

How our office moved to Ubuntu

Written by FHM

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This is not a review of the Ubuntu OS, but rather my adventure to look for an alternative OS. This adventure stemmed not from a general hatred of Windows but rather the need to look for a more affordable alternative for Windows. First a background about myself, I am definitely a computer geek started out in the 80s with the old Apple][when I was still 12, moved on to DOS, XENIX, AIX, WIN 2.0, 3.0, 3.1, NT. Did my fair share of tinkering from those early times with the hardware, but I am mostly a software guy. I do programming and have focused on RDBMS development work. But I am also a part of our family business which owns a small food chain in Asia. My general responsibility is of course handling the MIS requirements of our company but I do also have other responsibilities on the Sales and Operations and Marketing aspect of the business, of course, being part of the owners, I do need to be part of all the aspects of our company. Before joining our company, I was employed in several Software Development houses and also some Software Sales companies.

In terms of IT, I do command our IT direction. In the early years, I never considered UNIX simply because it was prohibitive in terms of the hardware requirements, maintenance requirements and of course, costs. Yes, before there was Linux, UNIX costs a bundle, not nice for a small company like ours. However, I did hear about Linux, MySQL in the 90s from former colleagues but I new a command line OS is not worth looking at when users are already getting used to the new GUI standard of Windows. Also, a previous disastrous experience of doing an 'rm -r' in the root directory, completely destroyed a whole project I was involved in, good thing for backups (another topic for later discussion). So, in 1996, I standardised our company to Windows, declaring it only as a "Windows country" company.

Well, our experience with Windows, is like most like everybody else, we did get our BSODs (very annoying, but not fatal), and viruses (again annoying, but manageable). Our development was Powerbuilder, and our db was SQLAnywhere. I developed the whole system for the company, Accounting, Receivables, Payables, Inventory, Payroll, POS systems, etc. I was pretty satisfied with myself after all this work. But thing about in-house development, you get what you want but you need to also support, fix and troubleshoot. After a while, you do get bored with maintaining and supporting it, at least this is what happened to me. Also, the fact that during this time our company grew from having 18 stores to having over 150 stores, my attention in our company is needed much more.

The movement to Linux was triggered by a series fo events, starting a few years ago, when we decided to move away from our in-house systems and look for more commercial systems. From my previous experience with Oracle and Oracle's solid reputation as a company, furthermore, Oracle was offering its E-Business suite at a friendly rate for a small company. So we purchased Oracle, and the OS of choice was RedHat ES 2.1, this was the start of our trials

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with the Linux environment. During this time, we were also hit by a virus that stopped our entire network and we lost a lot of productivity time. At this time, Microsoft was constantly sending us letters to renew our licenses, and to avoid pirated software. Also, at this time our Win98 machines were also aging and needed to be replaced.

After playing around with RedHat, we decided to research on Linux to understand the new environment. We discovered, it could be a viable alternative to our current setup. We had several objectives for the project:

1. Ease of transition for our users.
2. A good alternative for their current MS Office suite
3. Since we had inhouse developed programs, we had to find a way to execute them or find alternatives
4. Execute 3rd party legacy programs
5. Re-use our aging hardware
6. Avoid downtime due to viruses
7. Avoid costly licensing fees

So started our evaluation of different Linux distributions, starting with the RedHat, tested several others, until I came across Ubuntu. At the time, the [Ubuntu](#) version was 6.06 (Dapper). After a short evaluation period, we felt that this would be a good environment for our users who were so used to the Win GUI. For the Office application, we discovered

[OpenOffice](#)

. The harder part was executing our in-house applications, enter

[WINE](#)

. It took a while to modify our programs to be executed in WINE, but we were able to achieve it, We moved to MySQL to replace our SQLAnywhere database. For our older DOS legacy programs, there was

[DOSBOX](#)

, an excellent DOS emulator. We had problems with the hardware drivers, but Ubuntu was quick in development, by the time Ubuntu Hardy came along, it was primetime for our users, although we were effective starting with Feisty (with a lot workarounds for the hardware). Viruses were minimized or eliminated. Costs? All the solutions we chose were open source and totally free to use.

The biggest challenge we had was convincing our users to transition to the new system. Being the owner had it's advantages, they have no choice but to use the new system. I gave them an ultimatum of when we will implement the system, truth to be told, it was not as smooth sailing as that, we had to conduct several seminars and trainings to orient them to the new Ubuntu interface. We re-oriented the whole desktop to simulate a WinXP desktop complete with a WinXP look-alike wallpaper and theme. Even after all this, resistance was still there, some would rather resign than use the new system, well good riddance. Ironically, the most resistant were the managers, and I have yet to move them to the new environment.

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Where are we now. After the whole brouhaha about the transition to the Ubuntu environment, the users have already gotten used to the new environment, and don't think they miss their old Win machines. They get their jobs done. Since they have limited access, they are actually more productive and spend less in dressing up their desktop or doing other personal stuff on their machines. As far as our MIS group is concerned, maintenance is getting easier everyday as we learn more about the new environment. We still have occasional virus attacks on our network but it only affects our Win machines which are getting fewer everyday, our Ubuntu machines just becomes "virus carriers", this is why we still have clamav to check for viruses. Our legacy apps actually perform better or at par on the same machine using [WINE](#) libs. The people at the

[WINE](#)

project is doing an excellent job in helping people transition to Linux. The

[OpenOffice](#)

project was definitely a life saver, without it, the whole project would probably not succeed. Our new Oracle e-Business system is working nicely with FF, after some modifications to remove the need for the Oracle jinitiator Win-only program.

Our conclusion, we made the right decision when we embarked on this project. It's not perfect, especially, when it comes to searching for drivers, especially for printers. Now, we have to make sure that Linux drivers exists for printers before purchasing. Is Linux ready for primetime for the office environment, 100% yes. Bottomline, in an office environment, productivity is the most important thing, not the tool, in our case, we were able to achieve our goals.