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Software Support
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Linux & Open Source Software Support

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GBdirect staff were providing open source support services long before the company ' s incorporation in 1995, and we ' ve been offering Linux support since we migrated our own infrastructure to Linux way back in 1998.

Until recently, however, most of our open source software support focused on applications or systems that we had a hand in designing, writing, building, installing or integrating, i.e. a relatively specialised, hand-crafted, service.

In response to customer demand and to the increasing maturity of the open source software market, we are now offering Linux support and open source software support in simpler, packaged, formats, i.e. our open source maintenance contracts are now what are known in the awful jargon of our times as ' support solutions ' .

As time allows, we will detail our range of open source support ' solutions ' on pages shown in the indented section of the left hand menu. In the meantime, this page will serve as a general introduction to our maintenance offerings; providing an outline of the major open source packages supported, the different forms of open source support available, models of delivery and basic cost structures.

Open Source Support & Linux Support Requires Real Experience

In fast developing technologies like Linux and open source, experience counts for even more than it does in older and

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Please note:

Non-training enquiries should be directed, initially, to our UK national office in Leeds (West Yorkshire), even if the enquiry concerns services delivered in London or South/East England. Clients in London and the South East will typically be handled by staff working in the London or Cambridge areas.

more mature markets. Recent converts to Linux and open source, however prestigious their name and reputation, are unlikely to have the depth of knowledge and experience to efficiently address the most common requirement for Linux and open source support, i.e. serious troubleshooting skills. This depth of experience is, however, precisely what long-term open source experts like GBdirect and its associates can provide.

For most companies information technology (IT/ICT) is simply a means to an end. Economic logic dictates that many will retain technical staff to meet routine day-to-day exigencies, but use external support to tackle those situations which are too occasional to justify the cost of retaining in-house experts, e.g. catastrophic failure, security threat, upgrade, extension/customisation, migration, or the like.

One of the principal reasons for the growth of open source software is its affinity with this business model. The big name open source packages (e.g. Apache, Bind and Sendmail) are typically robust, stable and infrastructural in nature. They are usually installed and configured just once, then run and run without interruption or maintenance until they are either retired or redirected towards new tasks and functions.

Most open source packages of this kind are written by and for experts, with the unfortunate side-effect that accessible documentation for new users (including the technically skilled users) can be hard to find. As a consequence, even experienced contractors can be hard-pushed to find a quick and lasting solution to open source problems if they lack deep knowledge of system internals and the familiarity to read and modify source code with confidence. The technical principles may be same as those on other systems, but the practice of maintenance can be rather different.

If you are considering an alternative supplier of Linux support or open source support, remember to ask them how much of their own business runs on open source, and how long they 've depended on it for their livelihoods. Every application in our company, bar one, has run on open source software since 1998. The accounts package 's days are numbered, unless Sage comes up with a Linux port fairly soon.

Channels of Linux Support & Open Source Software Support

One notable difference from the proprietary model of software support is that very few open source applications have a single commercial provider or distribution channel. In many cases, traditional proprietary methods of escalating support simply become redundant.

When a package author has no economic or legal obligation to his/her users, no amount of channel pressure may be enough to secure end-user driven changes from him/her. On the other hand, open source licencing permits skilled third parties, like GBdirect, to modify his/her packages in whichever way their clients see fit.

In effect, providers of open source support can completely short-circuit the escalation procedures of the traditional channel, delivering a fast one-stop shop solution. If a client needs an answer, a new feature, or a fix, we can get it straight from the author or we can simply provide it ourselves, without time consuming conditions, qualifications and referrals up the chain.

Another difference is that the modular, component-based, character of open source software multiplies the potential external dependencies in a package; requiring open source support companies to draw upon a wider range of skills and knowledge than traditional ‘ solutions providers ’ typically have to hand.

This is why the support company ’ s embeddedness in open source communities and ecosystems should matter to the end-user. Companies that have worked in this environment for years have networks of mutual support which are both wider and deeper than you are ever likely to find in a proprietary channel, i.e. in addition to being vertically integrated with their own suppliers and resellers, open source support companies are horizontally integrated with an entire community, including direct competitors. In effect, the end-user user ’ s support

contract with a single company like GBdirect allows that user to tap into the skills and knowledge of individuals inside dozens of other companies.

The economic paradox here is that open source support companies frequently help themselves by helping their competitors. By sharing skills, they enable one another to offer better and cheaper services than the mutually exclusive channels of the proprietary world.

GBdirect take this practice of co-operation for mutual competitive advantage to a further level. Not only do we consult experts in competitor companies, we also sell their expertise directly to our clients (even when we have similar in-house skills). This allows us to provide a quality, quantity, range and depth of open source software support which even some of consulting ‘ giants ’ would be hard-pushed to match.

Moreover, we can offer high quality service at competitive prices, because neither we nor our customers carry the full burden of risk typically associated with immature, fast changing, markets. If, for whatever reason, we or our partners should be pressed to meet a support obligation at a particular moment, our other associates are committed to pick-up the slack. In effect, by sharing a necessary minimum of spare capacity between us, we reduce the total amount required (and, hence, the cost to each of us of maintaining it).

Practical Linux Support & Open Source Software Support

Software support can mean a great many different things, indeed there are even international standards which identify dozens of different categories and service levels. In the real world, however, distinctions between factors like maintenance, customisation, integration, software development, etc. are hard to draw and none-too-relevant for the commercial goals of a business.

GBdirect ’ s recognises that support of one kind tends to overflow into another and organises it ’ s services accordingly.

Insofar as they are necessary at all, transitions between one level or type of GBdirect support and another are seamless.

With the exception of initial incident reporting, helpdesk support is typically provided by the same experienced software developers and system administrators who provide our remote and onsite intervention services. These technical experts really are as comfortable answering end-user queries as they are editing source code.

On the rare occasions that an issue extends beyond the first individual 's field of knowledge, it is automatically passed to an established expert in the domain, without the need for any formal escalation or referral. The same procedure applies whether the experts involved are GBdirect associates or members of the company 's permanent staff. Needless to say, more bureaucratically formal procedures are available to those who prefer them.

Although they can be structured in different ways, our charges simply reflect the amount of time taken by the relevant expert to address the problems covered by a support contract.

Types of Linux and Open Source Software Support

Our two broad categories of support are:

- Helpdesk advice and diagnostic research
- Direct intervention to diagnose and resolve problems

Most of our clients combine the two; relying on the helpdesk to deal with the vast majority of incidents, but retaining the option to invoke direct intervention in exceptional circumstances.

Linux & Open Source Support: Helpdesk

This form of open source software support is designed primarily for those who would expect their own technical staff to handle everyday problems, i.e. it backs-up and extends in-

house resources when they are approaching their limits.

For relatively simple, or standalone applications, helpdesk support may also be used to back-up comparatively unskilled (non-technical) staff with responsibility for software maintenance in smaller businesses.

Larger clients may provide the first line of helpdesk support themselves (e.g. sourcing it from a hardware supplier), using GBdirect ' s helpdesk to provide expert and guru level back-up.

We can, however, provide direct front line support for those who require it.

Helpdesk support is normally staffed within office hours, but 24x7 support can be arranged as appropriate.

Pricing usually involves a relatively modest annual fee based on the number, scale and type of software systems involved, plus charges for the exact amount of helpdesk time used in a given period. For accounting convenience, some customers prefer to pay a single consolidated charge for a fixed amount of annual helpdesk time (with higher rates for any excess). While this is usually the more expensive option, we are happy to provide quotes for either form of payment.

Linux & Open Source Support: Intervention

This form of open source support essentially involves GBdirect staff and associates directly monitoring, configuring or managing your software systems, rather than merely advising your own technical staff on the matter. Obviously, the extent of that intervention is an issue for mutual discussion and agreement. It is most commonly invoked to cover emergencies and one-off system changes.

Most clients will employ this form of support alongside a helpdesk service, rather as a complete alternative to it. Some will, however, simply opt for a fully managed service in which the helpdesk fulfills the residual function of logging incident reports.

Routine intervention is most commonly delivered through remote management software and secure shell access, but all contracts provide the option of invoking onsite support when these are impracticable or undesirable.

New customers often choose a low cost package which provides remote intervention during office hours within a single annual fee and charges for exceptional onsite support during working hours based on our standard consulting rates.

Larger companies may employ such support as a means of evaluating our performance on ‘ edge ’ services before purchasing it for other systems.

Intervention support (onsite or remote) can be provided out of office hours and for a single consolidated annual fee, subject to negotiation. As with helpdesk support, the single flat rate option is essentially for those who prefer predictability over the fine-grained savings that come with payment for exact work done.

The precise charges for intervention support vary (depending on the scale and complexity of the systems concerned), but are essentially proportional to the cost of staff time we actually devote to the it. Managed services are an obvious exception, where charges also reflect the cost of holding staff available for contingencies which may not actually occur

Applications & Services Covered by Open Source Support

The following list is far from exhaustive. It is mostly a list of the open source applications that our full-time staff have historically supported and maintained. There are many other OSS applications which we and our associates have some experience of maintaining, but which we have not listed (e.g. because they are either relatively immature, are subject to dramatic change, or of purely minority interest) . A number of newer cross platform and ‘ cross-over ’ applications, particularly those associated with the proprietary Java and .Net frameworks belong in this category.

If you have an open source application which needs support, and isn't on the following list, just get in touch. If it's not something our full-time staff specialise in, there's still a very good chance that it is covered by one or more of our associates.

Operating Systems

- Debian GNU/Linux
- Novell/SUSE Linux
- Red Hat Enterprise Linux
- Legacy Red Hat Linux and Fedora Core

Web servers and web applications:

- Apache web server
- Apache core modules, plus tomcat, mod_php, mod_perl, mod_rewrite, etc.
- Application Servers, JBoss, WebLogic
- Content Management Systems (CMS), APLAWS+, Bricolage, WebGUI, Zope, bespoke
- Browsers and browser-based applications, Mozilla, Firefox, Internet Explorer, XUL, JavaScript

Networking:

- Bind DNS — Domain Name Server
- Samba — SMB/CIFS Windows Networking
- NFS — Unix/Linux Network File System
- Firewalls — hardware and software

Identity and authentication:

- OpenLDAP, including integration with Active Directory and eDirectory
- SASL
- PAM
- NIS, NIS+

RDBMs database servers:

- MySQL
- PostgreSQL

Mail and Messaging:

- Sendmail, Postfix and Exim mail servers
- Cyrus IMAP mailbox management
- Mail User Agents / Clients (MUAs), Thunderbird, Kmail, Evolution
- SpamAssassin — Spam filter
- ClamAV — Anti-virus filter

Groupware, Calendaring and Teamwork

- SUSE OpenExchange Server
- Open Groupware
- Evolution, Mozilla Thunderbird, Mozilla Calendar clients

Help desk request tracking

- RT

Desktop and office productivity

- OpenOffice.org
- Thin clients, xterminals, Linux Terminal Server Project (LTSP)
- GNOME, KDE

Source code version control systems and IDEs

- CVS
- Subversion
- Eclipse
- Mono Develop (C# IDE)

Bespoke applications written in these programming languages:

- C
- C++
- Perl
- PHP
- Python
- Java