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Interview with Bob Young

Red Hat's former CEO talks about his past and present experiences with Linux

By Colin McGregor

Bob Young, former CEO of Red Hat, former publisher of Linux Journal, current head of lulu.com and a professional football team shares his thoughts and views of Linux.

Free Software People: Bob Young

In 1995 Bob Young bought fledgling Linux distributor Red Hat and until 2005 held a number of roles within the company ranging from CEO to board member, all overseeing the explosive growth of what for many people was and is the Linux distribution of choice. His current projects center around lulu.com, an on-line publishing company and ownership of the Canadian Football League's Hamilton Tigercats.



Bob Young

CM: What was your connection with the early days of Linux Journal?

BY: I was publishing a small UNIX newsletter for the New York City market, when a friend read that Phil Hughes was looking to start the Linux Journal. Phil, based in Seattle, and I teamed up with Phil as editor and me as publisher. The first two issues were published out of my house in Westport CT. We quickly concluded that trying to publish a small magazine from locations on opposite sides of the continent was not going to work. So I decided to concentrate on selling Linux related products and Phil and his SSC company took over responsibility for publishing LJ, and IMHO they've done a great job.

CM: How did you first cross paths with Red Hat founder Mark Ewing?

BY: Online dating.

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Seriously, back in 1994 the Linux world was a very small place so you knew of everyone. When Marc launched his initial beta of Red Hat, the “Halloween” edition, he became instantly famous in the Linux newsgroups. I called him up because I wanted to add it to my catalog of Linux products, the “ACC PC Unix and Linux Catalog”. He knew who I was because of our marketing in those newsgroups, and thought of ACC as the giant retailer in the Linux space. We were actually tiny. Shortly afterwards we agreed to merge Marc’s tiny Linux business that ran out of his spare bedroom, with my tiny Linux business running out of my wife’s sewing closet, and the rest is history.

CM: In January 1998 I attended a talk you gave to the Toronto Linux user group where you noted how you hoped Red Hat would become the Heinz ketchup of Linux distributions. What did you mean by that?

BY: If you give away your product it is hard to claim a lot of IP or product differentiation. In the same way that anyone can make ketchup out of freely available ingredients (tomatoes, vinegar, salt and spices) without bending a copyright rule, anyone can build a Linux distribution (Linux kernel, drivers, utilities, and applications (Apache, DNS, Postgres, etc)). So both products are what are defined in business as “commodity” products.

Heinz has 60% of the ketchup business because they have built a brand synonymous with quality and consistency. Red Hat is doing very well by this standard.

But more than this you’ll have to ask Matthew Szulik at Red Hat. I don’t work at Red Hat these days, so I have to be careful about telling these stories in case they conflict with Red Hat’s current product positioning. Although I remain a big fan of Red Hat, and continue to be hugely impressed with how well they are doing in a very difficult business competing with the largest companies in the technology industry.

CM: What role or roles does Linux fill at lulu.com?

A: The similarity between Red Hat and Lulu is that Lulu is trying to do for creators, authors, photographers, filmmakers, and musicians what Open Source has done for software programmers, namely empower the creator. Lulu authors get to market their product directly to their readers while retaining full copyright control.

And it turns out that there is a similar need for control in the publishing space as there was in the software business. Lulu is growing rapidly, with over a hundred thousand of registered creators, selling a million books this year alone. Lulu is up in the top 3,000 websites on the ‘net according to Alexa.com.

But none of this would be possible without the tools that Lulu has built our technology platform around, including Linux (Red Hat), Apache, Postgres, and many others. Our site would not be as reliable, and would have been prohibitively expensive to build if we had been using the equivalent proprietary tools.

CM: At the Hamilton Tigercats?

BY: Same thing. At the risk of sounding like an infomercial: We are able to building better online services for our fans at a dramatically lower cost than we could have using tools where we were forced to rely on expensive support contracts from proprietary vendors. Simply because proprietary software vendors would not give us access to the source code we need to improve our systems and to identify and eliminate bugs.

CM: What else would you like readers of Free Software Magazine to know about you?

BY: Nothing about me. But the Tiger-Cats are going to have a much better season in the Canadian Football League this year, so you should rush to www.ticats.ca and buy your Season tickets today! ;-)

Biography

Colin McGregor (/user/44155" title="View user profile.): Colin McGregor (www.mcgregor.org) works for a Toronto-area charity, does consulting on the side and has served as President of the Toronto Free-Net. He also is secretary for and occasional guest speaker at the Greater Toronto Area Linux User Group meetings.

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