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# Linux For The Desktop: It's A Contender

**For now, Linux PCs are mostly limited by a lack of software**

Business and governments are starting to show a real interest in expanding their use of Linux operating system software from servers to employees' desktops. It had been a while since I tried out desktop versions of Linux, and the time seems ripe for a fresh look. The conclusion: While Linux isn't for everyone, it has come a long, long way.

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The underlying Linux software, the product of hundreds of programmers working cooperatively, has always been solid. The weakness has been in the user interface -- the windows, menus, icons, and other pieces that you see and interact with. Unlike Windows or Macintosh, there is no such thing as a standard Linux interface, and I had been unimpressed by the choices available.

This is starting to change. Java Desktop System (introductory price of \$50 per user per year) from Sun Microsystems ([SUNW](#)) is the slickest implementation I've seen. It's intended for professional setup -- installing a printer, for example, is not for the faint of heart. So home users might want

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to think twice, even three times, before trying this out. But once installed, the Java Desktop mostly succeeds as an imitation of Windows, from a "Launch" menu in the lower left corner of the screen, to desktop icons for "Network Places," "Documents," and "This Computer." As in Windows, only an advanced user will ever have to confront the command line. Java Desktop is not as polished as Windows or Mac OS X, but it comes pretty close.

**APPLICATIONS HAVE BEEN A WEAK POINT** for Linux PCs, and Java Desktop goes some way to alleviate that. It bundles in Sun's StarOffice 7, which includes a word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation program compatible with Microsoft Word ([MSFT](#)), Excel, and PowerPoint. It doesn't have all the bells and whistles of Microsoft Office, but it's more than good enough for most users. StarOffice had little trouble handling even relatively complex Office files. Java Desktop also includes Novell's Evolution e-mail program and a Mozilla Web browser, both solid applications that will be familiar to anyone who has used Netscape browsers and mail programs.

One of the challenges facing corporate use of Linux is making it work with Exchange, Microsoft's e-mail and scheduling system. Novell's [NOVL](#) ) Ximian Connector for Exchange, a \$69 add-on for Evolution, brings most features of Exchange to Linux. But here's where not having a Microsoft to enforce uniformity hurts: The Exchange Connector works on several flavors of Unix, but not with Java Desktop.


Of course, there are a lot of people who shouldn't even consider Linux. The primary reason to avoid it is the need for software, whether a custom corporate application or a commercial program that exists only for Windows. From Adobe ([ADBE](#)) Photoshop to Apple ([AAPL](#)) iTunes, you're out of luck. And even when a Linux version exists, such as Real Player, installation is a complicated, slightly scary business -- and RealNetworks ([RNWK](#)) disavows support of the product.

Corporations, which are looking to Linux PCs to reduce costs and simplify administration, usually restrict it to settings where the software is limited. The most popular uses are in call centers and other transaction-processing operations, where employees will often run just one application.

If you want to give Linux a fling, it's easy enough. You can buy a copy of Java Desktop from Sun ([sun.com/software/javadesktopsystem](http://sun.com/software/javadesktopsystem)) and install it on an old PC -- Linux will run happily on systems too slow for Windows. Or you can buy a preconfigured CPUBuilders or Lindows PC, with a less polished user interface than Java Desktop, for less than \$300. You'll get a system that will probably strike you as not quite ready for prime time. But it won't take much improvement to become a real threat to Microsoft's dominance of the desktop.

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By [Stephen H. Wildstrom](#)

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