

Straight Talking – How Linux is Hurting Microsoft

By Bob Tarzey, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

It is easy to get caught up in the banter that goes on between the open source community and certain commercial software vendors and fail to see what is going on in the real world. Open source software has its diehard advocates but for most it is one of a number of possibilities to consider as a pragmatic choice is made regarding IT investment.

There is no runaway 'open source train' and uptake varies considerably from one product area to another. Linux, for example, has established a respectable share of the server operating system market but unit shipments of servers with Linux installed are still a long way behind those of Microsoft Windows.

On the other hand the open source Apache web server has more than twice the market share of its nearest rival, Microsoft's IIS. In other areas it is a mixed bag, for example open source businesses applications such as SugarCRM have taken little market share from their commercial rivals as yet but an open source VoIP PBX solution, Asterisk, has just been endorsed by Aspect, a leading supplier of contact centre solutions.

It is also wrong to consider the open source movement as purist. The Apache server runs on Windows as well as Linux and a range of other operating systems.

Red Hat, the leading distributor of commercial Linux, has just bought JBoss, the leading open source application server provider. JBoss is widely used on Windows as well as Linux and, anyway, JBoss calls itself second-generation open source - which means the company maintains a higher level of control over its source code than many other open source distributors.

In addition there are many examples of products that were previously owned by commercial vendors being 'donated to' (some say may 'dumped on') the open source community.

Open source software can turn up in an IT department by one of three routes. First it can be selected as the pragmatic choice for a particular job: at this level it competes with commercial rivals on the same terms.

The second route is by stealth. Because open source software is free, developers can get hold of unsupported copies without recourse to their purchasing departments. For example, an application can be developed to run on the JBoss application server, and it is only when it comes to deployment

time that the purchasing department becomes aware of the need to buy a supported version. By that time, it's too late to undo the development - JBoss is already through the door.

The third way proves a big challenge to the commercial software vendors in the long term. Here it arrives already embedded in a product or service where the buyers and users do not even know it is there. This is a particular threat to the dominance of Microsoft's server operating systems. How come?

One of the most common ways this currently happens is for Linux to be delivered as the embedded operating system in hardware appliances and gadgets. Appliances are a common way of delivering network security solutions as dedicated hardware can be secured and performance levels guaranteed without running rival applications.

Some security appliance vendors have their own operating system, for example, Cisco's IOS and Juniper's ScreenOS, which is used for its firewalls. But most use locked down versions of operating systems from third parties, and most commonly this is Linux, although Windows is preferred by others such as Celestix and Network Engines.

But there is an even greater threat lurking for Windows - the growing use of Linux-based servers to drive the data centres that run hosted applications. Many independent software vendors (ISVs) are seeing an increasing demand for the delivery of their software as a service (SaaS) over the internet.

An ISV whose application runs on both Windows and Linux will often find that, when it ships an on-premise solution, Windows is the pragmatic choice for their customer - it is an operating system they are familiar with and can be more easily supported than Linux. However, when it comes to equipping their own data centre to provide their application as a service they more often turn to Linux.

The reason for this is that when the application is delivered on the customer's premises, it is often as a relatively small scale installation for a limited number of users. However, when equipping a data centre to provide SaaS, it will be an enterprise-style deployment expected to support many users and be scalable for an unknown number of users into the future. Enterprise applications either require enterprise servers or large numbers of commodity servers (often in the form of blades).

Many enterprise servers are not Intel-based but use the proprietary or semi-proprietary architectures of the big hardware vendors: HP, IBM and Sun. In the past such servers have run the vendors' own version of Unix but increasingly they are running Linux (especially the IBM System i and System p5). Perhaps more significantly, when large numbers of commodity servers are deployed together - maybe as a grid - the economies of scale may create a preference for Linux over Windows, with Linux experts employed to support them.

And it is not just Linux; some SaaS specialists are making use of other open source products as well. For example, RightNow Technologies, a hosted CRM provider, runs the world's largest installation of MySQL (the leading open source database), in this case on Dell boxes running Linux.

Others, such as Salesforce.com, have stuck with a commercial database, in its case the Oracle database on Sun Solaris but its applications run on Linux; either way neither is using Windows.

Microsoft is not taking all this lying down. It has a team focused on helping organisations develop hosted solutions based as much as possible on Microsoft technology. It is also working with third parties such as 7 Global to help enable ISVs to deliver SaaS on the Microsoft platform.

But Microsoft is coming from behind in this area, and if such a quantum shift was possible, and the whole world turned to the currently available SaaS applications over night, there would be lot of redundant Windows servers sitting in IT departments and a lot more of us relying on Linux and other open source products for delivery of our businesses IT requirements.

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