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## Expo Coverage

# Worlds collide at Linux-on-the-Hudson

## IBM, HP, and Compaq square up against KDE, GNOME, Workspot, and the new kernel

### Summary

In this news analysis, ITworld.com's Jack Vaughan previews New York's LinuxWorld Conference & Expo. (1,500 words)

By [Jack Vaughan](#)

The Linux community and its suppliers gather this week to view the latest wares at the LinuxWorld Conference and Expo at the Jacob Javits Center overlooking the Hudson River in New York. At the show, the Linux story will continue to be told as a tale of two platforms, with movement on the server side continuing to outpace desktop advances. Many of the key additions to the new Linux 2.4 kernel play to the server crowd, and the kernel is thus likely to be near the center of attention.

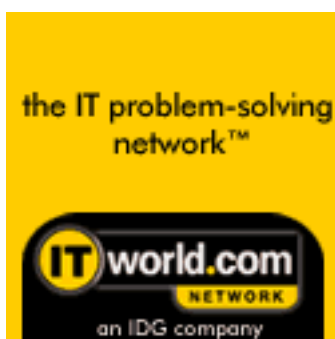


As major Linux software efforts can be divided into desktop and server camps, suppliers can likewise be placed in two broad categories: specialty Linux startups, and established vendors that have just recently caught the Linux bug. The former group is under pressure to demonstrate that open source enthusiasm can translate into profitable businesses. The latter group, which can shield its

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Linux software ramp-up costs under a wider umbrella, has the means to garner attention at the show, and much of this group's activity will be server-related.

IBM chair and chief executive Lou Gerstner vowed last month to invest nearly \$1 billion in Linux development. His company will again seek at this show to mark itself as the champion of things Linux. Other big computer vendors, including Hewlett-Packard, Compaq, Dell, and Unisys, will try to catch some of that fire. Most have formalized their Linux efforts in recent months, forming Linux-specialist offices and such, and they will work on plans and new alliances right up to show time.

For its part, HP is reportedly taking this show as an opportunity to debut a Linux server bundle that includes process-scheduling applications software based on HP's long-touted but rarely seen Change Engine technology.

Even Sun Microsystems, a server and workstation leader that sat out the early Linux battles, is slated to make its presence felt at the show. The company's newly purchased Cobalt Networks arm will display a series of new machines built specifically to run the Linux operating system.

Server-side Linux is the main play for all those vendors, whose desktop Linux efforts have yet to get rolling. They are apparently daunted by the entrenchment of Microsoft as the desktop application leader. And while smaller players are doing interesting things with new Linux GUIs and applications, they too seem unwilling to challenge Microsoft's productivity packages head-on, at least for now.

## Server locus

The so-called war between the KDE and GNOME interfaces gained some attention at the last Linux confab. A more intuitive, more graphical user interface, some believe, might enable Linux to gain a greater foothold on the desktop. The KDE-GNOME tussle is not necessarily a burning issue within the Linux community, because many Linux users prefer command-line control to "pretty pictures" of the graphical variety anyway.

"I don't buy into the war. I think it's all good," said Joe Barr, industry viewer and contributing editor at LinuxWorld.com, concerning Linux interfaces, "There are a lot of Linux users that don't buy into either one."

But Linux could benefit from added desktop enablement, Barr admits.

"Right now, there's a shortage of classic end-user applications. You cannot buy the same range or type of Linux apps for the general desktop," he said. "There's a tremendous repertoire of Linux apps, but they are specialty items."

Sun's StarOffice desktop suite, now available for Linux, has not allayed that problem. "StarOffice was too monolithic for Linux fans," said Barr. But, he added, parsed-down open source apps based on StarOffice may soon gain ground.

For now, Barr indicated, the server will remain the locus of Linux.

"Most announcements still are for servers. We're going to clustering, high availability, and the like. Very few things are for the desktop," he said.

The new kernel, which increases scalability and multiprocessor support, may have a role in this continued emphasis. "The new kernel is good for servers," Barr said, and has better addressed the area of security. Barr notes that a new "stateful" firewall, built into the kernel, is particularly welcome. Caldera, SuSE, and other Linux OS providers will be showing new system capabilities at the New York show.

## **Linux bundles**

The gap between commercial Linux promoters and noncommercial Linux adherents should not be overstated, or thought of as new, said Jean S. Bozman, an IDC analyst.

"The dynamic is similar to what happened in the early days of Unix, where the advocates called the commercial sides 'the suits' and the commercial side called the Unix advocates 'sandal wearers,' Bozman said.

Linux software installations on existing software still surpass new bundlings, she said.

"People started running Linux on already installed servers," Bozman said. She estimates that new, fully loaded Linux server shipments will vault from \$841 million in 1999 to \$5.1 billion in 2004. In 2004, Linux would account for about 5.8 percent of a server market projected at \$87.9 billion.

While the big system vendors have resources, Linux-only corporations will continue to have some advantages, Bozman suggested. "For VA Linux, for example, Linux is not an option; it is the focus. They have preconfigured combos [that meet users' needs]. They've gotten into the fact that they have to help the user load the

software." In fact, at the LinuxWorld Expo, operating system packages that include system management utilities -- and out-of-the-box Web server configurations -- will become more of the norm.

Count Compaq among the big players now emphasizing Linux. The company formed a Linux program office about a year ago, although it was announced formally just last month. The office has prepared an open source portal to help aggregate information that will help Linux efforts on Compaq hardware. There are indications that Compaq and others are getting ready to unveil significant benchmarks that will enhance the server-side Linux story for IT organizations.

Compaq, as both a desktop and server house, must straddle various worlds when pursuing Linux solutions. According to Judy Chavis, the manager of Compaq's Linux program office, the company has initiatives over most of its platforms, including storage systems and emerging wireless appliances.

Still, she agrees with those who see Linux at the moment as a server story. "Compaq created this program office because Linux is strong in the server market today. It's still very server-centric," Chavis says.

When discussing Linux on the desktop, she points out that of Compaq's strongest partners is Microsoft. Like others she notes that Microsoft is in a dominant position in the personal productivity application market. "It will take years before you see anything happening in that place. Microsoft has made it very easy for end users," she said.

## **Thin-client song**

One smaller vendor has taken a unique approach to spreading the desktop use of Linux: WorkSpot is the maker of AppSpot, an application service that helps companies quickly Web-enable Unix or Linux applications.

The company has been interested in promoting Linux on the desktop from its initiation in 1999, according to CEO Kathy Giori. But WorkSpot has taken the tack of providing server-savvy thin-client software that may be described as an open source analog to more familiar Windows-ready systems from Citrix and others.

At Linux World Expo, WorkSpot is expected to announce a deal to support Nautilus, a network user environment built by prominent startup Eazel. Nautilus combines a browser, a file manager, and specialized apps to provide a better user interface.

One of the big values regarding software like Easel and AppSpot for Linux, said Giori, is that it exploits Linux's success on the server side.

With such software IT shops can "take advantage of the server side," she said.

"There is not a large installed base of Linux operating systems on desktops," she said. "But you can allow people to use a desktop that is running on a Linux server and appears to execute on the desktop.

"On the desktop, I think Linux will continue to grow in the developers' base and in the field of education. And that will spill over into the business world."

## **Workstations of the world unite**

The interest of big vendors in Linux can help smaller Linux players, said Nat Friedman, the president and CEO of GNOME-proponent Ximian (formerly known as Helix Code). "IBM's commitment is an indication of a trend toward Linux," he said, adding that Linux server sellers are making strides at proving an acceptable total-cost-of-ownership quotient for Linux.

On the server, Linux is very mature, Friedman noted: "There are sales forces, there is market penetration. That is a business that is real."

And while the general-user desktop is now no-man's land to Linux, the OS is making incursions on the client side, albeit on the high end. "Right now Linux on the desktop is siphoning workstation users from Solaris and HP-UX," Friedman claimed.

Successes here may help non-server Linux software makers bide time until more applications become available for the platform.

Right now, the industry "is not ready for broad-based adoption against Microsoft," admits Ximian's Friedman. While many industry observers would say such adoption is many years away at best, Friedman and others can make a case that, perhaps on wireless appliances, adoption may be sooner than that. ■

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### **About the author**

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