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IBM will "wait and see" on desktop Linux

By Mary Lisbeth D'Amico

HANNOVER, GERMANY -- IBM executives today reiterated their support for the Linux operating system in the server market but said the company is taking a "wait-and-see" attitude when it comes to pushing Linux-based desktop applications.

"We see Linux as a server phenomena right now more than as a desktop phenomena," said Tony Occleshaw, IBM's software strategist for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, here at the CeBIT trade show. Although IBM isn't currently planning to take Linux into a new market segment, it will frequently revisit the issue as the industry sector develops, he said.

The limiting factor for Linux breaking into desktop area right now is simply the lack of available applications written for the operating system, Occleshaw said.

It is technically possible to install Linux on an IBM ThinkPad -- something that visitors to IBM's stand at CeBIT can see, said Christian Hildebrandt, head of IBM's PC group in Germany. But there are just not enough applications to make it worthwhile, Hildebrandt added.

Web servers are one of the most-popular uses for Linux right now, Occleshaw said. But users tend to deploy Linux for smaller, simpler tasks rather than for huge enterprise-scale transactions, he said.

"No one runs large, million-hits-per-day Web sites on Linux," Occleshaw said, adding that IBM would still recommend its AIX Unix-based server to customers that wanted to run large, serious enterprise applications.

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Currently, roughly one in six Intel Corp.-based servers is deployed with Linux, Occleshaw said, citing figures from International Data Corp. Interestingly for the European market, Linux is the No. 1 operating system used for Web sites, according to the statistics he cited.

Earlier this month, IBM made a major commitment to Linux, announcing it would work with all four major Linux distributors (Red Hat Software Inc., Caldera Systems Inc, Pacific HiTech Inc. and S.u.S.E Holding AG) on joint marketing, development, training and support initiatives. IBM also said it would release Linux-based products, including WebSphere applications servers, a Linux version of IBM Host On-Demand (a Java-based emulator used to access data and applications via a Web browser) and IBM's DB2 database.

Toward the latter part of the second quarter, IBM will introduce support for Linux on its Netfinity 3000, 5000, and 5500 servers, as well as for its RS/6000 line of high-end servers, IBM officials specified today. IBM will also next month start offering Netfinity servers preconfigured with Linux.

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