Linux Products Replace Exchange Server

Free at Last

A steadily increasing number of users are looking to free themselves from monopolistic chains and licensing policies. Mail and Groupware servers are a good place to start. New products that leverage Linux's stable base platform continue to force their way onto the market.

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Whether home-grown or out of the box, Linux mail servers have good reason to look to tried and trusted standard components like Cyrus IMAP, Postfix, and OpenLDAP. In either case you need solid Linux system skills to implement the server and plan the communications infrastructure.

System administrators and decision makers with Linux experience often have a hard time understanding why they should pay for an Open Source finished product, instead of just building it themselves. And this is one of the reasons why mail server manufacturers have a hard time producing conclusive sales arguments. Thus, to help things along, they tend to add closed source Groupware components.

SuSE, for example, has invested in the powerful Comfire Groupware product by Netline-IS and seamlessly integrated the product with their Openexchange Server 4, as previously noted in Linux Magazine Issue 27.

Microsoft Customers ...

Microsoft customers form the main target group for Linux based Groupware servers, and a certain amount of optimism is understandable, as Microsoft will be discontinuing support for Exchange 5.5 in December 2003 in favor of Exchange 2000. Instead of opting for an involuntary upgrade, customers might be tempted to move to a stable and inexpensive Linux Groupware product. The hordes of potential customers will not be convinced, unless the product in question can offer the complete functionality previously provided by Exchange 5.5.

... and what they can expect from Linux

Let's not forget one important aspect: most users will want to carry on running Windows and Outlook on their desktop PCs – a question of habit and acquired skills. IT service providers with a Linux bias can try to persuade their customers to look into the advantages of Webmail

solutions. We should try not be too overzealous – after all, the MAPI protocol specifies that the Groupware server should reflect the user's preferences and not the other way round.

In *Corporate to Workgroup* mode Outlook expects a specific set of functions, if it is provide its users with private mail, public folders, forms, calendar functions, appointments, group appointments, to-do lists and contacts. Some Linux programs, specifically SuSE's Openexchange Server 4, are more fully featured than Exchange 5.5 and this gives rise to the question of how Outlook can actually leverage the enhanced functionality. In any case, providing connectivity to Outlook will entail installing replication software or a special connector.

Migrating Data

Admins with large user databases on existing Groupware servers will definitely want to migrate their data to Linux if at all possible. LDAP, a directory service that most products support, provides a good place to start – although it must be said that our five test candidates handled the migration process with varying degrees of success. ∎