BURNING MEMORIES

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

A little over a year ago, I wrote a column [1] about a Nokia memo that appeared a little over a year ago. The famous "Burning Platform" memo made the case for Nokia bailing out of the open source MeeGo project as a last-ditch effort to save the company. Nokia CEO Stephen Elop's vivid metaphor of fire and desperation won rave reviews for its originality and the style, but as I pointed out last year, style is a cart that all too often leads the horse. Just because someone expresses himself well doesn't mean he is correct. A carefully crafted metaphorical framework can sometimes point toward a conclusion that seems very elegant and obvious within the metaphor, but if you step outside the metaphor, you get a very different view.

In the case of Elop's memo, the lifeline that was supposed to save Nokia from the burning platform was a multibillion dollar deal with Microsoft that would lead to putting Microsoft's Windows Phone OS on Nokia smartphone products. This announcement effectively ended the MeeGo project, a Linux-based mobile OS alternative in joint development by Nokia and Intel. Giving up the chance for an original, native smartphone OS was a big risk, but then, as Nokia CEO Stephen Elop explained, one cannot play it too safe when diving off a burning platform.

Many were skeptical that Windows Phone would be the answer to all of Nokia's problems, and it seems that, at least so far, the skeptics are correct. Nokia's Q1 financial report is in, and it is not looking pretty. Net sales are down 29% from this time last year. The full report is available online if you want to see it [2]. Nokia is a very large company with lots of problems, including a faltering conventional cell phone business, but at best, one could say that the Microsoft smartphone deal hasn't done much so far to help.

Nokia has reportedly lost around US$ 2 billion in "cash and liquid assets" since this time last year, even with Microsoft pumping hundreds of millions into Nokia in "platform support payments." And unfortunately, Nokia can't really do much now to distinguish itself in the smartphone market other than wait around for Windows Phone to distinguish itself.

So the question is, when is this new generation going to arise that sees Microsoft Windows as a hot, cool thing they just gotta have on their phone? To Microsoft, this moment is going to happen any minute now, but I sure wouldn't jump off an oil platform wrapped in that rescue scenario.

Of course, it is pretty easy for a Linux pub to take potshots at Windows, but even if you like Windows on the desktop, it should be obvious by now that the Windows brand can't really be everywhere and do everything anymore. Even if you believe that the Windows brand gives users a warm and confident feeling when they think about buying a home computer, why would you expect that they will be thinking about buying a home computer when they are shopping for a smartphone?

The whole smartphone scene is about escaping the baggage of old paradigms and latching onto a bold new vision. It is beyond confusing and is (actually) a little comical that anyone would think the brand that will truly capture the spirit of the mobile revolution is Windows – that thing that has been running on all those desktop computers for the past 27 years. Android is based on Linux, but Google knew they had to call it something else. iOS is based on Mac OS, but Apple knew they needed a different name. The Windows brand still seems to have some appeal in the desktop and even server space, but it never has gotten very far in the mobile space, and it isn't hard to guess why, since putting "Windows" on a smartphone is a little like putting "Buick" on a Segway.

As the desktop fades, Microsoft should just let the Windows brand fade with it and replace it with something new. BingOS? It almost doesn't matter what they call it. Someone needs to send Stephen Elop a new Burning Platform memo and spell this out for him metaphorically: In the next chapter of the saga, Nokia manages the exit from their burning platform, but the lifeline they grab onto is tethered to the burning Windows Phone platform. And so they dangle – waiting for something to happen to save them from their dangling condition, which would be … uh … what?

Joe

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[1] Oceanic Distress: *http://www.linuxpromagazine.com/Issues/2011/125/Letter-from-the-Editor/*

[2] Nokia Financial Report: *http://www.nokia.com/global/about-nokia/investors*