

Rob Buckley reports on Novell's recent 'Enterprise Day' in London

To boldly go

Novell and the enterprise: is there anyone who doesn't associate the two? Despite being founded in 1979, it wasn't until the company's acquisition of Ximian and SuSE in 2003 that it had a product it could sell to consumers. Until then, it was synonymous with enterprise networking through its NetWare products. So why, in June of this year, did Novell decide to run an Enterprise Day in London's The Brewery conference venue?

Novell's NetWare was once the networking product for the enterprise. But through various stumbles on Novell's part, the arrival of the Internet and Microsoft's skill in using its desktop monopoly to get Windows NT onto servers, NetWare's star began to fade during the mid 90s. While it continues to have a vast installed base of NetWare users, attracting new users has been an almost impossible prospect, particularly when the virtues of Linux on the server became apparent.

The acquisition of SuSE changed all of that. In one, Novell had a new strategy for itself – Linux and open source – that could once again put it high on the CIO's shopping list. "A lot of people still have a vision of Novell as a NetWare company," started Novell's Chris Papayianni, area

clear that Novell was not "in the business of creating tech, then throwing it over the wall. Our goal is to support business." Indeed, the whole idea of free (as in "not paying for it") software was something deeply upsetting to Papayianni. "You can get water free. I can get a bucket and go down to the Thames. I'm not sure I'd drink it though. But I will pay a couple of quid for bottled water." Open source software is all fine and dandy, provided you're paying someone to make sure it's all right, in the world of Novell.

Instead of praising Linux and open source, Novell's Enterprise Day instead revolved around three themes: virtualisation is great, particularly when it has a nice user interface; open source is great, but won't rule the enterprise roost for a long time; and please, why don't you just give us a try?

THE ENTERPRISE DESKTOP

This last plaintive cry surrounded the impressive work being done for SuSE Linux Enterprise Desktop (SLED) 10. Despite various claims by various vendors and distribution maintainers over the years, Linux's desktop has still had some way to go before regular users have been prepared to

Novell's vice president of Linux desktop Nat Friedman came close to making an equivalent, but more modest case for SLED 10 in his demo. Instead, the assembled executives wanted the assembled masses to know that Windows Vista was at least six months away, it was practically a new operating system, not an upgrade, so why not run a pilot program with SLED10, just to see if you'd like it? Take a few people aside, you know, maybe thirty or even a hundred, let them have Linux on their PCs and see how that pans out. They might like it. Which would be nice, wouldn't it?

Papayianni said this unconfident approach was because of the company's realistic aims. "We don't expect everyone to rip out Microsoft and put in a Linux desktop – at first." And Friedman also made the point that there were still classes of enterprise desktop users who wouldn't be able to swap Windows for Linux, even with the advances of SLED10. Despite all this work by Novell and others, Novell still doesn't think Linux is ready for every desktop.

Intriguingly, for an enterprise Linux day, Friedman spent most of his hour-long demo showing off most of the consumer-popular features of SLED10. While the new iPod-compatible, iTunes-like music player, the plug-and-play digital camera capabilities and the iPhoto-like photo organiser would certainly have pleased a crowd of Mac fans, the average CIO in the audience is likely to have remained unswayed.

However, there were a few nuggets in the demonstration for the enterprise user. The Spotlight/Google Desktop/WinFS-like search features in SLED10, which allow users to search for files by filename, metadata and content, threw them a bone – especially now WinFS has been rolled out of Vista altogether. The polished interfaces to the user-profile lockdowns would certainly have interested those fed up with users messing with settings, although given Microsoft's similar Zero Administration policy (don't let the users do anything and you won't have to do any administration) never got much traction, this may turn out as a non-starter, too.

Importantly, OpenOffice.org is starting to look a lot more like a viable alternative to Microsoft Office for the average enterprise user, particularly thanks to the native support for VBA macros. Friedman's promise that if anyone comes across a file OpenOffice can't cope with, Novell will

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general manager for Western Region, EMEA, as he opened the day to a packed auditorium. "We want to show you we have a commitment to open source and open standards." And that, in one, was the reason for the event – to persuade the assembled customers that Novell is once again a force in the enterprise, thanks to Linux and open source.

At least, so it would seem at first. But as one after another executive came out to speak at the enterprise open day, it was clear no one was entirely sure what the strategy was – other than to talk about the World Cup and how as Americans, they really just didn't get it like we Europeans, and yes they were trying really, really hard to get into it.

Was it to extol the virtues of Linux? Well, yes. But, no as well. Despite having a three-foot tall Tux on the stage in front of him, Papayianni was

use it – or at least for regular enterprise users to use it. SLED 10 does at least look like it could be the first Linux desktop that could really have a stab at Windows' dominance. While it would be relatively easy to take a cheap shot and say that finally Linux's desktop developers have stopped stealing their ideas from Windows, in favour of stealing their ideas from OS X, it's clear that Novell's extended usability testing has resulted in an aesthetic and an interface that's very similar to Apple's. In fact, it still embodies many of the important features of the Linux desktop as it is today, such as multiple desktops and extreme configurability, while taking on board much of Apple's user-friendliness.

But while Apple's Steve Jobs could mesmerise an audience into believing that OS X's interface was just so much better than that of Windows, Novell's pitch was far less confident – although

update OpenOffice to fix it in just a couple of days may have seemed like a good idea to Novell. But it undoubtedly would have highlighted potential compatibility nightmares in the mind of the average CIO in the audience – the last thing they need is 10,000 users ringing up support lines, asking why their files don't work properly, only for them to be told they'll have to wait at least a couple of days to get the software upgrade that will allow them to do their work. There's a reason why most organisations tend to upgrade Office all in one go, rather than piecemeal, and that's to reduce management difficulties such as this, since even two versions of Microsoft Office can have compatibility problems.

Until OpenOffice.org can offer 100% compatibility with Office formats, Linux on the desktop is going to have difficulties making inroads in many organisations. Pointing out this flaw in OpenOffice.org shows just how far Novell has to go before it can convincingly claim to know what the enterprise really wants these days.

SUSE ON THE SERVER

So it was fortunate perhaps that much of the focus of the day was on more comfortable enterprise territory: Linux on the server. SuSE Linux Enterprise Server (SLES) 10's inviting enterprise features, such as its "iSCSI in a box", Novell AppArmor application security system

and ZenWorks management system, got a somewhat short summary since the main theme of the day was the greatness of virtualisation. For organisations worried about how much of their servers' capabilities are being used and how many servers they can fit in their data centres, virtualisation is an important potential technology since it allows more resources to be used and redeployed easily.

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For the hardware side of virtualisation, "Scott" from Intel spoke about how its chipsets would help virtualisation in future: in other words, doing the typical Intel thing of mentioning how great Intel and its technology is without really mentioning how its partner company manages to fit in with this vision.

On the software side, senior Oracle director Dave Pearson came out to explain how Oracle loves Linux and how Oracle loves virtualisation. He made important points about server utilisation rates, and did the typical Oracle thing of talking about how great Oracle is without really mentioning how its partner company manages to fit in with this vision.

So it was left to Novell to explain SLES10's built-in tools for handling the bundled Xen virtualisation system with an impressive demo that showed the automatic clustering failover of virtualised servers using the Xen technology.

It was Jeff Jaffe, Novell's CTO, who spelled out Novell's strategy for the enterprise: "to become one of the infrastructure companies that really matter to IT". Despite all the boasts

about the number of downloads of OpenSUSE making it the "number one Linux distribution", it was this modest aspiration that really summarised Novell. Still bruised, demoralised and unsure of itself after its encounters with Microsoft during the 90s, Novell is slowly trying to convince itself and others of its return to enterprise-viability, while not being entirely sure how to do this.

Linux will be penetrating even further into the enterprise in future, and Novell's impressive technology will certainly be taking it there. But at what speed, in what areas and, given the nature of open source, under the aegis of which companies, is very much up to Novell.

Chris Papayianni at Novell's Enterprise Day. Source: photo.co.uk

