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What a difference a year makes for Linux

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Around this time last year, I wrote a column in which I cautioned readers not to dive into Linux. Unix, yes; Linux, no. To be specific, I said, "I'd go with a broadly supported Unix flavor that has technical support and a research and development department, such as BSDI [Berkeley Software Design, Inc.] Unix."

Now, one year later, Linux is all the rage. Novell and Caldera Systems, a firm started by former Novell CEO Ray Noorda, are working together to port Novell Directory Services (NDS) to Linux (NW Oct. 12, page 1). Companies such as Oracle, Netscape, Corel, Computer Associates and Informix have announced support for the maverick operating system. Applix, Inc.'s ApplixWare office suite running on Red Hat's version of the Linux operating system offers a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation graphics, mail and HTML authoring software.

How is this newfound enthusiasm for Linux affecting the more traditional Unix vendors, such as BSDI, The Santa Cruz Operation (SCO) and Solaris? Is support still an issue? Would you now be better off choosing Linux rather than Unix?

Red Hat, which considers NT to be its main rival, is currently seeing a doubling of its business, with a projected 400,000 copies of its Linux operating system being sold this year. In addition to eroding NT's foothold, Red Hat sees Linux products usurping some of the more traditional Unix vendors' market share, which is clearly one of Caldera's goals. "Linux does a better job than SCO Unix, has better scalability and will run most applications written for SCO Unix without modifications," contends Ransom Love, Caldera's president and CEO.

In contrast, Kevin Rose, director of marketing for Unix vendor BSDI, says Linux has helped increase Unix sales. "The growth of Linux has paralleled the growth of our business, and we're glad Linux is succeeding," he says.

Market share gains notwithstanding, a perceived lack of support still dogs Linux. How do you sell the low-to-no-cost operating system to your boss when little or no vendor support exists?

Currently Red Hat offers not only e-mail-driven installation support, but also a whole commercial support program that is available worldwide, says company spokeswoman Melissa London. In addition, London says the company is creating a Red Hat certified engineer program as well as a new enterprise computing division geared toward commercial use of Linux.

Caldera offers free 30-day installation support by e-mail and a pay-as-you-go support plan with several options. In addition, the company is creating "training and certification courses to bring a common level of knowledge to all Caldera value-added resellers, who will support Linux worldwide," Love says.

Unix vendor BSDI continues to offer a technical response team that responds to all technical queries within a four-hour time frame. BSDI also has a consulting division to assist clients in the development or implementation of BSDI products. From programmers to systems operators, Rose says BSDI will offer support to its clients - for a fee.

Ultimately, when deciding whether to go with Unix or Linux, weigh the advantages and disadvantages of specific Unix and Linux vendors based on the features they offer, not on the support issue. The platforms are beginning to open, so more and more programs are available on all flavors of Unix and Linux. And the major Linux vendors have created a support environment that you can take to your boss. So if Linux is your choice for an operating system, go for it; the old arguments aren't valid anymore.

Linux, as that old cigarette advertisement said, "You've come a long way, baby."

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