

Ubuntu is an interesting, fun alternative OS



John Deans

Twenty-four years ago, my then-boss at J.S. Nolen came in to my office and told me they were sending me to a class to learn a new computer operating system (OS) called Unix. This new OS ran on most every computer system large and small revolutionizing the computer industry.

Back then it was fast, terse, and all command line driven. It had a text editor called "vi" and you had to toggle between the display and command mode. All the OS commands were very short and had numerous options to them. For example to rename a file you would use the command "rn oldname newname."

The beauty about Unix is that it provided a universal command set and common operating system that could run mainframes and workstations of the day manufactured by IBM, Convex, Cray, VAX, Apollo or numerous others. This single OS running on all hardware platforms enabled programmers and system managers like me to quickly sit down at any of those various computer systems and become immediately productive.

A quarter of a century later Unix is still going strong, run-

ning on the vast majority of all the Web servers that house the millions of Web sites we view. The version of Unix that runs those servers is called Red Hat which is not only fast and secure but also very affordable compared to the stiff cost of its

competitor Microsoft Windows Server 2008.

Another group of Unix versions that has also blossomed over the years is called Linux. One specific version of Linux that is dominating workstation installations is called Ubuntu. The name comes from the Zulu word "ubuntu," loosely translated as "humanity" or "a person is a person only through other people."

Claiming 30 percent of the Linux desktop installations, Ubuntu is available at no charge and it spreading like wildfire due to its easy of installation and rich features. Another major Ubuntu incentive is it being open source meaning the general public can alter it and make their own improvements and customization.

I recently began using Ubuntu as the base operating system for my security penetration plat-

form. The Ubuntu OS supports the security testing software called Nessus which I have been utilizing for years now to basically hack into networks and secured computer systems.

Hang on don't freak out, I am what is called a "white hat" or "ethical hacker" who is legally contracted out to test the security of computer networks like power companies and even banks. Over the years I have been screened, background checked, finger printed, and on file with the FBI as a security specialist.

Six years ago I was paid a tidy sum to hack into the power grid of an electrical company (not Bluebonnet) and was able to tap into it from the Internet rather quickly. In fact during the presentation of my security audit findings I handed my Treo smartphone around to the directors displaying the prompt to their primary Cisco router on the screen.

All I would have had to do was type in 'reset' and their whole network would have crashed.

After gasping they thanked me and then had me layout plans for tightening their net-

work security. Over the years I have used Unix based hacking tools to test security at banks which is one of my more enjoyable service offerings. It is nice to get paid to legally break into banks.

The free Ubuntu operation system can be downloaded and burned onto a single CDROM from the site www.Ubuntu.com. After creating the disk you can boot from it on any personal computer. It will prompt you to either test drive the OS or perform the installation on the hard drive.

What I have done is to purchase a spare hard drive and replace the one with Microsoft Windows installed. This way I can still bail back to Windows after the need for Ubuntu has passed.

The installation is very simple after you are asked a few questions and after about a half an hour the setup is complete enabling you to run the Ubuntu UNIX OS on the personal computer. It has a nice graphical user interface with numerous applications preloaded to address the majority of your computing needs.

To surf the Web it has Mozilla

Firefox embedded so you can immediately start browsing the Internet safe from spyware due to the resiliency of Firefox's Web browser. There is also an e-mail tool called Evolution that also has an address book for your contacts and a calendar module for your appointments.

One big capability built into Ubuntu is that it comes pre-configured with Open Office to provide word processing, spreadsheets and presentation authoring. We discussed Open Office in this column three years ago and it has just gotten more popular and better since then.

Remember that Open Office can read and write the exact format of Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint. This means you can create Word .doc files, Excel .xls files and PowerPoint .ppt files via Open Office running on the Ubuntu OS.

You may be wondering when or why you would ever want to use Ubuntu on a computer of yours but let me give you a scenario. There have been many times I have seen older computers that have had their hard drive crash and we did not rebuild it due to not having the old

Windows or Office CDROMs available.

So instead of trashing the computer, I have booted from the Ubuntu CDROM and installed the OS and included applications to give life back to an old computer.

We recently did this a another client of mine who was give some old Pentium III PCs that had their hard drives erased due to security concerns.

Since those computer were way too old to spend hundreds of dollars on Windows and Office it make perfect sense just to load Ubuntu upon them within 30 minutes to have a free and functional computer ready to use.

Bottom line: The African son of Unix named Ubuntu is an interesting and fun alternative operating system to Microsoft Windows so keep it in mind before you throw out that old computer.

Next week's column: Dual screens.

John Deans of DeansConsulting.com is a Brenham area computer networking consultant who can be reached at 289-2233 or John@DeansConsulting.com for questions and comments.