Linux Usability Test Report - Executive Summary (excerpt)

The report "Linux Usability Study" presents the results of a large-scale Usability Study which was conducted in Summer 2003 by the Berlin based relevantive AG.

The study deals with the question of how usable desktop applications are on Linux, with a strong focus on the usage in companies and public administrations. Due to the fact that there are no publicly available studies on this subject, the intention is to provide an additional basis for decision-makers who plan, intent or are in the process of migrating to Linux on desktop.

The study is built on a task based set of usability tests, where 60 test participants performed typical office tasks on a Linux system. A further group of 20 users performed the identical tasks on a Windows XP system. The participants had no prior experience with the tested systems.

The test system based on SuSE 8.2 and KDE 3.1.2 and was configured in close cooperation with basyskom, a Darmstadt based Linux consulting company. The configurations followed basic usability guidelines. All results and statements in this study are related to this preconfigured system.

Main results:

The usability of Linux as a desktop system has been experienced as nearly equal to Windows XP. The performance (time required to complete a task) was in average only little behind Windows XP. A couple of tasks were even easier and faster to solve on Linux, many applications were rated better by the participants than their equivalents on Windows XP.

The majority of the test participants enjoyed working with the Linux system and estimated that they need a maximum of one week to acquire their previous level of competence on this system. It is therefore to conclude that in the course of a migration to Linux a positive acceptance by the users / employees can be expected. It is the strong configurability of Linux / KDE that enables the design of a tailor-made system which is adapting to the requirements of the users in companies and public administrations.

The study also shows significant problems that are connected with Linux as a desktop system. This does mainly concern poor wording of programs and interfaces, partly missing clarity and structure of the desktop interface as well as the menus, and poor system feedback.

These problems are identified, documented by examples, and their consequences are analyzed with respect to the user performance and experience.

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