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Saturday, 2 October, 2004

Loving Linux

by [Maddy Reddy](#)**ACN**
Arabian Computer News

The worldwide Linux server market is growing at 40% per annum and the open source operating system has an estimated 18 million users around the globe.

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In light of these figures, Aberdeen Research claims it is the fastest growing OS on the planet. IDC is equally as enthusiastic, estimating that by 2008 Linux will represent approximately 29% of all server unit shipments and garner US\$9.7 billion in revenues.

Many businesses that have not already installed Linux are also using the open platform, indirectly at least. For example, Linux and open source components collectively known as LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP/Perl/Python), power Google, eBay, Amazon and Priceline. Although the Middle East market has lagged behind more developed nations when it comes to deploying Linux, there are signs that this is changing.



VS Dileep, director of technology at Network Gulf Information Technology (NGIT).

"Three years ago, in the Middle East, Linux was in the early stages of adoption and was typically used only by technical people. They would bring in Linux and use it for a few applications on the edge of the network without [informing] the CIO. Now it has moved from [being purely] technical to delivering on a combination of technical factors and business drivers, which has caused Linux to take off," says Adam Jollans, manager of IBM Software's worldwide Linux marketing strategy.

Novell agrees that local Linux adoption is on the up, as Middle East end users become more willing to try different components in their computing environments. "The Middle East market is one of the few markets that is growing faster than the so-called matured markets such as Europe. Businesses are keen to [explore the option] of using new technologies in their [networks]," says Richard Seibt, president of Novell EMEA.

Another reason for Linux's growing popularity is the fact that the technology itself is maturing and issues that plagued it in the past, such as a lack of applications and after sales support, have been addressed. For instance, on the apps front 750 commercial ISV applications are now certified to run enterprise Linux distributions.

Source Forge and Freshmeat, which maintain open source repositories, have more than 35,000 listed applications covering everything needed by an end user organisation from free office suites to open source enterprise resources planning (ERP) solutions such as Compiere.

In the Middle East, businesses are slowly becoming comfortable with using Linux. They are no longer concerned about the product's licensing and intellectual property issues. The total cost of ownership (TCO) benefits are also becoming clearer, which is giving way to higher adoption levels. Furthermore, the region's 40,000 plus small-to-medium sized businesses (SMBs), which have limited IT budgets, appear to be increasingly willing to deploy Linux.

"A lot of SMBs are using Linux in some form or another. There are lots of companies out there using Linux on their own but they are not part of any statistics," says VS Dileep, director of technology at Network Gulf Information Technology (NGIT).

Earlier in the year, Dubai-based NGIT launched Matrix, a Linux and open source-based solution that offers ready to use integrated mail, proxy, file, caching SQL database, router and firewall services. It is targeted at the region's cost conscious SMBs and the AI Hathboor Group has already signed up for the product. AI Hathboor, which had already deployed Solaris and Windows NT, turned to Linux when faced with expiring licenses.

While Linux may be free, the costs creep in through consulting, migration services, technical support, upgrades and maintenance — sometimes pushing Linux out of the reach of most SMBs. To avoid this, AI Hathboor Group used its inhouse Unix and Windows skills and turned to Linux From Scratch (LFS). It is a basic kernel distribution that allows customers to compile and fine tune Linux from the ground up.

The Linux solution now powers the company's 100 users on the network and more than 40 e-mail users. However, AI Hathboor still runs parts of its core Oracle database and Sage ERP on Windows NT and Solaris.

"We were faced with a problem of adding users to the mail server and to the network. Also, there was the issue of purchasing user licenses and additional support costs. Besides that we had security and downtime issues. Now we run Linux and we do not have those downtime issues anymore," says Sudhindra Aithal, IT manager at AI Hathboor.

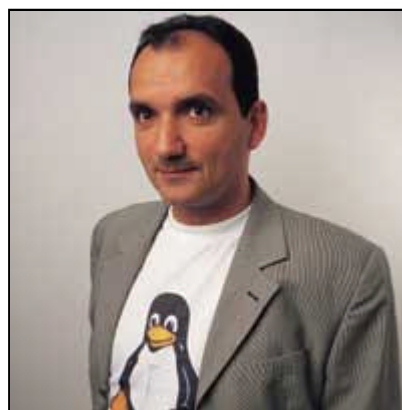
While AI Hathboor is capable of supporting its own Linux implementation, Oracle warns SMBs to be cautious when it comes commercial support. "Bringing down the cost of IT is a good thing, both for the industry and customers alike. It is especially good for the hundreds of thousands of SMBs who may not be able to afford an expensive IT infrastructure.

More importantly, it is essential to differentiate between somewhat free unsupported open source code and commercially packaged and supported software. There is a difference in terms of who can adopt what," says Ayman Abouseif, senior marketing director at Oracle Middle East and Africa.

The AI Ghurair Group migrated its

Oracle E-Business Suite applications from Windows to Linux last July. It now runs its financials, property management, asset management and supply chain management on the open source OS.

"We didn't just wake up one day and decide to go for Linux. We have been experimenting for years with Linux, and we slowly developed our skills inhouse, tested it several times and made the move. By the time we took the decision to migrate to Linux our employees were completely familiar with Linux," says Hatem Al-Sibai, CIO, Al Ghurair Group.



Hatem Al-Sibai, CIO, Al Ghurair Group.

"Our decision to migrate from Windows to Linux was driven by the need to achieve higher uptime for our business and consolidation on one platform. It started with ERP, messaging, then vertical apps, then network services. We were convinced that we would achieve the desired level of security, scalability and performance from Linux. After having used Linux for the past 16 months, we have benefited on all fronts," says Al-Sibai.

While Al Hathboor and Al Ghurair have been cautious in adopting Linux, Habib Bank Zurich (HBZ) took a rather more maverick approach. Three years ago, HBZ purchased one copy of Linux and migrated to it lock stock and barrel. Suse Linux now powers the bank's 450 desktops and 36 servers at its data centres across 44 branches and subsidiaries in 10 countries — all manned by its 10 IT staff. In addition to using standard open source applications such as Open office suite, MySQL and J-boss, Habib Bank also developed MIMs (Multiple Inexpensive Machines) based on LVS (Linux Virtual Server) technology to reduce server costs.

"We have almost forgotten about our migration to Linux. A lot of our end users and staff still don't know which platform we are on. They don't need to know. Everything runs seamlessly on Linux. There are a few applications running on other operating systems, but that's not because of the limitations of Linux," says Shyam Pillai, global IT chief at Habib Bank AG Zurich.

For instance, HBZ connects to the central bank for its financial reporting. The central bank's applications are Windows based, leaving the bank no choice but maintain a few Windows machines to interface with the central bank's servers.

However, Pillai believes that there are not many enterprise customer references for Linux. He attributes this to IT staff being vendor centric rather than business centric. "People are scared to try something new. In the Middle East, a lot of people who claim to be technically [savvy] are actually not. They think it's safer and easier to buy off the shelf products from vendors and implement them — they are only facilitating the sales of other vendors, which is a common issue in most enterprises," Pillai says.

Al-Sibai shares similar sentiments to HBZ's IT chief. "Linux is moving slowly in the Middle East because IT managers are concerned about their job security and they do not want to face

situations or introduce technology which may be a [gamble]. Most of them don't want to rock the boat and don't want to think beyond their jobs — this approach isn't necessarily the best approach. They should look at what is in the best interest of the business," he notes.

Despite these words of caution, there are a growing number of customer testimonials appearing in the region, especially in the Middle East's key vertical markets. For example, Abu Dhabi Marine Operating Company (ADMA-OPCO) uses a large Linux storage cluster, Samin Group runs its ERP and collaboration suite on Linux and the Arab Open University powers its entire content management system on the open source OS.

Even the Oman's Ministry of Health has Linux clusters running in each of its 12 hospitals, while the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations and the Kuwait National petroleum (KNPC) are also using Linux. Qatar Airways has six Linux server clusters in its infrastructure and both Omantel and M-Net, a Kuwaiti payment gateway, use Linux. Even the region's governments are now embracing Linux and Bahrain's e-government initiative and the Saudi Chamber of Commerce & Industry both make use of the open source OS.

For Linux to grow even further, users of the operating system need to espouse its benefits. However, Emile Shaya, operations manager at OpenNet Middle East, believes this is unlikely, as those companies already using the OS will not want to surrender their hard earned competitive advantage.

"We do not know which companies are using Linux. We are accidentally discovering who's running Linux while talking to companies. A lot of companies do not want to talk about their Linux implementation because they do not want their competition to know," he says.

Oracle's Abouseif agrees that there are even more Middle East users out there than the statistics show. As such, he suggests that the Linux adoption will now be driven by the maturity of a customer, rather than that of the technology. "We should no longer discuss whether Linux is ready for an enterprise because it is. The question to ask is the enterprise sector ready for Linux?" he says.

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