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Microsoft did its best to usher in a new era of desktop computing with the launch of Windows 8, but many businesses and individuals are opting out. Linux-based operating systems, meanwhile, present an increasingly compelling alternative. Benefits include tougher security and superior customization—not to mention that Linux is usually free. If you're ready to make the leap to desktop Linux, this guide will show you where to begin and how to choose the right OS and software for your small business. With advice on everything from choosing your Linux distribution and desktop software to easing the transition, we'll help you get started on the right foot. How to choose Linux for your desktop

Flickr: tshk2The Linux experience is far from dry. Here's one Gentoo Linux desktop. There are numerous flavors, or "distributions," of Linux, each offering a distinct experience for a particular taste or purpose. All are based on the Linux kernel, which is its core OS code. On top of that kernel, distributions may add different desktop environments, applications, and features. Ubuntu and Linux Mint are two of the more popular contenders. But a quick glance at DistroWatch, which keeps tabs on most distributions, shows just how vast the pool of choices is. Most distros, as they're called, are easily customizable, whether with industry-specific apps and modules or varied graphical interfaces. That said, the more your base Linux package delivers what you want, the less time you'll spend tweaking it. How do you pick the right distro? An online chooser such as this one is a good place to start. For a more complete consideration, break down the decision in terms of what you have and what you need. On the "what you have" side, there are three primary considerations for business users: the niche you're in, the hardware you're using, and the Linux skills your staff has. Mint is a popular flavor of Linux with a friendly-looking desktop. Your niche: Some Linux distributions focus very narrowly on particular industries. Scientific Linux is produced by Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory and the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). Another niche example is EduBuntu, a variation of Canonical's Ubuntu Linux tailored for classrooms and schools. Your hardware: As touchscreen features are being incorporated within OSs, such as Windows 8 and Ubuntu Linux, your hardware can make a big difference. Linux has always been an excellent choice for less-than-cutting-edge hardware. If your PCs are resource-limited, then consider a lightweight distro such as Puppy Linux, Xubuntu, Lubuntu, Bodhi, or Damn Small Linux. Your skills: Have you or your employees ever used Linux before? If not, choose a distribution that's friendly for beginners, such as Ubuntu, Linux Mint, PCLinuxOS, Zorin OS, or the new Linux Lite. Distributions like Gentoo and Slackware, on the other hand, are probably best for users with more experience. Numerous distros fall somewhere in between. With so many varieties out there, how can you choose the best OS?As for the "what you need" side of the equation, there are three key considerations: application support, mobile support, and user support—i.e., employee hand-holding. Must-have software: Is there software your business just can't do without, such as Microsoft Office? For most, an excellent open-source equivalent is probably already available in the Linux world's equivalent of an app store, for nearly any distro. Just in case, though, check the offerings before you pick a distro. OSalt lists open-source alternatives to popular proprietary software. If you can't locate what you want, find out if the proprietary app you rely on has already been made to run on the Linux flavor you're considering. You can even run Windows apps on Linux with help from Wine or CrossOver Linux. Mobile support: If your business relies heavily on mobile devices, pick a distro and apps that play well with them, which generally means one of the bigger names. The Ubuntu One cloud storage offering for Ubuntu Linux, for instance, offers clients for both Android and iOS. In the realm of desktop applications, GnuCash offers an Android app, while LibreOffice offers one that enables remote presentations. User support: How much hand-holding would you like for the Linux transition? The majority of the big Linux distributions offer paid support. For your small or medium-size business, however, it depends on the skills you have in-house, and how much effort you can expend to resolve issues that might come up. Virtually every Linux distro has an active online community of developers and users, so check out the forums for a sense of the kind of help they offer. Finally, before committing to a desktop Linux distro, take a commitment-free test-drive, such as via Live CD or Live USB. That way, even if you decide against the OS, you'll have lost nothing. If you love it, however, then go ahead and install. Next page: Explore your OS, and pick the best software... Ubuntu Linux's app store invites you to explore. So you've found and installed a Linux distribution you like. What now? Play around on the desktop to make it comfortable. Set your preferences, choose wallpaper, and check out the preloaded apps. Most every Linux distro comes with a default desktop environment, which determines the look and feel of pretty much everything you see. Most offer alternative options as well. If you don't like your default look and feel, you can swap in numerous others. The mobile-inspired GNOME 3 is the default desktop in many of the bigger Linux distros, including Fedora, while Unity (also mobile-inspired) is what you get in Ubuntu. A growing number of newer distros, including SolusOS and Pubuntu, display more classic default desktops based on the style of GNOME 2. If you dislike your default desktop, check out the alternatives. KDE and Enlightenment (E17) are generally considered the most visually appealing desktops, while Xfce and LXDE are minimal and lightweight. This Wikipedia page offers a nice glimpse. Keep in mind that the more similar your distro is to the OS you and your staff have been using, the shorter your learning curve will be. Get the apps you need GIMP/GIMP can replace Photoshop. There's no need to waste time searching the Web to find software. Instead, software for Linux is available in what's known as the software repository, similar to an app store. For Ubuntu Linux, that's the Ubuntu Software Center; but for the most part, each distro has its own equivalent (to find it, look in the administrative menu of your OS). Typically, software there is vetted, reviewed, and safe to download. A tool called the package manager lets you find and download software from the repository. If you're looking for an equivalent to a big-brand, commercial application, OSalt is a good place to start. Wikipedia has a nice list as well. You'll find user reviews for most of the following apps in the Ubuntu Software Center. For other distros, try Gizmo's Freeware site as well as OSalt. The following popular, free, and open-source business applications will often already come bundled with your Linux distro: LibreOffice includes free alternatives to Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Office productivity: LibreOffice is the most widely used open-source option. However, OpenOffice, Calligra Office, and the non-open-source, online-only Google Apps each have their own advantages. Accounting: Though not open source, QuickBooks is often held up as a reason for not switching to Linux. Its availability in browser-based form removes that obstacle. Also available is the free and open-source GnuCash. GnuCash can do most of what QuickBooks does. Database Management: MariaDB, Eclipse BIRT, and Actuate. A 2010 Forrester report compares these and other options. Web browser: Firefox and Chrome are the two biggest options for Linux users. Firefox integrates nicely with Thunderbird for email, but the choice between the two mostly comes down to a matter of personal preference. Email and shared calendars: Mozilla Thunderbird is probably the most widely used desktop email client, while Gmail and Google Apps for Business online are also good. Graphics: GIMP is the default graphics package included by nearly every distro, and it's excellent. Desktop publishing: Scribus offers a user-friendly interface, along with support for professional publishing features such as color separations, CMYK and spot colors, ICC color management, and versatile PDF creation. Backup: Amanda and Bacula are good open-source backup options, but Amanda tends to be viewed as more mature. Amanda Enterprise offers extra business-focused features. Remote desktop access: To access a user's PC from afar, rdesktop, RealVNC, and FreeNX are popular options. Next page: Arrange training and support... If Linux is running your business, consider investing in a course. Today's Linux distributions are a far cry from what they once were in terms of mainstream usability. The more popular ones, such as Ubuntu and Mint, are at least on a par with their Microsoft and Apple OS competitors. A little training can go a long way, however, particularly for users intimidated by something new. If you've already signed on for a commercial Linux distribution with paid support from the likes of Red Hat or Canonical, you're probably already covered—or at least you likely have professional training available to you as an extra. Even if not, though, legions of Linux consultants are out there, as well as national and global firms such as New Horizons and the Linux Foundation itself. Online training options abound as well. Ease the transition Plenty of IT pros specialize in Linux. You've chosen your Linux distro, customized the desktop, downloaded apps, and gotten the training you and your staff need. You're ready to pull the plug on Windows, right? Not quite yet. Before you do that, take these few key steps. First, if your switch to Linux means using different software than what your employees have been used to—Firefox, say, instead of Internet Explorer, get them started on that application while they're still on Windows. Once they start using the new Linux setup, that piece will be more familiar. It's also a good idea to have a dedicated desktop PC available in the office with your new Linux setup running ahead of time. Let staff play around with it before they have to get real work done using the new tools. Finally, there's no shame in coming up with a cheat sheet to help people remember key steps they need to get their work done. Get support Want free, live tech advice? Try a Linux user group nearby. Given how easy to use Linux has become, there's a good chance you won't need any support for a long time, particularly if you have some books to guide you. If and when the moment comes that you really need some outside help, however, you have several options. Free: First and foremost, every major distro has an online community with excellent forums. It's safe to say there's someone out there with experience on any common issue you may encounter. Beyond just the distro-specific forums, however, are a range of sub-communities. LinuxQuestions.org, for instance, offers discussions catered toward Linux newcomers, Linux in the enterprise, and more. Regional Linux User Groups (LUGs) offer another way to connect. Then, of course, a Web search can pull up answers. For a price: If you must have someone to speak to when problems arise, paid support is offered by most of the big distros, including Red Hat and Ubuntu, either included or as an extra. Pay-as-you-go support plans are increasingly common as well. Then, too, there are legions of consultants. Start by searching for "Linux support" in your area. Finally, if you're already paying a systems integrator or consultant for services in another aspect of computing, don't be afraid to ask them the occasional Linux question. Next page: Running the company? Here's what you need for the server side... Security Boot up with Lightweight Portable Security without any malware risk. It's widely acknowledged that Linux is more secure than the Windows and Mac platforms, thanks in large part to its relatively diverse nature and the way permissions are assigned. As a result, Linux users typically don't use antivirus software. However, no system is impermeable, and another step will help boost that security level even more. Namely, you can make your users' machines "thin" clients rather than "fat" ones running all their own, stand-alone software and applications. A thin client is a computer that depends on a remote server for processing, so the only thing the local machine does itself is display the results as a graphical presentation. This process is typically enabled by the open-source Linux Terminal Server Project (LTSP). The user's thin machine can't be infected by a virus. Plus, to a business, having data and applications secured on a central server is important and at times mandatory, in addition to the server being in a secure location. Also worth mentioning is that a number of distros put a particular emphasis on security, including Lightweight Portable Security (LPS). How to choose Linux for your server Red Hat is popular for Linux servers. If your office already has existing Windows Active Directory (AD) domain servers, your Linux server will have to be able to join the Active Directory domain and be visible across the network. Correspondingly, client Linux workstations must be able to join any existing Windows Active Directory domain using client tools such as Likewise (now PowerBroker Open). Most popular Linux servers being deployed today use distros including Debian, CentOS, Ubuntu, and Red Hat. Red Hat and Ubuntu both provide subscription-based support, good for specialized technical help. Smaller shops may opt to use CentOS, a Red Hat clone, or they may simply use Ubuntu Server without any contract support and rely on their IT pro's expertise. Ubuntu Server is perhaps the easiest to deploy. In its Long Term Support (LTS version 12.04) configuration, the OS does not receive any major upgrades during that period. Instead, to ensure minimal service interruptions, it receives only feature backports, bug fixes, and security-related updates. Ubuntu Server's hardware requirements are conservative, with both 32- and 64-bit editions. Out of the box, its security-hardened configuration makes it ideal for setting up public (DMZ) edge servers accessible by the Internet at large. Both Red Hat and Canonical do an excellent job with documentation, and the level of subscription support you need, if any, will be your other most important consideration. Larger organizations running enterprise-grade applications often choose subscription-based phone support to keep up with the growing demands of the application and underlying platform architecture. Finally, one additional key consideration is whether to deploy the server infrastructure in-house or in the cloud. If your risk-management process determines that storing data off-site is acceptable, then preprovisioned deployment in the cloud is an excellent opportunity to enjoy significant functionality at pennies per hour in operating expense. Whichever way you decide, however, be mindful of whether the distro you're looking at can support you for a minimum of five years. That alone could narrow down the number of distros to a handful of candidates. Best server tools Manage bug tickets with OTRS Systems administrators need the right tools on the server side. Sometimes all it takes is a login via secure shell to make a configuration file tweak, restart a daemon service, or install a needed patch update. Other times, it takes something more. Most servers should be configured to receive updates manually. This will allow a "change management" process to guide by approval when any update should occur, and to ensure that clear documentation and an audit trail are maintained. In the event of a system failure, for example, change management can help you find the root cause. For special needs, each systems administrator will inevitably use one or more of these server tools, typically found within your distro's trusted software repository. OTRS ticket management/change management software Redmine integrated project management Git or Subversion version control software WireShark, network packet sniffing diagnostic tool Preinstalled command-line tools: bash, ftp, Perl, awk, sed, secure shell (ssh), screen, cron, rsync, Nmap, Netcat, ping, traceroute, nslookup, and whois dd, tar, rsync, rsnaphot, Duplicity, Amazon S3, and ElephantDrive for offline or off-site backup archival KVM Kernel-based Virtual Machine (included free on Linux) Webmin browser-based system-admin interface Squid proxy/caching system Clonezilla, disk imaging system Observium, Nagios, or Zabbix network monitor tools Plone, WordPress, or Joomla content management systems Samba file server and/or Windows Active Directory (AD) primary domain controller PowerBroker Open (formerly known as Likewise Open) or Centrify Express for joining Linux client workstations to a Windows AD domain. Help understanding the differences can be found on the Centrify site. Common Unix Printing System (CUPS) for printing Next page: A reading list for those truly committed... Community forums are always a great place to absorb wisdom about Linux, of course, but so, too, are the many books on the topic. These titles are worth checking out. Share your experience Now your small business is up and running on Linux, and you're free of the malware scares and the upgrade treadmill that plague the proprietary-OS world. You've finally attained software freedom. Was it worth it? Do you wish you'd done anything differently along the way? What tips can you pass along to the business users who come along next? Share your newfound wisdom. After all, that's why the community approach works so well in the Linux world.

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