

Open-source LAMP a beacon to developers

By Martin LaMonica

For years, the business-software development world has been split largely between Microsoft's .Net toolset and Java. Get ready for a third option.

The so-called LAMP stack of open-source software--which includes the Linux operating system, Apache Web server, MySQL database and scripting languages PHP, Perl or Python--is pushing its way into mainstream corporate computing.

One of several smaller companies betting on the LAMP stack, start-up ActiveGrid announced on Monday partnerships that, combined with new software, could help expand LAMP's appeal among big companies. Partners include [MySQL](#), Apache management provider [Covalent](#), Linux company [Novell](#) and PHP tool maker [Zend Technologies](#).

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What's new:

ActiveGrid, one of several start-up companies centered on the LAMP combination of open-source products, has signed support partnerships with major providers of the Linux operating system, Apache Web server, MySQL database and PHP development language.

Bottom line:

The LAMP "stack" has become a more viable alternative to Microsoft's .Net development software and Java. LAMP's emergence has been fueled by a growing third-party industry and by corporate customers' interest in open source.



The efforts of companies such as these to make LAMP more industrial strength--combined with [growing interest among corporate customers in open source](#)--are making LAMP a more cohesive and competitive offering to Microsoft's .Net and Java products, said Stephen O'Grady, an analyst at RedMonk.

"LAMP is still viewed as a collection of piece parts that aren't really certified to work together. But the various participants in that stack and on top of that stack are doing a good job of driving it forward and making it just another stack," O'Grady said.

The individual components of the LAMP stack have been around for many years. But the combination of components--or similar open-source stacks--is increasingly being viewed by vendors, customers and venture investors as a unified platform for building and running business applications. These "stacks" aren't so much vertical entities, with each element layered on the other, as they are a looser collection of building blocks that can be put together to build various types of Web applications.

Indeed, several companies are [staking out businesses around the open-source software](#) rather than aligning with Microsoft's .Net or with Java 2 Enterprise Edition (J2EE) server software and tools. In many cases, the plan is to make LAMP more battle-tested and palatable to corporate customers.

Shining a light on LAMP industry

[ActiveGrid's Application Server software](#), set for release in July, is designed to combine several individual servers running LAMP software to tackle demanding computing jobs. The company will

give away a low-end product and charge for a more functional server aimed at large corporate customers.

Covalent makes management tools for handling large installations of Apache Web servers. And a handful of services companies, including [SourceLabs](#), [Optaros](#) and [SpikeSource](#), are looking to provide support and application-development services to corporations.

Meanwhile, some packaged-application companies are going with LAMP-like open-source options, eschewing Microsoft's .Net and Java. [SugarCRM](#), which released an open-source sales application this year, built its programs using the LAMP stack, which is included with its offering.

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--Curt Finch
Founder and CEO, Journyx

Another independent software vendor, Journyx, decided to build its Web-based time-sheet application with open-source components instead of Java. In this case, company engineers used Python, Linux, Apache and the [PostgreSQL](#) open-source database.

That combination of freely available software allows Journyx to let prospective customers use the software for free, which builds awareness of the company, said company founder and CEO Curt Finch. Python is also quicker to work with than Java, he said.

"Java is an old-style language--I'm not impressed with it. Look at how much money it takes to get (IBM) WebSphere or (BEA Systems') WebLogic up and running. It's just an endless stream of development money," said Finch.

Self-organizing versus top-controlled

LAMP vendors argue that open-source stacks will become more commonplace among business customers as third-party products, such as packaged applications and tools, become available. Also helping the adoption of LAMP is the fact that more customers are willing to use [open-source databases, application servers and development tools](#).

"What we've seen in the last two years is corporations saying, 'We don't need these big heavy J2EE application servers. Why don't we migrate to something easier to deploy and less costly?'" said Mark Brewer, CEO of Covalent.

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--Marten Mickos, CEO, MySQL
organization, where many additions are submitted by large vendors, such as IBM, Sun Microsystems, Oracle and BEA.

The organizing structure behind the LAMP software is very different from the more established stacks of .Net and J2EE.

Microsoft builds .Net and all Windows-related management tooling. Java software, meanwhile, is developed through the formal Java standards

By contrast, there is no central body overseeing the LAMP software. As a result, the combination of tools is not specifically designed to work together, although open-source components tend to stick to industry standards.

This "self-organizing" aspect of the LAMP marketplace prevents customers from getting "locked into" a specific vendor, according to LAMP vendors.

"If you look at .Net or J2EE, they are top-controlled by single entities to make decisions--sometimes good decisions, sometimes bad," said [Marten Mickos](#), CEO of MySQL. "In the LAMP stack, the evolutionary powers make sure that only best-of components survive. It is a difference in philosophy."

Both Microsoft and Java vendors are clearly aware of the popularity of LAMP.

Microsoft has lined up a set of products, including [low-end Web and database tools](#), as well as a [Web server more competitive to Apache's](#), to fend off incursions from LAMP.

[IBM](#) and [Oracle](#) have partnered with Zend to make their respective databases work better with PHP programming tools. Java vendors, including Sun, are making changes to the standard Java virtual machine and [NetBeans](#) development tool to work with scripting languages Jython or Groovy.

The LAMP stack is still not an officially sanctioned application platform in many companies. But the open-source development model, where individuals can make contributions to freely available products, will put the LAMP stack on a quicker development pace than those of Java or .Net, predicts MySQL's Mickos.

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