

Red Hat Plans Linux Desktop Offering 'for the Masses'

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Red Hat is designing a new, packaged Linux desktop solution to push its Linux desktop offering to a far broader audience than exists for its current client solution.

The move is designed in part to compete with Novell's SUSE Linux Enterprise 10 platform, which includes SUSE Linux Enterprise Server and SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop, which were released in July 2006.

"As we move out with this new desktop strategy, which we will announce sometime over the next few months, we will really look at the desktop from the perspective of a very different market," Paul Cormier, Red Hat's executive vice president of engineering, told eWEEK in an

interview.

"This will be a more comprehensive offering that will target markets like the small and medium-sized business - SMB - sector and emerging markets. Part of this strategy is to get the desktop more to the masses than our existing client is getting today. So there will be a different packaged solution for the masses coming down the pike," he said.

Asked if part of the strategy is the mass consumer market, Cormier responded that Red Hat has "no plans to go and sell this offering at Best Buy, if that's what you mean by the mass consumer market. Customers will be able to download it and get a Red Hat Network subscription on the Web for it, which is what we feel is the distribution wave of the future anyway," he said.

The news that Red Hat intends to re-enter the broader desktop market is not a surprise given the fact that Novell has for some time been offering a broad solution for customers from the desktop to the data center with its SUSE Linux 10 offering.

The new focus by Red Hat on the desktop also comes as Novell prepares to announce the first release candidate for the first service pack of its SLED (SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop) 10 at its annual Brainshare conference here.

But while Novell executives argue that its end-to-end customer offering is far superior to anything that Red Hat currently has to offer, Cormier disagrees, saying that, from an enterprise perspective, Red Hat already has its own solution that spans the desktop to the server and data center with its current client, which is targeted at enterprise desktops.

However, Justin Steinman, director of product marketing for Linux and open source at Novell, argues that most IT managers want a complete

operating system platform, with solutions from the desktop to the data center, so they can leverage management tools and people skills.

"Red Hat is basically ignoring the desktop, while SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop continues to sign new customers, like our 20,000-desktop deployment at Peugeot Citroen," Steinman told eWEEK ahead of the Red Hat desktop news.

But Gordon Haff, an analyst at Illuminata, disagrees, telling eWEEK that the simple fact is that Linux hasn't really taken off on the desktop in a big way.

"I don't see the lack of a desktop offering as a particular negative for Red Hat. Yes, companies that really want both desktop and server Linux will be more likely to go to Novell. That's true. It's also a business decision that Red Hat has made until now," he said.

Raven Zachary, senior analyst and open-source practice head at the 451 Group, agreed, telling eWEEK that most organizations have highly heterogeneous data center deployments and that he does not see a single operating system vendor having much success in persuading enterprise customers to standardize on a single operating system platform any time soon.

For his part, Cormier believes that Novell is simply misinformed on that front, saying that Red Hat has had a client solution for some time and that part of the recent release of RHEL (Red Hat Enterprise Linux) 5 is a client solution.

"The client is not so much what sits on your desktop, it's the interoperability of the client. Samba is key to that interoperability, and we have brought a big part of the Samba team into Red Hat to help us move that forward," he said.

"From a commercial desktop perspective, we've included things like stateless and previewed it in RHEL 5, which will be matured and made available under the RHEL 5 subscription. That's a big part of the desktop, which is mostly about interoperability and management in the commercial world," Cormier said.

Novell executives and analysts, however, dismissed that assertion, saying that Red Hat's client offering is not comparable to its SLED 10 and that this is not comparing apples with apples.

But a company spokesman said that Novell will not be surprised if Red Hat decides it needs to refocus on the desktop to try to compete with its current offering.

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