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The Value of Linux Standard Base?

In March 2002, I published an Aberdeen *InSight* entitled *The Linux Standard Base: How Will It Benefit Linux?* In that paper, I said, “For Linux to move into the enterprise and serve as the host for enterprise applications, a set of common standards is needed. Without standards and common application programming interfaces (APIs), independent software vendors (ISVs) and other developers must decide which of the more than 250 Linux distributions to target for hosting their applications. On the upside, standards will bring a greater market share for Linux, allowing for its continuing growth. Developers, distributors, ISVs, systems vendors, and especially users will surely benefit.”

One question at LinuxWorld 2002 in San Francisco was whether or not Red Hat would embrace Linux Standard Base (LSB). I did not think so, but Michael Tiemann strolled out onto the stage and declared that Red Hat would support LSB. At about the same time, Credit Suisse First Boston (CSFB) announced that it would deploy only LSB-compliant software after the end of 2002.

The motivation and need for LSB or some equivalent type standard is obvious — we need a single Linux — no forking permitted. For many years, ISVs have struggled with the task of porting their applications to multiple RISC/Unix platforms. Sometimes they have had to compromise their applications to get them to run with the degree of performance required to be competitive. Porting efforts are often time-consuming and costly, and once the port is completed, the ISV must support it. ISVs do this because they want access to as many markets as possible.

Support for LSB in 2002 seemed to be encouraging, but has this support increased over the two plus years? It is hard to determine if it has. The previous leadership of the Free Standards Group (FSG), the pushers and movers behind LSB, did not always have the funding and the management expertise to gain the support of executives at large companies such as HP and IBM and important ISVs. Now, the FSG has new executive leadership and is working on a strategy to make a strong case for LSB.

The Linux community does not want to repeat the forking mistake of Unix with Linux. A solution to this problem is to provide a standard Linux operating system. While this is a good concept, it works only if the community around Linux supports it and then adheres to the standard. The FSG has developed LSB, along with a number of tools and test suites, to facilitate the creation of a standard Linux. Until recently, the timing for making

a strong case for LSB may not have been optimum. But in the past year, Linux has begun making inroads into the enterprise and hundreds of ISV applications are now available on at least one Linux distro — Red Hat Enterprise Linux.

I believe that LSB is essential for ensuring the long-term market competitiveness of Linux against Windows. Microsoft has been running negative ads, worldwide, that depict the forking of Linux. LSB needs strong support from HP, IBM, Novell/SUSE, Red Hat, and ISVs such as CA, Oracle, BEA, and so on. LSB is the correct approach from economic, social, and technical points of view. It will help ensure that the Linux market continues to grow. And those vendors with the largest Linux distro and server market shares will stand to gain the most from LSB.

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