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In many ways, there has never been a better time now to make a big business move to Linux. The code is mature, competition is fierce, and there are only a few serious candidates. However, each of these Linux distributions has a separate set of features, migration paths, and faces for accountability. Choosing the right one for your business is very important. But the decision can be made easier if you have a few simple considerations into playing. When you choose a Linux for business distribution, you want to familiarize yourself with the options —so you know what options have the features and support you need —and you also have to consider your existing infrastructure, the type of support staff you have, and what kind of accountability you're most comfortable with. Knowing your choice We conduct a comprehensive due diligence review for any enterprise-level application, system, or service, said Greg Ashley, CIO senior collaborator at the University of Georgia. As part of the process, Ashley said the organization evaluates all available options. And that's the first step a CIOs should take in choosing the right Linux. The first two distributions to consider are those that have Enterprise Linux gravitas in the industry today. It's Red Hat Enterprise Linux and Novell SUSE Linux Enterprise, said Jay Lyman, open source analyst for 451 Group in New York. Last month, Red Hat Software released Red Hat Enterprise Linux 5, the latest in its linux enterprise caliber, and now includes Xen virtualization. In contrast, Novell's SUSE Linux Enterprise 10, which was marketed with Xen virtualization last summer, is billed as the only enterprise-class Linux platform that provides a complete solution for your critical needs. While both are Linux business stars today, other distributions are on the rise. Ubuntu, for example, has been a desktop success story. And now, it's taking over the business. The French parliament will install Ubuntu on more than 1,000 desktop computers this summer. Ubuntu has also partnered with Sun to win support and placement on some of the new Niagara servers of the later, while building on the distribution's excellent desktop reputation. Honestly, we didn't really see anything like that in Linux and it's been solid leaders for at least two years running now, so it's not a fad, says Lyman. I think normally when you talk to analysts and industry observers, they will say that it would be difficult for anyone to reach out to Red Hat and Novell, but a partnership with Sun Microsystems and the appeal that Ubuntu should not have underestimated. And there are others. Oracle's unbreakable Linux is basically Red Hat, but with Oracle providing upgrades and support. Some companies have built collaborate on their own Linux desktop technologies and are now competing for business. Mandriva released Corporate Desktop 4.0 last month and has some positive partnerships, while Xandros offers environment, that's a big selling point: Your Windows administrator won't be completely thrown out by Xandros, said Lyman, who also sees an opportunity for some of the other distributions just in the right niche. According to Lyman, Debian, for example, has a place in enterprise data centers. (The City of Munich began moving 14,000 PC to Debian last year.) Line Up Support Once you know what's out there, the first question to ask is where the responsibility will rest. What kind of support and services will your team handle and what services will it need? Because when you commit to distribution, support is just as important as software. Amy Niersbach, foundation architect for the City of Chicago said: It's not just about buying a license - it's a supportive partnership. It really makes a success of this kind of implementation. Although Niersbach said that Novell was a great support, the city decided to go with Red Hat on its 80 servers for other reasons. A lot of people are skeptical of buying Red Hat because they're worried about the support - I've heard that over time, Niersbach admits. But she said the ICO should also consider third-party support as a viable option. Dell provides support, HP provides support, and it's an attractive offer for companies. Since Niersbach's business bought a lot of HP servers, it has decided to join a partnership with HP, which she says has more to bring to the table due to its long history in the UNIX business. For some, choosing a third-party partner or supporter also provides the accountability answers they need and even reduces total cost of ownership. According to Ashley, this has been shown to be the case at the University of Georgia. We often join a partner who provides guaranteed support for any enterprise-level system or application, he said. Our experience and research have proven that this is a tool in maximizing system or application usability with the lowest total cost of ownership. Looking at your infrastructure Lyman says that your current infrastructure will also be a major factor in the decision. It's unreasonable to apply a distribution that doesn't match what your business already has. Review your business architecture and make sure they're well supported with any delivery you're considering. Most distributions publish lists of their supported hardware; Red Hat does, and Novell has its own list for servers and desktops. The distribution you choose should also play well with the providers you've relied on. It was the supplier's ability to interact with the decision that influenced Niersbach's decision. We are a great Oracle store, and Oracle is certified on Red Hat, she said. Red Hat's Oracle and supplier engagement helped it win over many businesses. This is the case Wotif.com, the famous hotel entertainment and online business booking service based Australia. Australia. the server handles nearly 2.5 million user sessions per month. From a commercial perspective, Red Hat has close relationships with leading suppliers, such as Oracle and hardware suppliers, said Paul Young, Wotif.com's CIO. Our continued links with Red Hat are in line with our ongoing affiliate strategy with key suppliers producing high-quality open source software that complies with open standards. On the other hand, if you're running only a few apps on Oracle or you don't have Oracle, you might be leaning toward Novell's SUSE Linux Enterprise — especially if you need to interact with Windows, which Lyman believes is an important difference to their Linux brand. That opens up for a Windows store, and obviously they can lean toward SUSE Linux, he said. Last fall, Novell announced the start of a partnership with Microsoft; Novell's senior manager of public relations, Kevan Barney, said the collaboration is now starting to bear fruit, pointing to recent advances in virtualization, Web services to manage physical and virtual servers, directory and identity interactions, and document format compatibility. Other businesses may even let suppliers work on making decisions for them. That's the experience of Neil Truby, director of Ardentia Limited, a UK-based consulting firm that helps businesses deploy Linux. He said customers often don't know the difference between distros, and will be eager to delay their trusted dealers and application providers for a lead. For example, customers who want to run an IBM Informix database will pay, as part of their license, a significant percentage of that license for supplier maintenance, said Truby. In this case, the provider will only support the database on SUSE or Red Hat, so even if we may think of an alternative —fortunately Ubuntu may be worth it, our advice to customers is that it would be crazy to disable maintenance conditions from IBM. Asking your acquaintance is another important reason why the city of Chicago decided to deploy Red Hat. Our system engineers were familiar with it, so we had the knowledge base in the house, Niersbach said. Lyman suggested that ICOs facing a Linux decision should look for an internal champion, someone who knows the field and has a favorite. If you have one or more of these people, they will be key in any Linux you deploy. If you've got an indoor champion, that goes a long way, says Lyman. You may have a few folks on your IT staff that are totally on Debian Linux, and that may affect you to consider that. That's exactly what happened at Hewlett-Packard, where the decision to use Debian because of the long history of technical cooperation between HP's internal engineering community and the Debian project, Bdale Garbee, home chief technology of hp Open Source & Linux Organization said. HP uses a number of current Debian developers, and has used Debian technology for many over the years. According to Lyman, direct interaction with the communities behind some Linux distributions and open source projects will be a growing trend. It's the same way that open source has crept into enterprise infrastructure: It's the development team that uses it, he said. Maybe the CIO isn't aware of it, or it's not a big priority for him or her, but nevertheless it's being used. We think that will continue to grow, and it will become more acceptable as these communities mature and as companies follow each other to see how they work. Copyright © 2007 IDG Communications, Inc. Inc.