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A business built on open source, virtualization, and clouds

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ReadyTechs provides network support services for companies that don't want the expense of hiring and caring for their own employees. Now CEO Gerry Libertelli says the company is using Linux virtualization to open a new income stream based on cloud computing.

Libertelli says he catches his existing customers at the end-of-life stage in hardware maintenance to offer them more than just virtual server administration. "We intervene in the hardware stream and say, 'How about a virtual network?' And that is starting to ramp up."

ReadyTechs' cloud computing and virtual network offerings are based on Linux and Xen. "We fully embrace it," Libertelli says. He was an early participant in the Xen computing project, but as it grew, "we started to buy commercial suites like XenSource (now owned by Citrix) or VMware. But we always hated their licensing programs and the way they tried to limit growth. So we wound up back at Xen.org."

Libertelli says his customers don't mind the simplicity of a cloud based on a community project. "We pitch the idea that we're pragmatic, rather than the latest and greatest. We know how to operate a cloud really effectively by using tried and true tools, and one of them is Xen. We showcase that we're involved in the project. And they would much rather have their applications in a stable environment than a supercharged, always failing environment."

A history of success

Libertelli discovered Linux in the late '90s when he owned a large development company called G. Triad. That company helped launch some big sites, like toysrus.com, dowjonesuniversity.com, and smartmoney.com. "We were into ColdFusion, and J.J. Allaire adopted Linux early. We've developed on top of Linux ever since."

Libertelli calls himself "more of an entrepreneur" than strictly a technologist. "I find myself always gravitating to the GNU-type projects. They are the best way to develop venture-backed applications. With the amount of creativity coming out of the community, and the value right out of the box, you realize a real benefit by always using [FOSS]."

ReadyTechs doesn't just develop with open source, it uses it throughout the company. "The other day I was looking around the office and realized we use a lot of Linux applications. We're not Linux purists, but it seems that when we need an application, the Linux option just winds up working the best. Not because it's the best, but because we can touch it. We can modify it very easily and it ends up suiting us well.

"We didn't set out to build the company on Linux, but we wound up doing that because everything just fits. We use **Sugar** for our CRM, **Nagios** for monitoring, and **MRTG** for bandwidth monitoring. It all rolls up into a little desktop we wrote. The lack of licensing restrictions makes [using open source software] more flexible. For example, Citrix is killing XenSource by not allowing you to touch certain things. When

you're building clouds you have to touch stuff.

"We still have to use Exchange, but we're about to move over to an Exchange knockoff with a great feature set called Kerio."

Libertelli says he used to be apprehensive about the perceived lack of support with open source. "I was like any business owner. But we have to buy so many support contracts for clients, servers, hardware, and you start to realize they're not really interested in supporting you. It used to be Dell had this four-hour support contract and it was easy to get them to do the work. As time has gone on they have changed that. We went to Dell the other day and they wanted us to troubleshoot. You have to go through all the troubleshooting before they will dispatch a part. The more I see that the more I say I would rather rely on the community discussion boards. It's all right there and I can just get it, rather than having to social engineer my way through tier one support."

Libertelli says ReadyTechs gives back to the community in non-traditional ways. "We aren't writing code and contributing it back," he says. "But we do get to see the net effect of all the software as it is running on diverse systems, and we contribute back support. We keep an active wiki and dump chunks of it back into the community to help the discussion. Sugar rolled out a revision recently and we saw the broken parts within minutes. We let people know, and many people avoided upgrading to that release. We're not stellar code contributors, but we do play a role."

When it comes to launching a software development company, Libertelli says it pays to help your developers out by providing a good development framework for them. "The principal flexibility of open source is unlocked by being able to leverage many PHP or Java developers to produce your vision. You get a massive benefit when you have a prepared framework. It takes a lot of time and code to write something people have already coded over and over again. So marshal the efforts of programmers with frameworks and focus on the special sauce. Open source unlocks that ability.

"With a network company, the advantage of open source is even clearer. If you have a programmer, you can string together an entire systems desk by using open source connectors that work together, and that looks like a large network management company. The advantage is I get the same efficiency as a enterprise-grade product at much lower expense."

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