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Why companies should consider using portable tools

Monday May 02, 2005 (12:00 PM GMT)

Topic: [Application Development](#)

By: [Ian Palmer](#)



Instead of using new software development technology each time another computer operating system platform becomes the flavor of the month, companies should encourage their software developers to use portable tools and leverage existing skills, said Geoff Perlman, president and CEO of [REAL Software Inc.](#) in Austin, Texas.

"With our product, we make it possible for the software developer to write software for multiple platforms rather than learning the platform APIs for Windows, for Linux, for Macs," he remarked, talking about his company's REALbasic application. "There are people who are experts in any one of those platforms, but [there are] very few that are experts in all. And even if you want to be an expert, there's a tremendous learning curve."

Five years ago cross-platform was not as interesting as it is today, he added, but various companies are now doing a better job at creating cross-platform technology to help developers build applications that can easily run on different platforms. And while he acknowledged Java is widely viewed as the leading cross-platform tool available, he said the technology works really well on the server side, but not so well on the client side.

"On the server, your engineering team or your IT staff, they have control over a small number of boxes and then can decide what commercial machine can be installed," said Perlman. "But when you've got a company with anywhere from hundreds to thousands of desktops, controlling all of those and keeping them all in synch isn't very practical, and it's certainly a very large expense. We give developers a modern language that helps them create just about any kind of [tool] they need to and to do that in a way that works across multiple platforms."

Sandra Slaughter, an associate professor of information systems at [Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business](#) in Pittsburgh, Pa., acknowledged Java as the frontrunner in the cross-platform technology area, but she said that there's certainly a market for products like REALbasic. One reason REALbasic would be of interest to businesses is that the technology is similar to Visual Basic, a popular event-driven application that enables even less experienced programmers to create software through simple drag-and-drop controls.

"Java is probably a more general purpose-type of a programming language," she said. "REALbasic, I looked it up, and it's like, 'This is just a different version of Visual Basic.' In fact, one of its main advantages is that it is

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Visual Basic compatible. REALbasic is apparently the modern object-oriented version of that, but it's more oriented toward an end-user programming environment...Java would be more for your regular programmer."

Prof. Slaughter said there is currently a quest for cross-platform capabilities at the code level and at the modeling or architecture level. This development stems from enterprises wanting applications to share a lot of information. If these applications are written in different languages, the challenge of making these languages communicate and share data would be daunting, she said. And if these applications are written in obscure programming languages that very few people even know nowadays, the task of finding competent programmers would be frustrating

"There are other ways to kind of make things appear as if they are cross-platform," she continued. "You put an interface [wrapper] around them [the application] and maybe that's how they get access to the application or work with that application, and it kind of shields them from having to know how to program in that language.

"Things like XML, Web services...are going to move toward more of a cross-platform capability. I think the reality is not quite there yet. What many companies are doing are using these wrappers as one way of making things appear to be more cross-platform. The extent to which you can apply those for companies that have legacy applications...written 10, 20 years ago, that's going to be a little bit trickier."

While some businesses are grappling with cross-platform issues, others aren't nearly as concerned. [lolo Technologies LLC](#), a company in Los Angeles, Calif., that designs, manufactures, and sells software, is focused on the Microsoft platform exclusively, said CIO Scott Yenor.

"We produce software products, and the reason we don't use any cross-platform tools for that is we develop specifically for the Microsoft operating system," he said. "So we don't need to engage in using Java or any of the other cross-platform tools to port to Linux because our tools are specifically for Microsoft. On the network side of things, since we are a Microsoft software development company and have special arrangements with them through various programs, we are given licenses for using their software for our own purposes."

Ian Palmer is a free-lance IT business writer based near Toronto and is a regular ITMJ contributor.

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