

# CRNtech

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**Linux Desktops**

## Four Linux Desktops Tackle The Enterprise

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The year 2007 might be remembered as the year when Linux corporate desktops stood up to Windows Vista. Hewlett-Packard recently announced it is making large deals with Linux desktops and that these orders might be a signal of an important shift in the market.

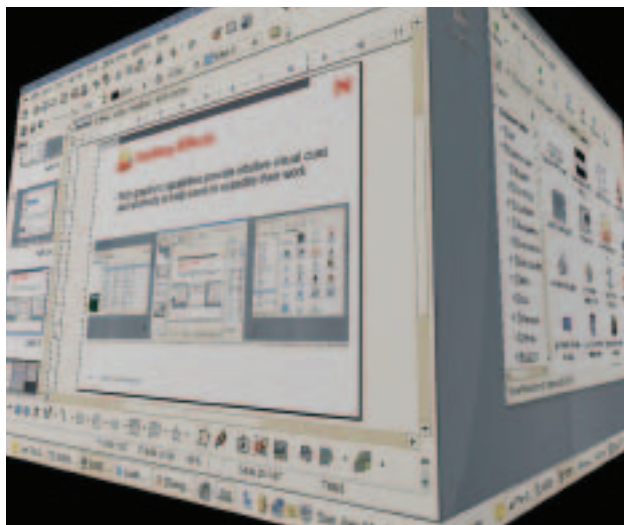
### Methodology

For this review, the CRN Test Center evaluated offerings from the four leading Linux enterprise desktop alternatives: Linspire Five-O, SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop, the newly released Red Hat Enterprise Linux Desktop 5.0 and Xandros 4 Professional.

A word of caution: The Test Center initially tried to install the distributions using the dual-boot option on a new Vista-based PC with an Athlon 64X2 dual-core processor and Asus M2NBP-VM CSM Micro ATX motherboard. But three of the four distributions failed to load properly even without using dual-boot. Only Xandros booted up, but it did not include a driver for the motherboard's Nvidia MCP51 Ethernet controller. And when booting into Vista after Xandros installed, Vista failed to load. During a detailed boot of Vista, engineers noticed that it could not load the crcdisk.sys driver. Vista was paralyzed. We suspect the problem was the lack of drivers.

After various attempts, engineers used an older AMD ATX motherboard running Windows XP, and all the Linux desktops worked correctly. Engineers also tested the OSes on a newer Intel HP xw4400 workstation and the desktops installed.

Our advice—run a complete backup before installing Linux with dual booting on a PC system running Vista. Before committing to Linux OS installation jobs, solution providers also should develop hardware surveys or



purchase hardware capture utilities that can help them build hardware asset lists.

In addition to running the OSes, engineers looked at the various applications and partner programs available to VARs.

### SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop 10 from Novell

Of the four enterprise desktops, Novell appears to be the most serious alternative to Microsoft Windows. For almost a year now, Novell has been offering an enterprise-class Linux desktop that competes with Windows on many levels. However, as with other Linux desktops, SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop suffers from a lack of drivers.

SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop ships with the Novell edition of OpenOffice. Novell's OpenOffice code abides with the open-source license and is certified to work with SUSE



### Scorecard

Novell SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop 10

Compatibility and support make it the best choice for the enterprise.

#### Features



Quality and reliability



Price/performance



Ease of deployment



Ease of use



Profit potential



Linux Enterprise Desktop. As with StarOffice's Enterprise suite, Novell's OpenOffice can run Visual Basic macros. Although Novell's macro library does not cover all the VBA macros, many commonly used macros written for Excel and Word will run on SUSE.

In addition to macros, enterprise customers also face some file interoperability problems between Microsoft Office and OpenOffice. For instance, OpenOffice cannot read Microsoft Office 2007's new DOCX file format. Novell built translators in its OpenOffice edition so that it works with DOCX files. Like every open-source innovation, the translators are freely available, but the OpenOffice community has yet to adopt them.

SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop ships with Novell's Evolution e-mail client and an Exchange connector. When migrating from Outlook to Evolution, solution providers might encounter some problems transferring calendar and address book data over to Evolution. Integrating with old versions of Outlook has always been difficult because Microsoft has never simplified it.

SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop arrives with Mono, which is the open-source version of Microsoft's .Net framework and runtime. With Mono, .Net applications can run on SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop. The Mono project recently unveiled a new .Net Visual Basic compiler, which allows developers to port over many Visual Basic applications to Linux.

Because of the Mono integration, SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop ships with iFolder, the Tomboy note-taking application and the F-Spot photo management application. iFolder allows users to share files on a peer-to-peer network. The iFolder server, which is free, automatically replicates documents on all desktops that are running the iFolder client. In addition, SUSE includes the Beagle search engine, which runs on Mono. The Beagle engine is a great tool for searching an entire desktop, including e-mail, instant messaging, music files and PDFs.

Novell made navigating through SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop's Gnome desktops extremely cool. Users can rotate desktops on a 3-D cube. SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop includes Samba, which allows users to authenticate to Active Directory. For extra security, SUSE arrives with Novell's security framework, which establishes normal behavior profiles for every desktop. Applications are quarantined whenever users try to do things outside a profile.

Novell is assisting partners with desktop installations and file migration services, including providing Level 1 through Level 3 support. Novell leaves it up to partners to select which level of support they want to provide, while it picks up other levels. For instance, Novell will do Level 2 and Level 3 support for partners that are only providing Level 1 support. With this multilevel flexibility, Novell is attracting large partners as well as small consultancies.

Like Linspire, SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop has made software purchasing extremely easy. Right from the desktop, users can click on Novell's Customer Center link and select software they want to

purchase. Since software installations are usually managed by administrators, solution providers can configure SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop so that software is dispatched through a central location.

Novell charges about \$50 per seat per year for OS and software updates. Novell is also teaching partners to take advantage of some of the customization and configuration features in SUSE. Since customers spend about 90 percent less on Linux licenses than Windows licenses, partners are encouraged to sell deployment services using SUSE's various deployment options and features.

## The Bottom Line

Surface-deep features are not enough anymore, as more companies than ever before are seriously considering migrating to Linux. However, the UI and navigational changes that Linux vendors are making in Linux desktops to improve the user experience are still far behind Windows. Simple routines such as adding a Flash player or Java plugin on Firefox can be a tedious experience. The Linux File Manager is not as intuitive as Windows Explorer.

While all four Linux vendors offer attractive suites, Novell leads the pack by paying close attention to enterprise features that allow users to work with .Net and Visual Basic macros. Novell also has the manpower to assist solution providers on large-scale deployments.

For the enterprise, Red Hat Enterprise Linux Desktop 5.0 is the competition, but its software bundle did not impress Test Center engineers. Linux vendors need to offer the best productivity tools they can bundle to remain competitive with Windows. Red Hat offers a highly competent desktop product but its default productivity products are too simple.

Red Hat also fails to provide some open-source Microsoft technologies out of the box, including key features in OpenOffice that allow users to import various Microsoft Office objects and files. Enterprise customers will be looking for interoperability and compatibility with Microsoft.

What's more, with the exception of a remote monitoring service, which is useful for managing desktops, the Red Hat Exchange partner program aims to help primarily ISV partners sell enterprise middleware and provide support.

Linspire and Xandros are forging ahead with many new, innovative features that simplify usability. Both products are geared toward SMB and departmental-level deployments, rather than large-scale enterprise rollouts, and are worth considering for such applications.

Linspire's CNR service is a plus. However, Linspire isolates users from Windows applications and files more so than Xandros. Xandros is more expensive than Linspire because the company has taken the bold move of offering the CrossOver Office suite for environments where it's necessary to run Windows applications. We think it's the right approach and worth the extra expense for most customers. ■

## Shopping The Ingredients

VENDOR	PRODUCT	PRICE/SUPPORT	PARTNER INCENTIVES	PROGRAM PARTNERS	PROGRAM COSTS	DISTRIBUTORS
<b>Linspire</b> San Diego (858) 587-6700 www.linspire.com	Linspire Five-0	\$60 with installation support	Participate in revenue sharing from software downloads up to 15%	4,500 resellers	No program fees	Ingram Micro
<b>Novell</b> Waltham, Mass. (781) 464-8000 www.novell.com	SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop 10	\$50 per year, per seat with technical support, updates	MDF available based on partner level	5,400 resellers	Varies depending on program level, type and training	Alternative Technologies, Ingram Micro, Synnex, Tech Data
<b>Red Hat</b> Raleigh, N.C. (919) 754-3700 www.redhat.com	Red Hat Enterprise Linux Desktop 5.0	Starting at \$80 per year for 1-socket desktop with basic support	Two-level partner program offers MDF, free training	NA	NA	Bell Micro, Ingram Micro, Tech Data
<b>Xandros</b> New York (212) 213-8083 www.xandros.com	Xandros 4 Professional	\$100 with installation support for 90 days	All leads are passed to partners; 2% MDF for Gold partners	150 resellers	\$299 for middle-level Gold partners	Ingram Micro, Navarre