

Is there a Microsoft competitor in the future?

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Every revolution was first a thought in one man’s mind.”

That’s exactly how the Linux revolution began.

It was created in 1991 by then college student Linus Torvalds. He wanted to create an operating system for his personal use based on the expensive, proprietary UNIX system. He made the new operating system (OS) available on the Internet with source code, and protected it with a special license that allowed others to improve the software as long as those improvements and the original code remained visible and modifiable. In other words, open.

Since then, Linux has struggled to gain validity and has had a “pony-tail, Birkenstock-type appeal” in the IT market.

But all of that is changing and Linux now has the attention of Microsoft as a potentially serious competitor. According to Kelly Hogan, President of Boise-based Linora Corporation (www.linora.com), an IT consulting and integration firm, Linux is becoming “a real alternative solution to Microsoft OS.”

Hogan cites numerous reasons why Linux is becoming a valid option for businesses of all sizes. Among them, lower costs and better security.

“The TCO, or total cost of ownership, is significantly lower for companies that utilize Linux in the back office than for those who use a Microsoft server solution,” he said. “These savings are realized from reduced administrative and people costs, improved IT efficiencies, and effective management of an entire network.”

Others agree. A March 2002 white paper on Linux by the International Data Corporation (IDC) also promotes the use of Linux OS in the back office, for small companies all the way up to the Fortune 50. According to the IDC study, companies that utilize Linux OS versus Microsoft OS on their networks save 55 percent of their annual IT costs for Internet and Intranet workloads and up to 81.9 percent on collaborative workloads, such as enterprise file sharing and application usage.

Linora’s Hogan says that beyond the cost savings from better utilization of employees and IT resources, the near immunity from security hacks and viruses can save corporations big money each year. “There are very few Linux viruses out there and the Linux OS has much greater security than Microsoft’s server OS,” Hogan said.

According to many IT experts, the biggest issue is migrating from a current Microsoft OS to Linux. The biggest obstacles are training and overcoming employee resistance to a new environment.

At a time when Microsoft is raising prices on server OS licenses and clamping down on invalid network licenses, com-

panies are considering the switch. Recently, Morgan Stanley, Credit Suisse First Boston, and AOL reported that their entire IT infrastructure would migrate to a Linux OS environment.

This is not surprising since businesses can migrate to Linux for the same cost as upgrading to a new Microsoft enterprise server license or ensuring a valid license. Further,

because Linux is open source, there are no annual license fees.

IDC analyst AL Gillen agrees.

“Costs for Microsoft licensing are going up, Plus, additional fees will be added in the future,” he said. “Couple that with the push to ‘true-up’ existing licenses and Linux becomes a very plausible idea.”

Experts agree that the migration process, although technically painless, can still be difficult on employees. Training on the use of a new IT OS can be time consuming, compounded by the need to assist IT staff through changing routine and regular work processes.

Many believe that users are so conditioned to Microsoft OS and applications that the change can be difficult, and finding ways to gradually explore change will be the best way to go.

One option for many small and medium-sized businesses is to dust off old, decommissioned computers, load Linux on them, and use them to support non-business critical application as part of the network. This would make it possible to see the differences, without putting essential parts of the business or IT infrastructure at risk.

For companies like Miami-based ITE Corp, the proof is in the pudding. According to Warren Tyler, CTO of ITE Corp, “We migrated to Linux and forgot about it. I think the server is somewhere in the closet. But, I am not sure. We don’t have to touch it. That’s how effective Linux is.”

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