UNIX variant to run on multiple platforms. Torvalds' decision to open his initial source code for public input and alteration was a dramatic departure from the typical proprietary product development model, as was the rapid and enthusiastic embrace of Linux by the software community. Within months, this enthusiasm amongst early adopters gained the weight of religious fervor among many Linux adherents seeking alternatives to existing proprietary solutions. Thus, Linux took a seat in IT history as a disruptive technology: a less complex and less expensive alternative to entrenched proprietary solutions, yet quite capable of performing well for many applications.



The hype-fueled climate of these earlier times combined with grandiose visions (some would say hallucinations) of unseating Microsoft's stranglehold on the desktop and derailing its increasing software hegemony created an air of management suspicion around Linux. However, as with most technological advancements, over time more business-focused minds began to see the inherent potential of Linux in a corporate setting and soon recognized the pragmatic opportunity for Open Source infrastructure solutions. This potential also resonated with IT management and staff, and as IT vendors and Independent Software Vendors (ISVs) began to embrace Linux, it built market momentum. With growing input, investment, and support from industry participants, Linux evolved per vendor clients' desires, thereby driving its evolution from a disruptive to a sustaining technology.

Where and Why Linux Is Winning

Today, the support and investment that Linux enjoys from vendors is driven as much by their desire for success as by the technology's own merits and business value. The original promise behind Linux – a multi-platform, UNIX-style offering that scales from PC desktops to mainframe computers – is now becoming a reality. Relative to rival proprietary solutions, Linux is proving a cost-effective and stable environment for deployment in Small and Medium Businesses (SMBs) while ISV support for the desktop, middleware, and ebusiness is impressive and growing. Companies are discovering that Linux represents a practical upgrade path for legacy UNIX solutions, as well as for their state-of-the-art application requirements.

Linux's appeal is spreading internationally also, with governments in countries such as Germany and China, as well as departments of the federal government including the Department of Defense and localities such as Houston, Texas demonstrating their support, thus lending Linux increasing credibility as a global IT solution that offers companies a secure development environment for business applications. This, combined with growing support from a wide variety of IT vendors and ISVs, is helping articulate the bottom-line impact Linux affords organizations of every kind.

Linux and SMBs: Special Issues and Concerns

Companies of all sizes are discovering the business benefits Linux delivers. Yet SMBs represent a unique demographic with specific concerns to address. SMBs tend to be the most practical of businesses: their long-term growth and profitability potential are governed by decisions grounded in a "scale-the-business" mentality. Compounding SMB's pragmatism is the entrenched risk-averse sentiment of a business entity that is quite able yet often hesitant to embrace change.

With this in mind, it is clear that FUD – fear, uncertainty, and doubt – remain the largest obstacle to SMB's deployment of Linux. Beneath the benefits preached by the industry at large lie concerns associated with switching to Linux, including weighing immediate and longer-term costs against perceived and real benefits. The fear of change may remain the greatest psychological hurdle for Linux vendors to overcome in convincing SMBs of Linux's long-term pragmatic value.

The Linux Advantage for SMBs

What SMBs Stand to Gain from Linux Migration

FUD may have hindered Linux adoption in its formative years. But today, Linux adoption is enjoying impressive gains as SMBs come to realize the real business advantages afforded by Linux, including the benefits afforded by developing in the Open Source and Open Standards environment. For developers, Linux represents a single platform for code development, regardless of the underlying hardware. This is in stark contrast to traditional UNIX developments, which must first cater to the specific requirements of a given hardware and operating system combination, then deal with the nuances of migrating software to sibling platforms. In a Linux world, this labor is reduced to a single platform that requires no migration effort outside that of a possible recompilation. As a result, an Open Standards environment can dramatically expand the number of supporters, suppliers, and developers a vendor can target with its offerings: a notable consideration in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

Financial personnel should take note that migrating to Linux can afford SMBs substantial cost savings over proprietary alternative applications, while IT departments will understand Linux's increased flexibility as an infrastructure solution. Linux can be installed on platforms from numerous vendors, which provides greater flexibility in migration costs while mitigating concerns regarding hardware vendor lock-in over time. In addition, Linux can also be deployed on under-utilized or repurposed hardware, thus

granting the SMB even greater flexibility. Similarly, Linux offers increased scalability for important software applications.

Solutions that were once deemed too expensive for the SMB due to the cost of the hardware and the vendor's cost to develop the application on multiple hardware platforms can now take advantage of the lower-cost structure of the Linux platform to deliver a new class of SMB solutions at affordable price points. This cost structure takes a number of forms, including the ability to purchase a Linux license to be deployed across a company's IT environment without paying additional per-server fees.

With this and other newly affordable solutions, SMBs can seek to improve their business flexibility, sharpen their competitive advantage, and garner customer insights once thought unavailable. Linux can provide a competitive advantage to SMBs that is analogous to what ebusiness did for SMBs in the early 1990s. This is a particularly appealing aspect of Linux as SMBs are rightly focused on future growth potential; migrating to Linux presents SMBs with a broader range of options for current and future business operations than many other solutions.

ISVs and Linux: A Key Issue for SMBs

Channel partner and ISV support is a key market signal that a new technology is enjoying positive adoption momentum. Since SMB customers rely heavily on ISVs and other channel partners to deliver IT solutions, the channels' support for Linux is critical to ensure Linux's adoption in this market segment. As Linux comes ever more into the mainstream, a broadening range of business ISVs continue to show support for it.

For example, a number of ISVs have stepped up with Linux offerings for the back office, including Clear Technologies, eOne Group, JD Edwards, and SAP. In addition, Linux support is brewing at the desktop. Although a clear leader for office productivity suites has not emerged, available solutions include IBM's Lotus productivity and collaboration products, Ximian's Enterprise Desktop productivity suite and Sun Microsystems' Star Office productivity suite. Nonetheless, the more critical issue is whether Linux on the server is incompatible with Microsoft or any vendor's desktop applications.

In an Open Standards environment, the standards, not the application, are the important factor. Hence, any ISV's offering that is standards-compliant should achieve the same level of compatibility regardless of whether it is Linux-based or not. However, in its On Demand initiative IBM is taking the further step of fully integrating Linux solutions across its greater product offerings, so that channel partners and SMB customers will not be saddled with the cost and effort of dealing with unexpected incompatibility issues.

Footnote:

Penguin Dreams: Can Linux Help SMB's to Fly? Clay Ryder, July 2003 The Sageza Group, Inc.

