

Information Technology

Is Linux Good for Business and How Do You Pronounce it, Anyway?

One of the first acronyms I learned while at IBM is TANSTAAFL: “There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch.” As businesspeople, we’re all conditioned to think that something free is worth exactly what we pay for it. Is Linux, a freely available system, a free lunch? Can free software be any good?

The concept of free software goes back to the 1950s, when users were struggling with brand-new technology and sharing ideas and programs benefitted everyone. By the ‘60s the major manufacturers distributed customer-contributed software. With the rise of commercial software products in the ‘70s the concept of free software faded, except in academia. Software producers stopped releasing human-readable versions of programs, called source code, and tightened license terms. This made it difficult to exchange ideas, fix bugs or improve products.

Annoyed by this trend, in 1984 an idealist named Richard Stallman started the Free Software Foundation, with the lofty goal of developing a Unix-like computer operating system containing no copyrighted elements. “Free” means that anyone is free to enhance the software because the source code is released. By 1990 Stallman and other programmers had developed a world-class set of programming tools and utilities, nearly everything needed for a complete replacement for Unix. They called it GNU. (GNU= “GNU’s Not Unix” - don’t ask.) The only piece missing was the core, or kernel.

In 1991 a graduate student at the University of Helsinki named Linus Torvalds decided to write a kernel for a Unix-like system. After a year’s work, Torvalds felt it was ready for others to test. At this point he made two key decisions: to release the source, allowing others to improve and fix it, and to distribute it under essentially the same licensing as GNU. Aided by the growing Internet, thousands of users downloaded it, improved it and sent changes back to Torvalds. It eventually acquired the name Linux, although purists correctly insist that the system should be called GNU-Linux because most of what’s on a “Linux” CD is GNU.

Is GNU-Linux any good? The best programmers are perfectionists; unconstrained by time or budget pressures, perfectionists have improved and fixed it for over 10 years. It’s fast, robust and reliable. Estimates are that 33-40% of Web servers run on Linux. IBM, for one, is investing \$1 billion in Linux infrastructure, training and development.

Is Linux ready for your office? Most software designed for Windows will not run on Linux. While word processing, spreadsheet, database and presentation products for Linux are available, they’re not familiar to most users with two exceptions: Netscape and the WordPerfect suite. (You die-hard WordPerfect lovers may have been right after all.) And the other 50,000 Windows applications? Not yet, maybe in 2-3 years, or 20-30 years.

How do people make money in the topsy-turvy world of free software? The old-fashioned way: by providing service, support, customization and training.

And how do you pronounce Linux? Go to <http://www.linux.org/info/sounds/english.au> and Linus will tell you how he pronounces it.

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