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Linux: Ready or Not for Prime Time

"We feel comfortable with the deployment of Linux for low end infrastructure tasks such as web, cache, and proxy servers."

Andy Butler, Gartner Vice President

by Drew Robb

It's almost thirty years now since Saturday Night Live debuted, unleashing the Not Ready for Prime Time Players onto the television viewing world. Over the years the show has had its share of controversies, generally along the lines of, "has anyone since been as good as the original crew?" Similarly, there is an ongoing discussion that is vital to IT planning: Is Linux Not Ready for Prime Time? Has it emerged as an OS that can be trusted with core enterprise applications?

The Debate Continues

If you are not sure whether Linux is enterprise-ready, dont worry. You are not alone. The experts disagree on that point, too. Experts within the same research group even disagree. Giga Information Group (Cambridge, MA) Research Fellow Rob Enderle published an article in Information Week entitled, "Linux is Not Ready for the Enterprise (Opinion). A few days later Ted Schadler, a Senior Analyst for Forrester Research, Inc. - also based in Cambridge and, as of February, the owner of Giga - published a brief entitled, Linux is More than Ready for the Enterprise. Meanwhile, 150 miles to the southwest, Gartner, Inc. (Stamford, CT) is advising clients to use it for peripheral, but not necessarily core applications. "We feel comfortable with the deployment of Linux for low end infrastructure tasks such as web, cache, and proxy servers, says Gartner Vice President Andy Butler, who works out of Gartner's UK office, but the ability of Linux to be a reliable database server is still being tested."

So what is needed to definitively settle the debate? For starters, there needs to be more hardware and software developed that support Linux.

Jason Schmidt is a project manager for Comprehensive Consulting Solutions Inc. of Brookfield, Wisconsin. His company specializes in IT consulting and has a great deal of Linux experience. Schmidt speaks of encountering problems due to hardware incompatibility, particularly with add-on SCSI cards.

"We were unable to get a four-processor HP NetServer to boot with any additional SCSI cards, even the expensive HP NetRaid SCSI cards made specifically for this machine," he relates. "We have found other compatibility issues with devices like network and video cards."

But these issues are being resolved as more and more vendors support the operating system. With the major firms including IBM, HP, Oracle, Dell, Computer Associates, PeopleSoft and numerous others throwing their development resources behind Linux, we will soon see the full range of devices and software needed for widespread application.

As well as OS support, the Linux toolset needs to evolve. The harsh reality is that Linux tools have yet to reach the level of maturity and broad vendor support enjoyed by more established operating systems.

"The management suite of Linux is fragmented and immature," says Gartner's Butler. "It is only recently that vendors have started creating Linux versions of their products."

That situation, however is quickly changing as software vendors including BMC Software, Inc. (Houston, TX), Computer Associates, Inc. (Islandia, NY) and IBM Tivoli have started supporting Linux with their management suites. In the mainframe arena, Candle recently released a version of its OMEGAMON XE software designed to manage Linux running on IBM zSeries mainframes.

But, beyond the tools, there are also the procedures necessary for a successful deployment.

"Linux is great, but it is not magic," says Candle Corporation (El Segundo, CA) Assistant Vice President Pete Marshal. "It requires the same discipline and planning associated with any other enterprise project."

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Is Linux enterprise ready or is it doomed to remain one of the Not-Ready for Prime Time players for some time to come? The fact that we are even having this discussion is an excellent indicator. A few years ago, the discussions were more along the lines of whether Linux would survive, not whether one could run the entire business on it.

The debate over the enterprise readiness of Linux, though, is impossible to definitively answer unless all enterprises standardize their infrastructure and operations. There is one question, however, which can be answered and which perhaps IT managers should be asking instead. Is Linux ready for my enterprise?

In answering this question you need to take a look at both your current IT operations and where you want to go in the next few years. Do you need 32-bit or 64-bit applications. Are you planning on consolidating your servers? What level of management do you need? Do you depend on industry-specific applications or primarily use generic business apps? Are you putting in a wireless LAN?

Then, as part of your evaluation, keep in mind that technology is not static. To do a major technology migration, from initial planning through final deployment, will take several years. So you can't only evaluate based on what is currently available, but on what will be on the market at the time you need them?

A few years back Linux only supported a single processor. Now it supports eight and with 2.6 that number rises to sixteen. Each month also marks the release of additional software that runs on Linux.

So, take a good hard look at what is out there now. Based on that, some enterprises may be surprised at just how much Linux has grown up over the past couple of years. And in many cases, the platform support and toolset availability may well be more than enough to justify the adoption of Linux on core systems.

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Oracle, HP, and Red Hat just set the **world-record TPC-C Benchmark of over one million transactions per minute on a cluster of Linux servers**. The benchmark not only sets a new industry record, but also proves the power of industry-standard servers running the Red Hat Enterprise Linux in "scale out" clustered server configurations.

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