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Editorial

Why Red Hat will go bust because of Ubuntu

By Tony Mobily

I don't like writing controversial editorials. Controversy is an effective means to get a lot of accesses: most people seem to enjoy reading controversial articles, maybe because they like torturing themselves. (And yes, I used to read a lot of Maureen O'Gara's articles myself!). Besides, controversy is a double edged sword: there's very little chance that I would ever go *back* to those sites!

And yet here I am.

First of all: Red Hat was my first love, as far as GNU/Linux distributions are concerned. I was always frustrated by the many tgz files in slackware, and was ecstatic when I installed Red Hat 3.0.3. At that time, Red Hat was a tiny startup with a *modem connection* to the internet. It was based on RPM, a tool that made me finally feel in control of my system.

Now, the key sentence: I became a user of Red Hat Linux for my desktop machine (and yes, it was a bit of a challenge!), and a couple of months later, when I had to choose what distribution I should use for my server, I chose the one I was most accustomed to: Red Hat Linux.

A number of things happened in the following years (1997 to 2005). Here are a few of them, in chronological order: the packaged version of Red Hat Linux flopped (why would anybody buy it, if you can download it? Plus, yes, it was overpriced...). Red Hat went public, and started having a number of investors that wanted to see good, realistic plans to make money—which meant focusing more on the corporate market. Then, the split: Fedora came along, but it was underfunded and the “community involvement” was patchy and disorganised. Eventually, Red Hat effectively abandoned its desktop audience, to focus on the more lucrative corporate market. Then, a very smart man called Mark Shuttleworth made 500 million dollars in the .com boom, learned Russian from scratch, went to space, came back in one piece, funded several charities focussing on South Africa, and... oh yes, he created Ubuntu Linux.

Mark accomplished three things with his move. First of all, he created tons and tons of work for himself. This isn't really crucial to my point, but I think it's important to mention it. He also gathered a community of hackers to create what is, in my humble opinion, the *first* desktop GNU/Linux done right. And I mean, *really* right. The third thing he did, was divert tons, and tons, and tons of GNU/Linux users away from Red Hat Linux, and towards Ubuntu Linux. A lot of those people—and this is the crucial piece of information—were system administrators, who in the last 12 months got more and more used to using Ubuntu Linux rather than Red Hat. And—guess what?—now they have Ubuntu Server, which—again, guess what?—is a GNU/Linux server system *done right*.

I am convinced that Red Hat is now starting to realise that losing their desktop users didn't just mean “losing the suckers who didn't pay a cent anyway” (this is *not* a quote, by the way), because a lot of those “suckers” were system administrators, who will soon have to decide between Red Hat Linux and Ubuntu Server. And when you use Ubuntu Server as your home system, the choice really can go either way.

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By abandoning their desktop users, Red Hat has effectively shot itself in the foot. Funnily enough, they kept on chasing the mirage of thousands of soul-less corporate customers with the real money. However, the bleeding didn't stop altogether, and behind those faceless corporations there are thousands of system administrators who now use Ubuntu Linux rather than Red Hat Linux.

And they will want to continue to do so, as much as possible.

Good luck, Red Hat. Thank you Mark for Ubuntu.

Biography

Tony Mobily (/user/2" title="View user profile.): Tony is the founder and the Editor In Chief of Free Software Magazine

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