Mobile Linux Cellular Handset Support Takes a Big Step Forward

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28 August 2007 - Mobile Linux momentum is growing, and some recent key announcements from the LiMo Foundation at the LinuxWorld Conference emphasize the growing support for Linux as a cellular operating system from a broad cross-section of the handset industry.

The increased focus on Mobile Linux shows the high level of interest from all segments of the cellular handset industry, including manufacturers, network operators and component suppliers. This is demonstrated pretty clearly by the expanding membership of the LiMo Foundation, an industry group that was established in January of this year with the stated goal of developing a common Linux Platform. The LiMo Foundation, comprised of founding members Motorola, NEC, NTT DoCoMo, Panasonic Mobile Communications, Samsung Electronics and Vodafone, announced significant additions to the core membership including Aplix, Celunite, LG Electronics, Wind River and McAfee. Some of these additions are clearly strategic, with McAfee expected to contribute to the security protocols for the proposed common Mobile Linux platform. In addition, several key companies joined the LiMo Foundation as associate members, including ARM, Broadcom, Ericsson, InnoPath, KTF, MontaVista and NXP â€“ reinforcing the increasing support for Linux within the handset industry.

However, this still leaves the problem of conflicting standards. While it certainly has its share of significant industry supporters, the LiMo Foundation is not the only group working on establishing a Mobile Linux standard. The Linux Phone Standards (LiPS) Forum has recently released its own set of specifications as Release 1.0, with an accompanying roadmap highlighting specific goals for implementation throughout 2008. LiPS Forum members include other Linux contenders such as Trolltech, a la Mobile and VirtualLogix, in addition to industry players such as Orange, Telecom Italia, Huawei, Freescale, TI and ZTE. Perhaps hedging their bets, Celunite, NXP, MontaVista and others are maintaining a membership in both groups.

To be clear, the goals of these two groups are not necessarily in conflict. As IMS Research Director John Devlin points out, â€œThe LiMo Foundation intends to develop an actual mobile Linux platform, which potentially will conform to the standards established by the LiPS Forum. However, since the LiMo Foundation has stated a desire to have products shipping as early as next 2Q08, they are working in advance of any final standards that will be set by the LiPS Forum. This creates the potential for the LiMO Foundation platform becoming a de facto competing standard.â€•

So what does all of this mean for the future of Mobile Linux? In a recently published report, â€œThe Impact of Cellular Linuxâ€•, IMS Research Analyst Alison Bogle accurately predicted much of what we are seeing come to pass. Bogle states, â€œThere will be a period of acquisition and consolidation over the next few years, the Mobile Linux community will eventually standardize on one or two leading unified Linux-based platforms, which will become the de facto standards, and Linux will see strong adoption in the handset space based on the strength of the companies supporting it.â€• This monthâ€™s developments in the market certainly reinforce these findings, and reinforces IMS Researchâ€™s belief that Mobile Linux as a whole will see a CAGR of greater than 45% over the course of the next five years. Put succinctly, Mobile Linux is starting to grow into its role as a major player in the handset OS marketplace.