The Role of Linux

BY JOHN E. JOHNSTON

Recently, I developed a proposal for the implementation of a Microsoft Terminal Server at my site. The Terminal Server appeared to be a good technology that would solve a very specific remote access problem I was facing. The plan was to implement the Terminal Server to provide remote access to a very cantankerous application that would not run properly on our WinFrame server (or at least the software vendor would not support it unless it was run on the Terminal Server).

The plan was simple: The end user would access the Terminal Server using the Dial-Up Networking feature of his Windows 95 workstation. Once logged into the Terminal Server, the user could access the "problem" application, as well as the Microsoft Office 97 suite of applications. This all seemed very simple, until I discussed the proposal with the person in our office who purchases software licenses. This person did some investigation and found that a client license for Windows NT and a license for the Microsoft Office Suite would need to be purchased for each user of the Terminal Server.

I quickly explained that we would not be using the file and print services of the Terminal Server, so a client license should not be required. Our licensing expert then informed me that since the end users are accessing the Terminal Server using Windows 95, and the Terminal Server presented these users with a Windows NT 4.0 session, that a client license was required. "But these users already have a Windows 95 license. So now they must have a Windows 95 license and a Windows NT client license?" I asked in frustration. Unfortunately, the answer was yes.

Then we began talking about the licenses for the Microsoft Office 97 suite. "Well," I said, "These users already have a license for Office 95, I suppose they will also need a license for Office 97." Again, the answer was yes; they must be doubly licensed.

When I took the proposal to my boss, he hit the roof. "One day, Microsoft is going to get some competition." This simple statement got my partner and me thinking, "Is there an alternative to Windows?"

> While I feel that many of these vendors are adopting Linux simply because it is "not Microsoft," this trend could benefit the cost-conscious IT manager.

After a bit of investigation, we found Linux. Linux is an operating system very similar to UNIX. Linux was developed in 1991 by Linus Torvalds, a Finnish software engineer who offered the source code free on the Internet. Linux can be run on a PC as a workstation or on a file server as a network operating system. The Linux business model is very simple; the software is free, but if you want support and a manual, you must pay. Linux runs on low-end hardware, provides very good performance and is (according to the information available on the Internet) reliable and scalable. Linux can run on many computer platforms, including Intel, Apple and the Power PC. Version 2.2 of Linux, which is expected to be released in December or January, includes support for multiprocessor systems and RAID level 5 disk arrays.

Recently, several large software vendors began porting their applications to run on the Linux operating system, Among these vendors is Corel who is developing WordPerfect 8 for Linux. Corel also plans to offer their full office suite for the Linux operating system in the near future. Several other big name software vendors have announced that they will port their database products to Linux. These vendors include Oracle, IBM, Informix, Computer Associates and Sybase. While this small number of software vendors is not enough to make Linux an instant success in the corporate world, it is a very significant start. If these companies can turn a profit on their Linux offerings, other software vendors will soon follow their lead.

While I feel that many of these vendors are adopting Linux simply because it is "not Microsoft," this trend could benefit the cost-conscious IT manager. Almost all IT managers face some very stringent budgets. If we could reduce the cost of the operating system software, these dollars could be used to help our company attain other strategic goals.

I'm neither a Microsoft evangelist nor a Microsoft basher. In my opinion, Microsoft has helped this country in many ways, including the creation of thousands of jobs, including mine. After all, someone has to know how to implement and support the barrage of Microsoft products. However, many people disagree with the way Microsoft appears to either crush or buy all of the companies that produce competing products, but isn't this the American way, survival of the fittest?

If Linux does turn out to be a threat to Microsoft, it will be interesting to see how Microsoft reacts to this phenomenon. Linux is free. Even Microsoft will have a difficult

time competing with a product that is provided free of charge.

Is Linux ready for the corporate world? Maybe some companies would be willing to gamble on Linux, but personally, I am not, at least not yet. At my site we have hundreds of Windows-based applications and we install new applications every month. If I was to deny a department from purchasing a software package because it would not run under Linux, I would be in trouble. Microsoft was very clever when they were courting the independent software vendors to write to the Windows API.

The bottom line, Linux needs more support from the software vendors. If every software product came in two flavors, Windows and Linux, the move to Linux would be a no-brainer.

What do you think about Linux? Do you think Linux is a threat to Microsoft? Does your organization currently have Linux installed in a production environment? If you have any questions or comments on this material, or have suggestions for future topics, please feel free to email me at johnj@fast.net. **ts**

NaSPA member John E. Johnston is manager of technical support and communications for a major hospital in Pennsylvania. He designs and maintains cross-platform local and wide area networks utilizing NetWare, OS/2, DOS, and Windows.