

ENTERPRISE DESKTOP

# Red Hat Desktop 3

And then there were four – **Andy Hudson** takes a look at the latest and perhaps most significant addition to the RHEL family.

**BUYER INFO**

Corporate desktop environment; also consider SUSE's Office Desktop or Sun's Java Desktop System.

- **SUPPLIER** Red Hat
- **WEB** www.redhat.com/
- **PRICE** See pricing box opposite

**R**ight in the middle of the year, halfway between Red Hat Enterprise Linux 3 and 4, Red Hat has released this: its new corporate desktop product. Despite withdrawing from the desktop market with the ending of the Red Hat Linux project and moving down very specific channels, the company has effectively done an about-turn to provide a robust desktop environment for corporate usage. Yes, that's right, this release is for companies only!

**Who does what?**

Before we plough into the actual desktop itself, it's best to explain the

configurations that are available. You can't buy or obtain the Red Hat Desktop by itself; instead you have to purchase it as part of one of three packs: the Proxy, Satellite and Extension packs.

Both the Proxy and Satellite configurations come complete with RHEL Advanced Server Premium Edition (reviewed back in LXF49) meaning that the only real difference between Proxy and Satellite is the amount of client licences that are bundled – Proxy has 10 and Satellite has 50. The Extension pack comes with an additional 50 licences to bolt onto the existing Proxy or Satellite installations, but you can use the Extension pack without AS. You can add as many Extension packs as you require, either onto an existing Proxy or Satellite installation.

What makes each bundle different is how it handles the Red Hat Network. The Proxy pack systems connect to the local AS, which then connects to the Red Hat network to download the necessary packages and distributes

them to the local system. Satellite offers more than this, effectively taking a mirror of the Red Hat Network onto the local AS machine and enabling it to act like a local Red Hat Network server for client updates and management. The advantages to this are obvious and make it a real time-saver for large scale deployments where there are hundreds of machines. Finally, if you have deployed the Extension pack, then updates will happen via each client machine using the hosted model, not through a central server on the network.

**Firing it up**

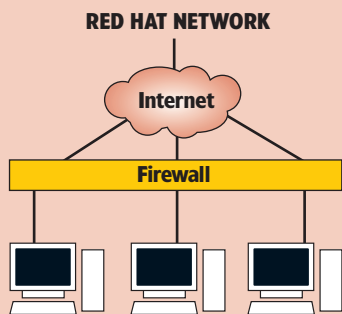
Back to the desktop itself! Continuing with RHEL's download availability, RHD3 is available for download as ISOs for burning. For the record, there are four binary ISO files and three source-code ISO files, as well as two further ISO files for documentation and RHD 'extras'. Thankfully the Red Hat Network servers are more than up to the task for downloads maintaining an almost

constant 115Kbps over a broadband connection. When you purchase RHD3 you do have the option to get branded CDs and printed documentation should you require it. Of course, being able to download the software when you need it is convenience in itself! After downloading and burning these to disc I set about installing the newest addition to the RHEL family.

The familiar *Anaconda* installer greeted us after we booted from the first CD. As long-time users of Red Hat products, there were no real surprises waiting in store as we made our way through the options. The end-user is never likely to see the installation program itself, which is a shame because *Anaconda* is of such high quality, not to mention its ease of use. It automatically gives you the basic desktop programs, and offers you the ability to further customise the package list should you wish to deprive your end-users of one of the many myriad of games. The Red Hat installer then kicks in with its usual

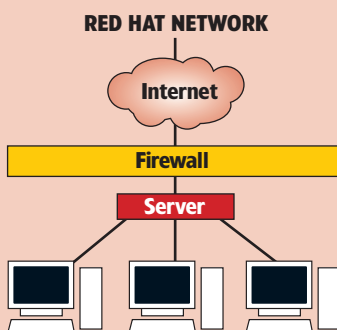
**RED HAT NETWORK**

Proxy, Satellite and Hosted models



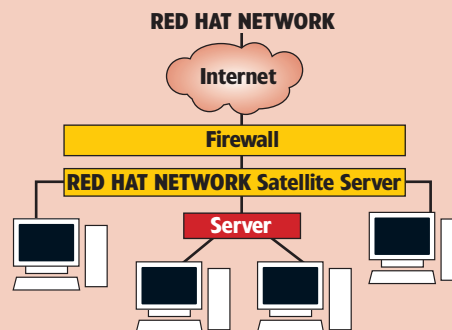
**Hosted model**

A customer's individual systems connect with RHN via the Internet and exchange packages and information from the central RHN servers. This solution is suited to those with limited RHEL deployments wanting to leverage the Red Hat Network infrastructure to store and manage their systems information, and do not require a solution for custom content.



**Proxy model**

Individual systems connect to a locally hosted (on the customer network) RHN Proxy, which aggregates all necessary data, performing selected tasks locally, and communicates via the Internet with the central RHN servers. Like the hosted model, all system information is stored in the hosted Red Hat data repository. The Proxy model is ideal for small organisations requiring a staging environment for custom or third-party content, and that want to cache content locally to provide for faster distribution to systems. As there is only a single connection over the Intranet, this model is more secure.



**Satellite model**

All RHN functionality is on the customer premises, allowing the greater functionality and customisation. The Satellite server connects with RHN over the public Internet only to download updates, and other methods are also available. This model allows customers to take their RHN solution completely off-line if desired.

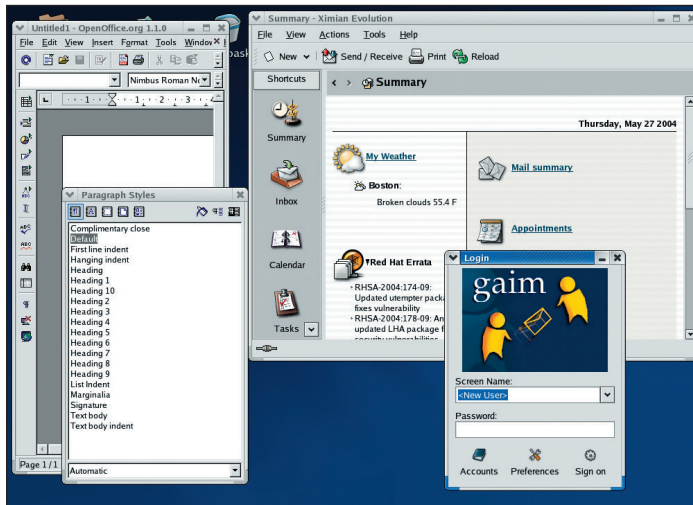
The Satellite model is the preferred architecture of enterprise customers with larger RHEL deployments that need enhanced functionality and for those with stringent security policies preferring to keep all of their systems data on the local network.

## PRICING INFORMATION

Annual Subscriptions

	Proxy	Satellite	Extension
<b>Red Hat Desktop 3</b>	\$2500	\$13,500	\$3500 (No AS)

Considering that Red Hat Enterprise Linux AS Premium can cost up to \$2998, you can see that Red Hat is really bringing value to the market. The actual cost per desktop based on the extension pack is \$70, significantly undercutting Java Desktop System from Sun Microsystems, which costs \$100.



The standard office desktop – Evolution still carries all the Red Hat errata details, which are unnecessary for a managed desktop such as this one.

panache, giving you a blow-by-blow account of total installation size, how much has been installed and how much time remains. The basic install is 1.8GB, so it didn't take long to set up – in fact, it took only 10 minutes.

After the inevitable reboot, the initial setup screen popped up asking for user details and Red Hat Network credentials. The necessary updates were then downloaded and applied with minimum fuss, with *update* updating itself before going off and giving us the option to retrieve several other package updates and bugfixes.

### The usual suspects

Being a branch of RHEL, there are no real surprises to find that the default window manager is GNOME. The usual applications are there in force – *Evolution 1.4*, *OpenOffice.org 1.1*, *Gaim* and *The GIMP*, as well as several other productivity tools. There aren't any major attempts to make the environment any more user-friendly, such as has been attempted in Java Desktop System, but there is a reassuring simplicity to the whole bundle. Having gotten used to the spatial browsing of GNOME 2.6, it was somewhat of a culture shock to revert

back to GNOME 2.2 and its single-window browsing. However, this means that the end-user and perhaps more importantly the IT guy is working with proven and stable technology rather than the cutting-edge. This reflects the intended deployment lifecycle of approximately 18 months between each release of RHEL; and while not quite as out of date as Debian, it certainly indicates that Red Hat is very serious about providing a proven and stable platform for enterprise usage. As with the other siblings in the RHEL family, RHD's kernel includes some features that are backported from kernel 2.6, mainly to provide scalability (not really necessary for a desktop-based system) and performance increases.

### Conversion

So, is this a desktop for the masses? The answer is "maybe." Compared to Java Desktop System's many intentional similarities to Windows, Red Hat Desktop just hasn't made a big enough effort to embrace the new users that it is clearly aimed at. Yes, the applications are there, but not much has been done to make it any easier to switch to. Perhaps a worthy addition to the Help system

would be a "Moving from Windows to Red Hat Desktop" section for users who have been moved. RHD3 is really just a stripped-down version of RHEL WorkStation, with the ability to run only on single processor machines. It is compatible with traditional x86 platforms, as well as AMD64 and the upcoming EM64T processors from Intel. You're not going to find any support for Sparc workstations here: but, considering the percentage of Sparcs in use by office workers, this isn't really a surprise! Red Hat has given the end-user the ability to utilise corporate systems based on IBM's *WebSphere* and BEA's *WebLogic*, not to mention a Citrix ICA client for connecting to thin-client networks. There is even a version of Adobe's ubiquitous *Acrobat Reader* software for document sharing. Native compatibility with core enterprise systems is essential for the continued take up of Linux in the business world and it is good to see this level of support built in. For those all-important coffee breaks, the *Flash* plugin and *RealPlayer* are provided, should you be able to tear yourself away from work for a moment of entertainment.

### Who you gonna call?

Red Hat, as expected, provides an extensive support package to back up its software offering. With each version of RHD3, you get 30 days of telephone installation support as well as a one-year email support contract. We had no problem getting through on the telephone to ask some questions and were re-assured by the knowledge of the engineer who assisted us. Perhaps more importantly, at least for the CFOs and general bean-counters, Red Hat provides a clear roadmap of support for each version of RHEL, so there are no nasty surprises in store. There are three stages in the lifecycle, which allows for a total supported product life of five years from point of general release meaning that maintenance support and major security updates will be available until October 2008. Having clear dates in mind will help IT strategy planners and managers to work on long-term implementation and client support strategy knowing exactly how long they can plan on having Red Hat-based support resources in place.

### In control

Red Hat has bundled the *Update* module as standard with all three configurations, with a further two optional modules available for both the

Proxy and Satellite configurations. The first one is the management option, which really enhances the administration of users and groups making it simple to identify which machine groups require which package updates. It also allows you to make blanket permission changes to the groups; so for instance, I could allocate permissions for myself to access all areas, yet confine Nick to laptops and web servers, and allow Paul access to the workstations and developer workstations. This makes access control something of a breeze, reducing administration load and freeing you up to tinker with other projects!

The second option is the Provisioning module, which allows you to quickly and efficiently build new workstations and servers using brand-new templates or modelling them on existing builds. You can also effectively manage their configurations from a single file; and perhaps the most impressive feature is the ability to roll back the entire system to a previous state should the need arise.

What is most apparent from the Red Hat Desktop is that it provides a solution as opposed to individual systems. With just the Proxy pack, you have a fully fledged corporate network backed up with real support from Red Hat. With extra licences being available through the Extension pack, you can quickly and easily scale up to the requirements of a large network with very little hassle. Red Hat is currently the only large-scale Linux provider to bundle software like this, and if you are in the market for this type of deployment, then we would seriously recommend taking a good look at the extra options that Red Hat offers. As a whole package – including both the Management and Provisioning modules – it is an effective and cohesive system that enables rapid deployment, maintenance and administration over a system that could be between 10 and 2000 users strong. [LXF](#)

### LINUX FORMAT VERDICT

<b>FEATURES</b>	<b>9/10</b>
<b>PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>8/10</b>
<b>EASE OF USE</b>	<b>7/10</b>
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b>	<b>10/10</b>
The lack of a more user-friendly interface is the only real problem with an otherwise enterprise-ready, super-stable system.	
<b>RATING</b>	<b>9/10</b>

