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Opening up to Linux

by [Zoe Moleshead](#)


Linux uptake

In the few short months since it migrated its Oracle E-business suite to Red Hat's Advanced Server Linux platform, Al Ghurair Group of Companies has already seen its decision justified. Improved scalability, reliability and cost savings are among the benefits the business group has been reaping since its switch from Windows 2000 and NT in May.

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"The benefits include scalability and reliability, and in addition to that the total cost of ownership (TCO) and the return on investment (ROI) is significantly better. From a cost perspective, it is lower to license the [Linux] operating system and the reliability means lower costs, while the ability to add users and retain the performance will also keep costs under control," explains Hatem Al Sibai, group IT manager, Al Ghurair Group of Companies.

Al Sibai was encouraged to migrate to Linux in response its increasing regional momentum, while successful testing of the platform proved the decisive factor. Al Ghurair Group, however, is not alone in recognising the benefits that the open source operating system can offer. Saudi Aramco is running the Middle East's largest Linux cluster, while Habib Bank AG Zurich and both the Bahraini and Omani governments are also utilising the open source platform.

Globally, Linux is also experiencing significant growth. Support from vendors, including Oracle and Sun Microsystems, but predominantly IBM, has proved a key factor in driving interest in Linux. Furthermore, Aberdeen Group reports that the open source platform is being developed faster than any other modern operating system.

"Linux is replacing Microsoft Windows and Sun's Solaris at a higher rate than any other operating system —combined almost 50%," says the research group's Bill Claybrook.

Regionally, there are also signs that local enterprises are making the leap of faith to deploy Linux in mission critical environments. "Previously, people thought of Linux as an operating system for print and file sharing, or maybe as a good web/firewall server, but nowadays it is becoming a platform for mission critical applications," says Murad Zouhny, system sales manager for Middle East & Pakistan, IBM.

"We have a customer in the UAE whose core banking application has been deployed on a Linux platform," he adds.

The introduction of Sun's Mad Hatter suite of integrated Linux solutions should also help to push uptake on the desktop. John Foster, product manager for entry level & midrange systems, Sun Microsystems Middle East claims that users can garner 70-80% savings by migrating to the open source OS on the desktop.

"Mad Hatter is a suite of integrated software specifically aimed at the PC desktop. It includes StarOffice, Evolution, which is a Linux equivalent of Outlook Express and Mozilla, which is the open source Linux browser," he says.

"The idea is to sell it as an integrated package with support, so that it can be dropped into what was previously a Microsoft environment. It doesn't matter

whether a customer has Linux skills or not because it [Mad Hatter software] looks and feels like what they are used to," he adds.

Migration

Although Sun is keen to push desktop uptake, Linux deployments remain predominantly on the server side. Clusters of web servers or installations running non-mission critical applications are most popular in this region. Predominantly, this is tied to concerns about migrating an entire desktop user base from Windows to a different environment. Locally, this is further complicated by language support issues.

"On the server side it is easy to switch [to Linux] because you don't have such a large user base. On the desktop you have an entire population used to doing things a certain way and telling them to move from Windows to something else is always going to take time," explains Mohammed Elzubeir of Linux user group, Arabeyes.

Al Sibai also highlights the fear of isolation in using Linux on the desktop. "When it comes to the desktop, Linux is a very small chunk... If you run it you are unable to exchange programs and applications with millions of sources because you are on a completely different platform," he says.

While this is an issue that can only be overcome by time and migration to the desktop by large enterprises and user communities, other user concerns, including Arabic support, can be tackled immediately.

For example, Linux can be made to behave just like Windows, which obviously helps to address users' adjustment period to the deployment of a new operating system. "You can make it look and act like Windows and the user won't even know it isn't Windows — except that it won't crash," says Elzubeir.

Furthermore, Arabeyes recently announced a project to Arabise OpenOffice, which when completed should encourage both regional and enterprise users to move towards Linux.

"If you want to introduce Linux [at the desktop] you need the proper [Arabic] support — word processing and spell checking — so that is what we are doing, we making sure that this is possible," explains Elzubeir.

Additionally, other support concerns have troubled enterprises planning to invest in Linux. The departure of Red Hat from the UAE raised questions about the roadmap and long term viability of the platform.

"Customers say we like the look and feel of Linux and we think it can be used, but unless there is a roadmap for how it is going to be supported within the region, typically it doesn't get touched," says Martyn Molnar, business solutions architect, Tech Access. "This region has suffered because of the lack of support [for Linux]," he adds.

The slow uptake of Linux in the region was undoubtedly a factor in the exit of Red Hat, but vendors and user groups have moved to ensure regional Linux users have the necessary support channels for their open source platforms. Online user groups are one source of support, although regional user groups are less common. However, the likes of Sun and Oracle will support Linux implementations running their solutions.

"We announced an alliance with Red Hat where we distribute and support Red Hat... We have also signed an alliance with SuSE whereby we are distributing and supporting that operating system. We don't only support it on our systems, but on other people's as well," says Foster.

"If someone calls with a problem in Linux we will attend to that problem and resolve it for them. So customers have access too a much more robust support from Oracle for their [Linux] environment," adds Husam Dajani, vice president, Oracle Middle East.

Questions also remain about the scalability of Linux. While many users and proponents of the platform highlight its scalability as a key benefit, other parties

suggest that while Linux is capable of scaling horizontally, it struggles vertically.

"Once you scale horizontally, which Linux allows you to do at a low incremental cost, you then want to scale out vertically and that is when the crux comes. There are very few Linux programs available today that allow you to do that. Customers that have very complex back end applications are recognising that they [apps] just don't lend themselves to Linux today," claims Molnar.

Additionally, Molnar cites the continual evolution of Linux as a further stumbling block for the open source environment. While the cost savings, rapid response to security holes and general helpfulness of the user community are benefits of Linux that cannot be denied, enterprises may be disconcerted by the seeming lack of ownership or management.

"Although people actually see Linux as a very good strategy, there is an air of etherealness about it, a group of developers that nobody can see or touch actually develop this project, and it has a momentum of its own," comments Molnar.

While this momentum may not be moving so quickly in the regional market, converts to the open source platform are already planning where next to deploy it.

"You say 'since my ERP is on Linux, why not my file servers also?' Why don't users have their shared directories on Linux? It is just much easier to support when you have a consolidated platform," says Al Sibai.

"I think we will see a trend in the UAE similar to that of the US, once the march starts, it will pick up momentum and more and more people will deploy Linux," he concludes.

Skills

Another factor that is impacting the regional uptake of Linux is the availability of skills. Despite the efforts of local universities and vendors such as IBM, which are assisting in the training of Linux professionals, numbers remain low.

Murad Zouhny, systems sales manager for Middle East & Pakistan with IBM, says Big Blue recently donated a Linux lab to the University of Jordan. "We have done something similar with Zayed University [in the UAE] as well," he adds.

While the skills are being developed in the universities, very few appear to be filtering through into the current employment market. Consequently, Linux professionals in the enterprise market are restricted to one or two enthusiasts in the odd company here and there. Furthermore, these proponents may not even be involved with the IT department or its purchasing decisions.

"We tend to see one or two evangelists in an organisation, but we are not seeing a widespread mass of certified individuals in an organisation," says Martyn Molnar, business solutions architect, Tech Access.

"There are individuals and it is wrong for me to say this but they don't really matter in the big picture. There are a few enthusiasts, but they don't make any impact on the numbers," adds Arabeyes' Mohammed Elzubeir.

The bigger picture is that the limited number of Linux certified professionals is discouraging enterprises from making the transition to the open source platform. The difficulty in sourcing staff is forcing many companies committed to Linux to invest in training their own employees.

"The biggest problem is that we [the Middle East market] don't have the talent. If I'm a business and I want to switch my servers to Linux, who am I going to hire? Where do I get these people from? That is a big problem," confirms Elzubeir.

Hatem Al Sibai, group IT manager with Al Ghurair Group also acknowledges that the skills gap is a problem. However, for Al Sibai and his team, their lengthy testing of Linux enabled them to gain the necessary knowledge and experience.

"Windows resources are easier to find," Al Sibai admits. "In our case, our move to Linux has been gradual and we have been looking at it for the last two years, so our engineers had plenty of time to get their skills up to speed," he continues.

While Al Ghurair has been prepared to invest time and energy in getting its staff skilled in Linux, not every company is able or willing to follow suit. As such, plans to migrate to open source often fall by the wayside.

In the bigger picture, Elzubeir argues that this lack of commitment is having an even greater effect. Many individuals are discouraged from paying the sizeable training fees for Linux courses because there are very few jobs available. This, in turn, impacts distributors such as Red Hat, which make the majority of their revenues from training.

"It is a chicken and egg problem. Individuals look at Red Hat certification, which is a great certification, but costs about Dhs 8000 –9000. That is a lot of money to spend when they are not going to find a job as no one is hiring for those sorts of skills because no one thinks they exist," explains Elzubeir.

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