

INTRO

COMMENT

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TIME FOR LINUX TO GO TO SCHOOL



Microsoft, the Redmond-based software developer we all know and love, is getting twitchy about the amount of licence revenue it loses to software piracy. Back in the summer it commissioned a report on the problem of piracy in schools which found that more than a third of schools in some areas were breaking the law by allowing teachers and pupils to copy software illegally.

My reaction when I saw this was one of shock and horror, though perhaps not in the way the report's authors intended. The horror was the thought that the cash-rich software corporation was going to make schools cough up money they could ill-afford to pay for the extra software licenses. The shock was the realisation of just how much money this must be. And this led to the question: why? Why are British schools paying a small fortune for software when there is an effective and completely free alternative?

A few schools *are* using Linux. Very few. Roger Whittaker of SuSE UK runs a mailing list for Linux users in schools. (SuSE's schools web page is at <http://www.suse.de/uk/schools/>.) The list has around 150 members. Most of those represent secondary schools at which an IT teacher has installed a Linux box or two as file, print or web servers. There is no use of Linux on the desktop yet, despite the fact that most systems in schools are used not to run custom Windows-based applications but for things like word-processing, spreadsheet work and so on – just the kind of thing that could be accomplished using Linux and StarOffice.

Think of the benefits a greater use of Linux in schools would bring. Not just a saving in licence fees but a saving in administration costs thanks to Linux being a secure operating system, safe from tinkering. It would be immune to the viruses that can spread like wildfire in the school environment too – the saving in anti-virus software licence fees would be another bonus.

Lack of Linux experience among teaching staff (not to mention local authority education departments) will be one obstacle to overcome. Here, perhaps, Linux User Groups could help. Many LUG members must be parents and contribute in one way or another to school funds. Your Linux expertise could potentially be of more value to a school than time devoted to other fund-raising activities.

There's also enormous potential for developing educational software for Linux. The open source development model is perfect for this. Skilled programmers and teachers could work together creating educational programs that would be free and available to all. Nor should the value in introducing computer users to Linux at such a young age be overlooked. The nation's children are in danger of growing up thinking that computers and Windows are synonymous.

Schools are a huge market – many British IT companies grew big devoting themselves exclusively to it – and they present a wonderful opportunity for Linux and the open source movement to make a difference where it would really be noticed. Who wants to seize the initiative?

Julian Moss

GUARANTEE

We pride ourselves on the origins of our magazine which come from the very start of the Linux revolution. We have been involved with Linux market for six years now through our sister European-based titles Linux Magazine (aimed at professionals) and Linux User (for hobbyists), and through seminars, conferences and events.

By purchasing this magazine you are joining an information network that enjoys the benefit of all the knowledge and technical expertise of all the major Linux professionals and enthusiasts. No other UK Linux magazine can offer that pedigree or such close links with the Linux Community. We're not simply reporting on the Linux and open source movement - we're part of it.