

Timothy Perrin

Learning About Linux: Part II

In my last column, I introduced you to Linux, the alternative to Microsoft Windows for Intel-based PCs. I pointed out that Linux has a variety of advantages over Windows.

Linux is free or very inexpensive. You'll be paying for added features and support, not the core software.

- Linux comes with application software such as an office suite, Web browser, email program, and dozens of others.
- Linux is more resistant to viruses than Windows.
- Linux is more stable than Windows.

But I would be misleading you if I painted a completely rosy picture of Linux. There are a number of disadvantages and some of them are quite serious.

Retraining Costs

While the cost of the operating system and most Linux software may be low, the cost of retraining your staff is not. If you switch to Linux, professional training on the new software is a must. Since many of the best Linux programs have Windows versions, I suggest training staff *before* the transition on the Windows versions. That way, you can introduce change in bite-sized chunks.

Complex Installation

Installing a Windows program is easy. We've all done it dozens of times. Installations in Linux **can** be that easy. Several commercial Linux products prove

that. Unfortunately, with many Linux programs, things don't go that smoothly. I'm not even going to go into the little dance Linux users call "dependency hell." Trust me; you don't want to know.

Fortunately, most flavours of Linux allow you to download and install software from the company's Website with a point-and-click feature. That's if there's anything left that you didn't get with the original distribution disks. Some distributions come on as many as 10 CDs. That's a **lot** of software.

Windows Compatibility

Realistically, however, before we can even consider using Linux, we need to be assured of four levels of Windows compatibility.

First, for at least the first little while, we're going to want to be able to run both Windows and Linux on our systems; they'll have to somehow co-exist.

Second, any Linux system we deploy has to be able to read Windows file systems and file formats.

Third, it has to be able to operate over a Microsoft network.

Fourth, there will be some programs for which we will not be able to find Linux equivalents. There must be a way to run these programs under Linux.

1. Coexistence

The coexistence issue is perhaps the easiest one. Linux and Windows can exist in separate areas of your hard drive called partitions. When you first boot your computer in the morning, you can



choose which system you wish to run. Unfortunately, switching between them requires you to reboot your computer.

Another alternative, as you'll see below, is to run Windows on top of Linux.

2. File Compatibility

Linux has no trouble reading and writing Windows FAT and FAT32 formatted disks. It can read but not write the newer NTFS format, the default on both Windows XP and Windows NT.

The simple solution is to create a hard drive partition formatted in FAT32 to store data files accessed by both systems.

As for file format compatibility, there are programs in the Linux world that can read and write all the normal file formats you use every day, such as Microsoft Word's DOC format, Microsoft Excel's XLS, Rich Text Format (RTF), and all the others your current software creates.

The only notable exception is the Microsoft Outlook data file format PST. Getting your data out of Outlook and into another email or personal information management program can be done, but you wouldn't want to do it more than once.

3. Network Compatibility

Linux runs flawlessly on Microsoft or Novell networks.

4. Running Windows Programs

We all have some specialized programs on which we've come to rely. Sometimes these programs are at the heart of our businesses. For you, that may be conveyancing software. For me, there are two specialized writing programs that I can't imagine living

without. No Linux versions are available of these particular products; nothing does the same job in the Linux world.

We have two options.

- **WINE/Crossover Office**

WINE is a project to implement an interface on Linux so that when a Windows program tries to run, it can. WINE works with varying degrees of success, depending on what you're trying to run. WINE is free at www.winehq.com.

A company called CodeWeavers has produced a souped-up version of WINE called Crossover Office. They've made sure that the most popular programs run correctly. These include the Microsoft Office products, Adobe Photoshop, and others. You can see exactly which programs have been checked out with Crossover Office on the CodeWeavers Website: www.codeweavers.com. The price for the product is US\$59.95.

- **Win4Lin**

The other option is Win4Lin. This product actually loads and runs Windows in a Linux window. When Windows crashes, Linux just "reboots" Windows. All your Linux windows don't even know anything happened. If you have a program that won't run with WINE or Crossover Office, this is your only option.

Win4Lin costs US\$89.99 by download from the company's Website, www.win4lin.com. You will need a copy of Windows 98 or ME, as well.

Trying Linux

If you are curious about Linux, the good news is you can try it out for free, but you're going to need a bit of help from a tech-head friend if you don't know how to burn your own CDs.

So, if you're ready to try Linux, here are several sources—all versions I've had up and running on my system. I list them in my order of preference.

Xandros 2.0

This is my Linux of choice. I use the Deluxe Edition, which includes Crossover Office and costs US\$89. The Standard Edition is US\$39. The free, downloadable version has a limited CD burn speed and the ad-supported Opera Web browser, but you can download and install Mozilla for yourself quite easily.

Download page:

<http://www.xandros.com/about/downloads.html>.

Mandrake 10.0

If you want to try Linux without installing it, download MandrakeMove; it runs Linux from the CD without making any changes to your hard drive.

Download page:

<http://www.mandrakelinux.com/en/ftp.php3>.

SuSE 9.1.

SuSE was recently purchased by Novell, the company best known for its networking software.

Download page: <http://www.suse.com/us/private/download/index.html>.

Linspire 4.5

Linspire just settled a lawsuit with Microsoft over their former name, Lindows. This is a great beginner product. Well-supported, with a super-easy 10 minute install. You'll be up and running quickly and comfortably. That's the good news. The bad news is there's no free version. You have to pay to give this one a try. Cost of entry is US\$49.95 for the full version by download. Linspire, however, also offers a run-from-the-CD version called LinspireLive for \$19.95. Go to the Website and click on the "Products" tab.

<http://www.linspire.com>

Red Hat Fedora Core 2.0

Red Hat is perhaps the best-known Linux, but I found it a bit too techie, even for me. Perhaps that's because it was the first one I tried. It is generally very highly regarded, but I don't recommend it as your first Linux.

Download page:

<http://fedora.redhat.com/download/>.

If you do give Linux a try, drop me a note and let me know your reactions. As always, I'm interested in your experiences, suggestions for topics, brickbats, and kudos. ▲

Timothy Perrin, a former lawyer, is a technology writer for a variety of magazines. He teaches writing in the Professional Writing program at Okanagan University College in Kelowna; online for the Community College of Southern Nevada; and through his own school, WritingSchool.com.

www.TimothyPerrin.com