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Linux for the Legal Desktop?

The question of using Linux on the desktop has been popping up with increasing frequency recently, if only when appended to a long string of curses about Windows: "maybe I ought to try Linux." Is this realistic at the present time and, if not, is it likely to be realistic any time soon? And of course, the central question, why bother with Linux at all?

Why Even Consider Linux?

The basic advantages of Linux are simple: it is a more stable program that runs on substantially less horsepower than Windows, and avoids the infernal upgrade cycle that is increasingly built into Windows-based products. Especially internationally, there have been a number of major adoptions of Linux, most notably by the city of Munich in Germany.

Then there is the question of cost. A full-fledged Novell distribution of Linux costs about $50, including technical support. To purchase Windows and Microsoft Office new on the market would cost you over $600. Even counting the steep discounts offered on new PCs, and/or upgrade pricing, you are still paying a premium to ensure the continuance of Microsoft's 85% profit margins on Windows. Microsoft is reportedly virtually giving away its software to prevent large installations from switching to Linux. The outstanding issue is whether it will work with legal-specific products.

Heckman Consulting

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Some Background Basics

Linux was originally written by a Norwegian student, Linus Torvaalds, as a variant of Unix (Linus + Unix = Linux). It is "Open Source" which means the code is published, as opposed to the closely guarded code of proprietary software such as Windows. The "General Public License" that governs most Linux releases provides that anyone can make modifications to the basic program, but modified versions must be freely distributable in the same way as the original. However, overall control is still held by Torvaalds, who approves anything that goes into the public builds. Since working with the basic program is beyond most people, a number of companies have formed to release distributions ("distros" in Linux-speak) that are easier to configure and use and come pre-packaged with various add-ins. The three main Linux distributors are RedHat, Novell (which recently acquired Ximian and SuSE, the second largest distribution of Linux) and IBM. While Linux is "free," these distributions are not: companies make their money by packaging a wide range of utilities and by providing technical support.

Linux is already heavily implanted in back office operations. For example, the Linux-based Apache web server has a 67% market share of all web servers, as opposed to Microsoft's IIS, which has about a 21% market share–and Linux' share has been increasing over the past several years. The research company IDC predicts that in 2005, Linux will account for more than 20% of server shipments, growing at twice the rate of Windows. In addition, Google, for example, runs its some 13,000 servers on Linux. IBM is switching major credit card systems such as Visa and American Express to Linux. So there is no question that Linux offers industrial-strength capabilities. But what about the desktop? In order to get a systematic overview, I recently attended a 2-day "bootcamp" for the Novell/SuSE distribution of Linux.

The Desktop

The weak point of Linux has always been the desktop interface and the lack of drivers for various peripherals. Systems were hard to piece together, reminiscent of the early days of Windows when the "automated" installations were frequently referred to as "plug and pray."

Today, however, the major distributions –Red Hat, SuSE, Novell Linux for Desktop, have large remedied this problem. I installed the newly-released Novell Linux Desktop, and the installation could not have been smoother, although I did have to tweak the CD-Rom settings to get it to recognize some CDs. Typically, Linux gives you much more information about what is going on than Windows does. It took an me hour to install the 3 CDs, after which I had the Open Office suite (including a word processor, spreadsheet, graphics program, etc.), a powerful e-mail client (including calendar), the Mozilla/Firefox browser, an Instant Messaging client compatible with several existing Windows IM clients, and a PDF reader. My Internet connection was detected and set up automatically (something Windows does not do), and the installation checked for updates. Audio and video drivers are installed, so downloading and playing music files presents no problem. The Evolution email client also runs against many back-ends, including Microsoft Exchange. And all that for $50!

Open Office can save files as Microsoft Word documents so compatibility is not an issue. In addition, it has capabilities that Word does not have, such as the ability natively to save files in Acrobat PDF format without purchasing the full version of Acrobat. However, for firms that use advanced functionality and/or extensive Word styles and macros, Open Office will not suffice, as the macros and styles won't carry over from Windows to Linux.

Both main Linux desktop systems are installed–Gnome and KDE, so you can choose the one you prefer. Gnome puts the taskbar is at the top of the screen, in KDE it is at the bottom. Gnome is somewhat more "user friendly" but KDE gives the user more flexibility. Novell also installs a powerful and convenient configuration

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Linux Desktop *(Cont.)*

tool, YaST (for Yet Another Setup [or: Stupid] Tool – Linux typically has a sense of humor) which takes the place of the Windows Control Panel.

Operationally, there are a few things that take some getting used to – primarily the way the file system is organized (no drive letters). Many operations run from a command line (although this is only a minor problem for anyone who remembers DOS). But after a couple of hours it is easy to get up to speed for basic operations. While Linux requires command-line input where Windows does not, this also gives the user vastly more flexibility than you have with Windows.

What's Missing?

The main thing that is missing, of course, is the ability to run Windows programs. This is particularly an issue for programs with no real Linux equivalent, such as Quicken or Adobe Photoshop. There is a very good emulator, CodeWeaver's CrossOver program (www.codeweavers.com), which allows you to run many Windows programs (including the Microsoft suite, Adobe Photoshop, Lotus Notes and Quicken/QuickBooks) under Linux. In many cases, it will also run "unsupported" applications as well. Another emulator, Win4Lin, also shows a lot of promise (www.netraverse.com).

However, there is no official support for major legal-specific programs such as Amicus Attorney, TimeMatters, PC Law, Tabs, or Timeslips. Even if you were able to load and run these programs there are no guarantees or support in the event that something went wrong. This is most likely a deal-breaker for law firms at the present time. I was able to load and run PCLaw, I could load but not run Amicus, and TimeMatters failed to load (although it does have a separate Linux-based "World" version). Corel had a fully functional Linux version of WordPerfect a few years ago (WP 8 for Linux) but unfortunately abandoned it. Theoretically, it is still possible to run this version, although it takes significant tweaking to get it installed.

But overall, what is remarkable is not what is still left to do, as important as that may be, but how far Linux has come in offering a usable desktop. Novell is converting all its employees to Linux, saving several million dollars in Microsoft licensing fees in the process. If you just need a word processor, e-mail, instant messaging (the Novell Linux supports multiple Instant Messaging clients), a better-than-IE web browser, audio & video, you could easily rely on Linux right now. And for what it's worth, the Linux desktop is a lot more attractive than Windows.

The next version of Windows/Microsoft Office will probably not be available/usable until early 2007 at least. By all reports, it is likely to require new hardware to run acceptably, unless you have *just* purchased a top of the line PC. Since one of the attractions of Linux is that it will do a lot more with a lot less processing power (Linux has about 100,000 lines of code vs. Windows' 30 *million* lines of code), by the time of your next upgrade it will be time to take a serious look at Linux on the Desktop. ■

[Note: this article is an expanded version of my "Technofeature" article that appeared in the technolawyer listserve on February 15.]

Desktop Search Engines

Desktop search engines, in particular those by Google and Microsoft, have garnered a lot of publicity recently. How useful are they?

With the exception of the X1 search program, which has been around for a long time (and is now licensed by Yahoo as a beta), the current incarnations of these programs have two serious issues.

First, unless you have filled in "profile" information for various programs (photos, Word), which virtually nobody does, you are limited to searching full-text and the names of files, which makes the searches very "rough," i.e., inexact.

More importantly, most programs are extremely limited in what they index (again, except for X1/Yahoo). Google, for example, will not index PDF or WordPerfect files. Microsoft will not index its own *.rtf format. Nor will it index attachments to email. In many other cases, it will index only the title of files, not the content. There are workarounds and add-ins, but right now this is a serious limitation.

In addition, currently these programs have more or less severe limitations in how they operate, typical of initial releases. While they might be useful to find that lost file, they are far from providing anything close to a document management tool. ■

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