Linux: Another Look

We last discussed Linux 4 years ago, concluding that it wasn't ready for small business users. In technology years, that's ages ago. Can today's Linux benefit your organization?

While rare on desktops in the U.S., Linux is popular in Europe, where schools, municipalities and corporations find it fast, stable and inexpensive. It's available for an extremely wide variety of hardware: PCs to mid-range systems to technical workstations to IBM mainframes. (Why run Linux on a mainframe? Suppose you could consolidate 500 separate PC servers and lots of network equipment into a single machine. It would be easier to manage – if you need another Linux server, just define and start one.)

There are 200+ Linux "distributions", but only about 6 - Red Hat, Mandrake, Suse, Fedora, Debian and Xandros - have significant market presence. Differing mainly in pricing, packaging and support, some distributions are free, with limited support; others are priced and include support or unique functions. All include web browser, e-mail, games, calculator, etc. Most come with software which costs extra in the Windows environment, including calendar manager, PDF creator, a comprehensive image editor, database program and OpenOffice.   OpenOffice has a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation creator and drawing program, can read and write Word and Excel files and is also available for Windows free.

What can't you do with Linux? You can't run the thousands of programs written specifically for Windows. Many printers aren't supported.

Want to try Linux? Knoppix is a distribution that runs entirely from CD, so it doesn't alter your PC. Boot from the CD or DVD drive, surf the Internet, try OpenOffice, play music, test other applications. When you're done, remove the CD and your PC is unchanged. You can download Knoppix from www.knoppix.org, but it's big and you'll need software capable of burning what's called an iso image. An easier way is to buy a book with a Knoppix CD, such as *Knoppix Hacks* (O'Reilly), *Linux for Dummies* (Wiley) and others. (Some books have a DVD; you'll need a DVD player in the PC.)

So, can your organization benefit from Linux? If you don't run Windows-specific programs and don't mind some retraining, Linux might fit your needs. It supports Windows networking, so you can use it in a Windows environment. Try Xandros; it looks very like Windows and is supported.

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