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# Red Hat Inc.

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Birth of Red Hat: Founders, Vision, and the Early 1990s
- **Chapter 2** Red Hat Linux: Boxed Software and the First Business Model
- **Chapter 3** Bob Young and Marc Ewing: Red Hats and Red Letters
- **Chapter 4** IPO Fever: Red Hat Joins the Dot-Com Boom
- **Chapter 5** Building Community: Open Source and Fedora's Origins
- **Chapter 6** From Retail to Enterprise: The Move to Red Hat Enterprise Linux
- **Chapter 7** Acquisitions and Expansion: Delix, Cygnus, and Beyond
- **Chapter 8** Red Hat India and Global Beginnings
- **Chapter 9** Competing on Quality: Awards and Community Recognition
- **Chapter 10** Maturing the Model: Subscription Success and Commercial Support
- **Chapter 11** The Middleware Leap: The JBoss Acquisition
- **Chapter 12** Strategic Alliances: Partnering for Growth and Influence
- **Chapter 13** Moving Upstream: Red Hat's Work with the Fedora Project
- **Chapter 14** Engineering Open Source: Contributions to the Linux Kernel
- **Chapter 15** The Virtualization Wave: Red Hat's Technology Portfolio Diversifies
- **Chapter 16** Clouds on the Horizon: Cloud Computing and OpenShift
- **Chapter 17** Automation Era: From Ansible to Enterprise Automation
- **Chapter 18** Financial Growth and the S&P 500 Milestone
- **Chapter 19** Open Culture: Values, Practices, and Internal Community
- **Chapter 20** The IBM Acquisition: Negotiation, Reaction, and Reality
- **Chapter 21** Hybrid Cloud Leadership: Red Hat and IBM Transform Together
- **Chapter 22** Product Portfolio: Linux, Middleware, Containers, and AI
- **Chapter 23** Innovation Never Sleeps: Red Hat Labs and Future Technologies
- **Chapter 24** Influence and Impact: Red Hat in Industry, Academia, and Government
- **Chapter 25** Looking Forward: The Next Generation and Future Prospects

## Introduction

Few companies in the world of technology have managed to transform both an industry and the mindset of a generation as profoundly as Red Hat Inc. Founded in the early 1990s, Red Hat's journey mirrors the broader evolution of open source from the fringes of software development to the very core of modern enterprise infrastructure. This is not just a story about a company; it's a story about change—technological, cultural, and economic—on a global scale.

At its heart, the story of Red Hat is rooted in the unique synergy between visionaries from different backgrounds: Marc Ewing, a hacker and Linux enthusiast from North Carolina, and Bob Young, an ambitious entrepreneur from Connecticut. Their combined efforts would give rise to the famed "Red Hat Linux," first distributed via humble CD-ROMs and later to the subscription-supported solutions that power some of the world's largest organizations. The early days were defined by a radical business model: building value not by owning code, but by improving it and supporting it as part of a vibrant, collaborative community.

This ethos—of openness, transparency, and meritocracy—became the DNA of Red Hat and guided its many pivots and transformations. From its successful initial public offering in the dot-com era, through a series of bold acquisitions and steady expansion across continents, to its central role in shaping the enterprise open source movement, Red Hat set benchmarks that others would follow. Its flagship products, especially Red Hat Enterprise Linux and later OpenShift and Ansible, have become foundational in a rapidly shifting IT landscape defined by virtualization, cloud computing, and automation.

But Red Hat's story is more than just a catalogue of products or acquisitions. It is also a chronicle of persistence through adversity and an exemplar of how collaboration can outpace proprietary innovation. The company's leadership in community-driven projects like Fedora and contributions to cornerstone technologies such as the Linux kernel and Kubernetes have helped redefine what it means to be part of the software industry. Red Hat's ability to bridge the ideals of free software with the practical needs of business has won it an uncommonly diverse and loyal customer base.

In recent years, Red Hat has faced new challenges and opportunities: the relentless evolution of the technology sector, the stakes of hybrid and multi-cloud environments, and the seismic impact of its acquisition by IBM—the largest in the history of both companies. Through all of this, Red Hat has remained remarkably committed to its underlying principles of freedom, courage, commitment, and accountability, striving not only for commercial success but also for positive systemic impact.

This book is both a chronicle and an analysis. It explores Red Hat's key people, pivotal moments, and strategic decisions but also delves into its ongoing influence: in open source communities, in shaping the future of cloud and AI, and in setting the standard for an open, collaborative corporate culture. As Red Hat enters its fourth decade, its story offers valuable lessons—not only about the past and present, but about the possibilities and promises of what comes next.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Birth of Red Hat: Founders, Vision, and the Early 1990s**

The nascent days of the internet, a time before ubiquitous broadband and social media, were a fertile ground for technological rebellion. In the early 1990s, the digital landscape was largely dominated by proprietary software, a walled garden where access and innovation were tightly controlled. Yet, beneath the surface, a different philosophy was stirring, one that championed collaboration, transparency, and the free exchange of ideas. It was within this bubbling cauldron of change that Red Hat Inc. first took root, not in a gleaming corporate campus, but in the unassuming environments of a "geek's" apartment and a businessman's home office.

The story of Red Hat's genesis begins with Marc Ewing, a self-described "geek" operating out of Durham, North Carolina. Ewing was an early adopter and fervent believer in the potential of Linux, an operating system that, at the time, was largely the domain of academics and hardcore enthusiasts. His passion wasn't just in using Linux, but in refining it, debugging it, and, crucially, making it accessible to others. In an era when software distribution often meant floppy disks or painstakingly slow downloads over dial-up, Ewing took a practical approach: he began burning his customized versions of Linux onto CDs. These physical discs, tangible representations of an intangible world, became his method of sharing the open-source gospel.

Ewing's efforts, though perhaps small in scale initially, tapped into a burgeoning demand. The curiosity surrounding Linux was growing, even if its adoption was far from mainstream. His CDs offered a tangible entry point for those eager to explore this new, collaborative operating system. It was a grassroots movement, driven by the inherent desire of technologists to tinker, improve, and share. Ewing's apartment, in essence, became an early, informal distribution hub for a technology that would eventually reshape the industry.

Miles away, in Connecticut, another individual was observing this nascent trend with keen interest. Bob Young, a businessman with a background in running a computer supply catalog business from his home, possessed a different but equally vital skillset. Young understood markets, logistics, and the art of turning a promising product into a sustainable venture. He recognized the whispers of demand for Linux, a quiet but persistent hum that suggested a deeper potential than simply a niche hobbyist pursuit.

Young began acquiring Ewing's Linux CDs for his catalog business. This was not merely a passive act of reselling; it was an early form of validation, a signal that there

was a commercial appetite for what Ewing was creating. The interaction between the meticulous, technically focused Ewing and the commercially savvy Young laid the groundwork for a future partnership. It was a classic pairing of technical prowess meeting business acumen, a formula that has fueled countless successful enterprises throughout history.

The informal collaboration between Ewing and Young quickly blossomed into something more formal. The combined success of their individual ventures, one focused on the creation and refinement of open-source software and the other on its distribution and commercialization, made a merger seem not just logical, but inevitable. In 1995, this convergence officially took shape with the formation of Red Hat Software. The name itself, "Red Hat," carried a touch of personal anecdote and collegiate charm, originating from a distinctive red Cornell University lacrosse hat that Ewing frequently wore during his time at Carnegie Mellon University. It was an unpretentious, memorable moniker for a company that would go on to challenge the giants of the software world. Bob Young, with his business background and entrepreneurial drive, naturally stepped into the role of CEO, setting the initial course for the newly formed entity.

The early business model of Red Hat Software was, in many ways, a reflection of the prevailing software industry at the time. Red Hat Linux was packaged and sold as a boxed product, much like Microsoft Windows or other proprietary software offerings. Customers would purchase a physical box containing the Linux operating system, often accompanied by documentation and perhaps some bundled applications. This approach, while familiar to consumers, presented inherent limitations when applied to open-source software. The very essence of open source lies in its freeness – not necessarily in price, but in the freedom to view, modify, and distribute the code. Selling a "boxed" version of something that could, in theory, be freely downloaded or compiled by anyone seemed, in retrospect, a temporary bridge between two very different paradigms.

Yet, this initial model served a crucial purpose. It provided a structured way for early adopters to acquire Linux, simplifying the process for those who might not have the technical expertise to compile it from source or navigate complex online repositories of the time. It also established a commercial identity for Red Hat, allowing them to generate revenue and begin building a brand around their curated Linux distribution. It was a necessary stepping stone, a way to bootstrap the company while the founders grappled with the more profound implications of building a sustainable business around open-source principles.

The vision, even in these nascent stages, was clear: to make Linux accessible and reliable for a broader audience. While the "boxed product" approach might have seemed conventional, the underlying product—a robust, open-source operating system—was anything but. Red Hat was, from its very beginning, an experiment in

commercializing a revolutionary concept. It was a gamble that open collaboration, coupled with professional support and quality assurance, could create a product that businesses and individuals would be willing to pay for, even if the core technology was freely available. This early period was defined by a blend of idealism and pragmatism, a characteristic that would remain central to Red Hat's identity for decades to come. The groundwork was being laid for a company that would not only sell software but would also champion a philosophy.

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