

Linux: the thinking person's IT solution

Organisations want reliable, low cost, scalable IT solutions – so why are they still buying Microsoft server technology, asks Kyzo?

With no dedicated IT resource, SMEs want a server solution that is reliable, low-cost and can be managed even by someone with the most basic technical knowledge. It is ironic that this fear of technology has sent thousands of companies hurtling into the arms of an IT vendor that has some of the most complex, resource hungry and insecure server technology on the market: Microsoft.

Worse, that the same fear has resulted in organisations eschewing the accepted reliability and low cost of Linux due to its 'tech head' reputation. Yet packaged Linux server solutions requiring minimal expertise can support hundreds of users at a third of the cost of a Microsoft option.

Is this lemming like following of the Microsoft marketing mantra damaging business through poor system availability and massive support costs? If organisations want to achieve the dream of an invisible, reliable box that provides the basic business tools of email, internet access and file sharing without drama or crisis, they need to stop following the crowd and opt for an IT solution designed to work quietly, reliably, in the background without drama or crisis.

The Reality

The UK has a reputation for being bad at complaining, silently accepting atrocious service and overpriced products. But our attitude to IT is, quite frankly, ridiculous. Twenty years on from the PC revolution, why are SMEs so willing to pay through the nose for unreliable systems?

Is it acceptable to have to reboot the server at least once a week, while disgruntled employees chunter about performance targets and working elsewhere and customers opt for the competition? Is it good business sense to invest in an expensive system that will cost even more in maintenance and support than it did to install in the first place? One that requires multiple add-ons to achieve a modicum of stability? Or to purchase a system that requires constant security patches and demands per user license fees?

Obviously not – yet hundreds of thousands of UK businesses are wasting money this way every day of every month of every year. Why? Through an obtuse insistence on buying Microsoft server technology.

Without doubt, Microsoft has the desktop market sewn up – and, despite recent discussions about desktop Linux, moving away from Microsoft Windows, Outlook and IE is neither viable nor necessary for most businesses.

However, and let's get this straight: if you are using Microsoft desktop software you do not have to use Microsoft server software! It is not a prerequisite, whatever the marketing message may imply. There are other options out there – including Linux – that can deliver low-cost, highly reliable solutions that work just as well, if not better, with Microsoft desktop technology.

The Truth

Making the break from the crowd requires a simple understanding of the facts. Most organisations perceive that Microsoft server software is simply a big brother to the familiar desktop package and, as such, they should be familiar enough with the technology to manage any problems. But this is simply not the case. The veneer may be familiar but underneath all is very different. In fact, Microsoft NT technology is a kit of bits, requiring organisations to define hardware, memory and drives, and then to set up and maintain multiple server application programs: each solution is, in effect, bespoke.

Fine, for organisations with specific requirements and technical expertise. But, let's be frank, most SMEs buy a server to run email, provide secure Internet access and share files – not to undertake some esoteric development project. So why not buy a standard, one size fits all solution that has been tried, tested and can deliver the reliability required at a far lower price point? A solution that is highly secure and not exposed to the multiple viral attacks experienced by Microsoft systems?

'Because everyone buys Microsoft', is simply not a good enough reason! How can any serious business turn down a technology solution that is reliable, robust and works silently in the background, delivering practically 100 percent uptime, managing business growth and enabling strategic upgrades that take minutes, not weeks? A system that can offer a three to one cost benefit up front, and minimal on going maintenance and support costs?

Despite the 'too technical' perception, packaged Linux solutions have been tailored to meet the specific business requirements of SMEs wanting secure Internet access, reliable email and file sharing. Standard, off the peg, solutions are robustly tested, secure, highly reliable and leverage Linux' efficiency to support anything up to 300 users on low-end, lower priced hardware.

Rather than the expensive support required to manage the regular tantrums thrown by Microsoft server software, these standard Linux systems run without interruption. Upgrades can be managed within minutes – with the system retaining the original configurations to ensure smooth progression; and pre-emptive maintenance, such as replacing hard drives before they fail, can be achieved without causing system (and business) mayhem.

The Choice

In fact – many SMEs may be surprised to discover they already use Linux. The operating system is quietly gaining significant ground – particularly in the area of network appliances. From DVD players to in-car systems, Linux is becoming the operating system of choice.

Indeed, it is expected to attain a strong hold in the server market – although, again many businesses may be unaware that Linux is running the new box that delivers web access to their accounting package, for example. It will simply be a reliable business tool that requires no more support than a toaster or video recorder. Finally, after all these years, the IT market is beginning to deliver solutions that effectively mask the technology components from the user. And it is the highly reliable and cost effective Linux that is enabling this development.

So next time your system crashes, remember: grumbling under your breath is not the answer – nor is a swift kick to the server! The answer is to sever the Microsoft addiction and venture out into the thinking person's world of reliable systems and affordable solutions that can be seen but not heard.

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