Independent Assessment
by Alan Radding

Oct. 18, 2002

Linux Gains Enterprise Bite
5 reasons Linux why can succeed in the enterprise

It seems that Linux offers everything a big, intensive enterprise computing organization needs. There is Linux support for the latest 64-bit Intel processors, for clustering and high availability architectures, for SMP. It already is widely deployed, albeit somewhat unnoticed, in many organizations through myriad computing appliances that handle the Web, email, caching, storage, content delivery and host of other infrastructure tasks. Linux is built into these devices as the underlying operating system because it is cheap (free), reliable, easy to maintain, scalable, and secure--all the things enterprise IT managers and the top executives claim they want. A growing library of enterprise case studies confirms that Linux can play and win in the corporate enterprise.

So why isn't Linux getting the respect it should? Certainly Microsoft's anti-Linux tirades, however far-fetched, have caused some IT managers to hesitate when it comes to Linux. But Microsoft's charges, such as Linux lacking security, are laughable coming from a company whose own products are riddled with flaw and security failures. Linux, like any operating system, has security flaws, but they pale in comparison to Microsoft's incessant security lapses.

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IT managers often point to the lack of conventional service and support for Linux. They understandably are reluctant to trust the support for their production applications to anonymous contributors at Linux online forums. This concern, however, can be eliminated with five simple words: IBM, Sun, HP, Oracle, SAP. These major vendors, the most stalwart companies the computer industry offers, are committed to supporting Linux.

IBM probably has the most established and largest Linux commitment. It supports Linux on a wide variety of platforms, from laptops to mainframe systems. It is involved with SuSE Linux for high availability, enterprise Linux systems. It has introduced extensive Linux application development tools; ported MQ Series, DB2, and WebSphere--company jewels--to Linux; and committed to extensive Linux support through IBM Global Services. IBM invested $1 billion in hardware, software and services related to Linux in 2001 alone, according to the company. It reports more than 2,500 Linux customers worldwide as well as using it internally on more than 1,000 servers running Linux for mission-critical applications.

Sun is a new convert to Linux, but it insists that Linux will be a central piece of its strategy going forward. It has committed to supporting Linux in its Sun ONE Web services initiative and Sun Grid Engine. It has introduced a new line of Linux servers at the low end (Solaris still reigns at the high end.). And most importantly, Sun has committed its global service organization to supporting Linux.

Oracle too is involved with the open source Linux community and is actively publishing source code. It has ported its Oracle 9i database to Linux. According to a recent announcement, it is collaborating with Dell and Red Hat to develop, test, and market enterprise-ready Linux solutions based on a combination of Dell PowerEdge Servers, Dell/EMC and PowerVault storage systems, Oracle9*i* Database Release 2 with Real Application Clusters, and Red Hat Linux Advanced Server along with enterprise management software.

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The combined HP/Compaq also declared its support for Linux. The HP effort includes hardware, enterprise security, management and high-availability software, and comprehensive services for Linux. In addition, HP has enlisted its network of partners, ISVs, and the open source community to offer applications and the tools needed to develop comprehensive Linux-based solutions.

Then there is SAP, the enterprise packaged application leader. "Since early 1999, SAP has successfully supported Linux as a mature, reliable operating system for e-business solutions," said Karl-Heinz Hess, member of the SAP Extended Executive Board in a March 2001 announcement. Today SAP supports the latest Linux kernel and distributions from Red Hat and SuSE on the Dell, HP/Compaq, IBM, and Fujitsu-Siemens platforms.

For some, a gnawing concern is Linux on the desktop, not the server at all. As long as organizations are married to the Windows desktop they can't realistically free themselves from Microsoft and take full advantage of the open source world. Even if they replace their entire Microsoft-based backend infrastructure with Linux, the organization remains saturated with Windows on desktops everywhere.

Until recently, there have been no viable alternatives to Windows on the desktop. (In 2000, Corel appeared poised to introduce a WordPerfect Office Suite for Linux but that fizzled.) Now, however, desktop office suites are appearing that offer substantial Windows-compatibility, meaning they have sufficient filters to import and export documents in Windows formats. Sun's StarOffice is the leader at this point. OpenOffice (OpenOffice.org) is another. Codeweavers CrossOver Office, Mandrake, and Lindows provide Windows-like desktop environments in which you can run StarOffice or one of the others.

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Six months ago these products were primitive, suitable only for the determined. Recent users report much improvement in the latest versions. A year from now, the best products probably will be nearly indistinguishable from the Microsoft Office Suite in terms of core functionality and basic file compatibility. When that happens, enterprises will feel freer to choose not only on the desktop but throughout the corporate computing environment.

Linux is not the panacea for all that ails IT; neither is Microsoft technology a plague to be avoided at all cost. But wherever you find a Linux option, it is worth seriously considering. Even Microsoft appears to be moderating its stance on Linux. And, with IBM, Oracle, Sun, HP, SAP, and many others fully supporting Linux, you certainly won't be out there alone.

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