

BUSINESS GROUP MAKES PUSH FOR SOFTWARE COMPETITION

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OTTAWA - A coalition of powerful multinational companies is urging Canada and Europe to support, in the next round of global trade talks, the use of open-source operating software as an antidote to the dominance of Microsoft Corp.

The Canada Europe Round Table, launched yesterday, wants governments to take the lead in using operating systems such as Linux instead of Microsoft's proprietary Windows.

The group of 28 companies -- which includes Bombardier Inc., Nortel Networks Corp., Corel Corp., DaimlerChrysler AG and Ericsson AG of Sweden -- suggests "competitive systems" such as Linux should be endorsed at the next round of World Trade Organization (WTO) talks.

"CERT urges . . . government bodies to encourage competition by recognizing competing software systems -- operating systems, application packages, etc," the group's working paper on this matter says. "Almost all government procurement offices have adopted Microsoft operating systems as a standard and have eliminated competition."

The coalition also wants Canada and the European Union to adhere to the principle that the Internet be a tax-free zone. It wants Canada and the EU to develop these and other common negotiating positions in advance of the next WTO round, which is to begin in November in Seattle. A CERT spokesman denied that its advocacy of open systems is an anyone-but-Microsoft stance.

But Symon Vysser, who is also Nortel Networks' senior policy advisor in Europe, said often potential suppliers of computer systems to government are shut out of the market because their software is not compatible with Microsoft's Windows operating system, which runs nine out of 10 of the world's personal computers.

Mr. Vysser said governments can increase the use of open systems through their procurement policies. He explained Linux's virtues: "First of all, it's free -- you don't pay for it. It was developed by a Finn with input from all sorts of people from all over the world. And it's superior to Microsoft Windows in the opinion of experts."

A spokesman for Microsoft was not perturbed by CERT's urgings. "We are absolutely 100% for competition, we think it makes us better and we believe Windows will continue to deliver the best value," said Bob Tuttle, director of regional sales for Microsoft Canada.

Linux, an offshoot of the older Unix operating system, is open-source software, which means developers agree to share with everyone any changes they make to it. Microsoft, on the other hand, developed its Windows operating system as a for-profit venture and sells a vast array of software that runs only on that system.

The endorsement of Linux seems to have been included at the urging of CERT member Corel, a promoter of the new operating system. It has spearheaded the creation of a Linux Advisory Council and pledged to write Linux versions of all its software.