

Open-Source Computing: Is It for You?

By Linda Dailey Paulson

Although open-source computing has existed for decades, users are just now learning about this concept, thanks to Linux. As Jim Freund, site editor at Planet IT, explains, "Before Linux, there was GNU."

From Apache to BSD and beyond, "These were not consumer-friendly products. People actually wanted to get into the open source and use the source code." Perhaps drawn by the freeware concept as much as the ability to use the source code to construct custom applications, more developers started using these products.

"If you need something truly customized, the very nature of open source lets you run exactly what you need," says Freund. "You might be trying to create a different kind of application server or a different server period. You can create a particular program to do a specific thing that off-the-shelf software doesn't do. You may want it to be completely proprietary. You can change the code to your needs and close it up."

As Freund points out, this is particularly useful when a user wants "something very specific that doesn't necessarily exist, like a networking or software package for their office." With an open-source application, for example, a group of small talent

agencies could create a special application that ties together casting information, actors' résumés and photographs. "Given the fact that this is open source . . . they could share the cost and it would be cheaper than trying to do the same thing with Mac or Windows," says Freund. "Somewhere down the line, you are going to be paying Apple or Microsoft for use of the code. With Linux, that is available without cost."

What can be confusing to users new to the free-source/open-source concept is that "not all open source is free and not all freeware is open source."

As Dave McAllister, chief technology officer of Maxspeed Corporation points out, "Open source is one of those topics that few business folks get at first pass. It has been most often referred to as 'free software,' as in 'You get what you pay for,'" but that is wholly incorrect. "Open source is about free as in 'free speech' not as in 'free beer.' It's about the capability of being independent of a single vendor, about being able to build what you need off existing infrastructures."

A useful analogy McAllister gives is that of owning a car, "but [you] can get the oil changed at only one

particular place. Open source allows you to have the oil serviced as you wish, or even do it yourself."

What factors draw a user to open source? Those are quite varied, but pricing and stability are the desirable attributes most often mentioned.

Bob DeRosa, CTO of BASCOM, developers of Linux-based connectivity solutions, says his company was first attracted by cost. "When we were starting our company, we looked at using open-source software to reduce costs. Once we started using the software, we were impressed with the breadth and quality of the open-source software," he says. "We were also impressed with the responsiveness of the community when we had questions or problems."

When Russell Holt started at Destiny WebSolutions, a Internet consulting firm, in Conshohocken, Penn., cost was a big issue. "We couldn't afford commercial development tools, being a self-funded start-up company of two people. The high quality and freely available open-source tools for UNIX like the GNU gcc compiler were perfect for us."

Fred Weiss, director of development for AllSites.com Inc., an Ann Arbor, Mich., Internet company, says overhead with Windows ate his budget. "For each NT box that I launched, I spent nearly 50 percent of the hardware price to purchase Windows NT," he says. "Linux should allow me to deploy more hardware with my savings on operating system spending."

A constantly crashing computer

sent Aravind Vijayakirithi, Internet applications architect with New York-based Thaumaturgix Inc., to Linux. He had been using a laptop running Windows NT as his development machine, but it kept crashing. "I was spending more time bringing it up than doing real work," he says. "Even when it was running, there seemed to be no straightforward way to diagnose where and why so much of my memory and processing power were being sucked up. So I decided to try Linux."

He installed Red Hat 6.1 in 30 minutes. "I started doing real work a few hours later. I've never had my computer crash on me since. Some programs do misbehave now and then," adds Vijayakirithi, "but never have any misbehaving programs taken control of the operating system or my machine as has happened so many times with NT."

It seems that resistance to using open-source products in the enterprise is usually confined to support and security issues.

"We were initially concerned about the support available with 'non-commercial products,' but no longer have much concern," says Randy Prakken, president of Swift-View Inc. and an open-source advocate. "After many years of using Microsoft products, we have found

that we get essentially no support beyond 'developer docs' in anything related to development. Support for product use is pretty reasonable, but support for development problems isn't there—nobody on the other end of the call has a clue." He finds it "relatively easy" to find someone within the open-source community to

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help with workarounds for problems. "There are lots of developers on the Internet to work with."

Prakken says he gets better support for his open-source products than from Microsoft. "Not only did I never expect to be saying that," he says, frankly, "it goes against my previously held experience and belief in the industry.

There are very practical security matters when using or developing applications with open-source code. As Freund points out, "The very fact that it is open—everybody knows the code." If you don't want to be hacked, close up the application when it's deployed, "otherwise one day you'll be getting a love letter," quips Freund.

Some developers would argue

that consistent sources of support just can't be found.

"Other professional developers or managers like to complain that Linux is unsupported and that Windows is supported," says Weiss, "but anyone who has tried to get support from Microsoft probably is aware that MS support is pretty weak, too."

If you're using Linux, Freund suggests LinuxCare, a company that "supports anything and everything." Plus lots of good information can be found in Internet newsgroups, "which probably should be the first line of defense," he says.

DeRosa and others say their experiences with Linux are that it is very stable and flexible—regardless of what uses it's being put to. "Despite the fear that open source is a chaotic mob of cowboy programmers," says Weiss, "the quality of the software tends to surpass most corporate offerings."

With UNIX-experienced staff, "the open-source concept won't be new and can enhance productivity greatly," says Greg Haerr, CEO of Century Software. "Some open-source projects distribute binaries . . . and less technical IS/IT personnel can easily evaluate the program. I would say that if you can get the program running and it works well for you, then use it!" □