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Sun to Open Source Solaris, Again!

In the past day or two, a Sun executive announced again Sun's intent to open source the Solaris operating system. This is not the first time that this topic has been recently aired. I also heard this from a couple of Sun executives at the Sun analyst summit in San Francisco in February 2004. In January 2000, Sun began publicly speaking about making Solaris 8 source code available to developers/users. At that time, Sun decided to distribute source code over the Internet or on CD. Developers/hardware vendors that used the code to commercially distribute their solutions would pay Sun royalties and license fees. In December 2002, more public statements were made about Sun possibly open sourcing Solaris/x86, but it was mostly a discussion topic. Now that the popularity of Solaris/x86 is growing at a more rapid pace than in the past, Sun is again contemplating open sourcing Solaris/x86.

In February 2004, I proposed that Sun should do some primary research prior to open sourcing Solaris/x86. I told them that they should do at least the following:

1. Assess customers' understanding of the business value that they can attain via open source Solaris/x86.
2. Determine the business value for Sun of open sourcing Solaris/x86.
3. Determine if there is a market need or market interest in open source Solaris/x86.
4. Determine how Sun's installed base would react to an open source Solaris/x86.
5. Determine if open source Solaris/x86 would broaden the deployment of Solaris.
6. Determine if there are enough users interested in open source Solaris/x86 for a sufficiently large community to be created.
7. Specify whether or not Sun would open source the whole of Solaris/x86. Can users compile their own working system? What about third party code that Sun does not own? Are negotiated agreements in place?

This research would allow Sun to more effectively address any deficiencies or risk factors that are obstacles to open sourcing Solaris/x86.

Some people still think that open source is a cool thing to do, but open sourcing an existing product or creating a new open source offering is not free. Sun might reduce its development costs for Solaris/x86, but it will have to spend money to manage the project. Sun should know this because it has experience with this with its Sun Grid Engine project.

My feeling is that few will care if Solaris/x86 is open sourced. Open source contributors are usually motivated by the prospect of working with software that solves important problems for them and others, as well as by the possibility of future gain via the provision of related services and products. For the open source community to enthusiastically work on the Solaris source code and collaborate with Sun to improve the software, they must have an interest in Solaris/x86. Today, I think that there will be little interest in enhancing Solaris because open source developers are focused on Linux and many other open source projects that benefit a much wider audience than just Sun and its Solaris/x86 users.

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