

Selecting a distribution is a personal decision

Distribution of Choice

maddog explains what's behind his use of particular Linux distributions. *By Jon "maddog" Hall*

Every time I have been asked, "Which distribution do you use?" I have given a truthful answer: "I use whatever distribution my customers use. It depends on the situation." Typically, that answer is sufficient, but recently someone asked: "Who are your customers? Why is it dependent on customers? There are many 'Linux' (sic) distributions, like Debian, Ubuntu, Fedora, etc. Anyone can choose what he likes."

So, in this column, I'll explain why, over the past 20 years, I've hesitated to tell people which distribution I use. First of all, I typically take no "honorariums" for the presentations that I make. I earn my money through writing and consulting. As a consultant, I sometimes do work for various companies, such as Red Hat Software. So, Red Hat is my customer. I think it would be fairly insulting to my customer if I showed up at Red Hat with Ubuntu on my laptop, even though I know from experience that the people at Red Hat would not say anything about it.

More importantly, the work that I do for Red Hat might be less useful if I developed it in a different environment from what Red Hat's customers typically use. If I were developing a solution that required a different media player from the one

Red Hat normally delivers or a different codec from the one Red Hat recommends, this would create a needless incompatibility in the solution.

If you are working in a large company, that company may dictate the distribution of Linux you use – not only the distribution, but the desktop, window manager, office package, and a lot of other things. Companies

do this so they can have consistency across all their employees for ease of systems administration and security issues.

Thus, the "end user" does not always have as much choice as people think. Yet, people ask me what distribution I use on my lap-

top from day to day. The answer is: I use a lot of them. Over the years, I have used Yggdrasil, Slackware, Red Hat, PHATLinux (hello, Cameron!), SUSE, Ubuntu, Mint, Knoppix, Debian, and some others that most people would not recognize. And, that does not include the hundreds more that I have put on virtual machines or installed on various hardware in my house just to see what they were like. The distributions I named above are ones that stayed a significant amount of time on my "main machines."

From time to time, I change distributions to test out new features, interfaces, etc. To me, it makes little difference which one I use and, therefore, should make even less difference to you. I can say that there are some distributions I used for a very short period of time. They were typically unstable, short-lived distributions, usually done by people who brought little or nothing to the table of the GNU/Linux community other than creating "yet another distribution" that had their name or stamp on it.

In the past, I have told a distribution producer to their face that they should "get out of the distribution business" because their time and resources could be better spent in making another more useful distribution stronger. Their ego and self-importance thwarted that recommendation (distribution vendor, you know who you are) to their eventual shame.

I do not answer the question "What do you use on your laptop?" because the real question people are asking is: "What should I be using on my laptop?" And, the real (and truthful) answer is, "I do not know."

I do not know, because I do not know you. Typically, the people asking do not want to take the time for me to know them or their needs. People who do want me to really know them typically pay me money in consulting fees to help them discover their (or their company's) real needs. Then, I can help them. Other people usually just want a quick answer so they won't have to invest time and effort to figure out the answer for themselves, and I refuse to play that game.

I have lost a lot of income over the years because I have tried to stay independent of distributions because of my particular role in the Linux community. I could have become an "evangelist" for one distribution or another, and I might even have enjoyed it (I certainly would have enjoyed a more even distribution of income), but it would not have been fair to all the other distributions that were struggling to be seen. This is why I tell people to try several distributions to find out which one is best for them. ■■■

