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THE WORKPLACE

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance
SysAdmin, or Where Geeks Gather

by Mike Knell

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the loneliness of the long-distance sysadmin, or where geeks gather

by Mike Knell

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I'm a sysadmin. This, as I'm sure many people reading this will be pleased to hear, is a cool job. Sure, it's a job that drives you nuts at times, but there are still the perks: no management interference, the ability to delete user files and kill user processes with impunity, all the training you can eat, a social life that anyone else can only dream of having

Uh, one moment. That was the dream I had last night. Sorry.

I'm going to hold on to that assertion about system administration being a cool job, though, because compared to a hell of a lot of other jobs, it is. But I'm also going to talk about a couple of other things that, if paid attention to, would help make it even cooler.

A few months ago, a sysadmin friend by the name of Dónal Cunningham made an astonishing announcement – he was going to LISA. We all thought that was very cool, and I promise that I won't use the word "cool" again after this because it's getting a bit tired now. At this point, I bet a few people are thinking "Huh? Why is going to LISA astonishing?"

The reason for this is simple. I live and work in Dublin, Ireland. It's a nice place to live, but there's one drawback as far as professional development for the system administrator is concerned – distance. Getting almost anywhere from here involves a flight to somewhere, or a ferry trip to the UK followed by a trip across the UK, followed by another ferry trip to . . . well, you get my drift. Going anywhere outside the country, in short, starts getting really expensive really fast. The comparatively small size of the sysadmin population here means that people often don't know that there are other sysadmins out there. There are a few OS-specific user groups, or informal gatherings of people that have sprung up in various places. But there's nothing for, say, the new sysadmin, or even as in my case a couple of years ago, the new-to-the-area sysadmin, to point to and say, "That's where the sysadmins hang out."

The result of this is that wheels end up getting reinvented quite regularly. One person has a problem, and they never get to sit down with other people in the pub or at a meeting and say, "I've had this problem. Anyone know anything about it?" So they have to work it out for themselves from scratch, even when it's quite possible that someone working just down the road from them has had the same problem and would have been able to answer in about five seconds what will otherwise take a couple of days of tedious slogging to work out. In summary, what's lacking is information exchange.

But why am I moaning here about an issue that's specific to me? The simple answer is that it's not. I'm willing to bet that all over the world there are thousands and thousands of sysadmins who aren't SAGE members, who may never get to hear about SAGE, and who will never attend LISA or any other formal system administration conference. It's even quite unlikely that many sysadmins will get to talk informally with other sysadmins from outside their own place of work. There are a few reasons for this – limited travel and training budgets, limited publicity for those groups that actually *are* out there, and

possibly even lack of motivation to go out and find out who else is doing a similar job, but the most pervasive problem is a shortage of local communication.

For a profession that spends much of its time dealing with the exchange of information in one form or another, sysadmins in many parts of the world are remarkably poor at exchanging information among themselves. For every problem or obstacle that's encountered while trying to get something done at work, there's almost certainly a solution out there already.¹ The problem is getting hold of that solution.

Vendor-specific certifications are one way of finding out how to solve problems. However, as soon as the problem is something remotely out of the ordinary, that expensive MCSE or CCNA suddenly becomes less useful. Such certifications don't really contribute much to professional development unless you equate "professional development" with "maximum obtainable salary." I'd prefer professional development to be more about gaining a reputation as a Damn Good Sysadmin than as an Expensive Sysadmin. Don't get me wrong – certifications have their value, but what's most important to me in the process of becoming a better sysadmin is good old-fashioned peer-to-peer networking.

To my mind, the best and usually the cheapest way to become a better sysadmin is to talk to other sysadmins. Face-to-face conversation is by far the most valuable, as it's possible to learn a lot just by listening to things that you never even knew you needed to know (and you often get to drink beer while you're doing it). But there are plenty of other ways in which people could be communicating that are currently either under-used or well used but unpublicized.

Most sysadmins these days are fortunate enough to have an Internet connection, and there are numerous services available out in the electronic world that could be used for connecting sysadmins. There's IRC for those questions that need to be answered right now but not necessarily reliably, Usenet if you can wait a little longer and still not have the right answer, the Web if you can find what you're looking for in the search engines, and mailing lists if you know which one to look for.

However, when it comes to the crunch there's little to beat local knowledge and contacts even when all the resources of the Global Village are available at your fingertips. The idle "Hey, has anyone encountered . . ." question asked at a meeting or in the pub often draws a quicker and more accurate answer than posting on Usenet or asking on some anonymous IRC channel. If you know the person answering the question, you're more likely to be confident that they've given you the right answer (or not) than if the answer has come from a total stranger out on the Net.

Anyway, Dónal went to LISA last December and came back laden with enthusiasm, new knowledge, and some really nifty freebies. As often happens, he's passed on some of this new knowledge to me, some of the enthusiasm, and even a couple of the freebies.

As a result of this new-found enthusiasm, we're looking to improve the lack of communication here a little by finally getting around to starting a SAGE-IE, as an offshoot of the recently formed UK-based SAGE-WISE. We're hoping to have a press launch within the next few months, followed by a technical event of some kind to kick things off. This isn't just because we want more freebies (although I might have to actually buy some t-shirts soon otherwise) but because somewhere out there are bound to be sysadmins

1. Usually something along the lines of "Add 'host zing arf' to /etc/foo!" or "Use a crossover cable!" or "Shoot the user concerned!" I didn't say that it was always the right solution, but any solution is a start.

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who are interested in becoming better sysadmins but who don't know how to go about it.

If every city had a local SAGE group or even just an informal gathering, and every country had a national SAGE, system administration as a profession would benefit in ways we can only begin to think of. It would be, uh, cool.

[The SAGE-IE mailing list is hosted by SAGE-WISE – to subscribe, send mail to ireland-subscribe@sage-wise.org. The SAGE-IE website can be found at <http://www.sage-ie.org/>].