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LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

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letters to the editor

THE COST OF GOING TO CONFERENCES
from Art Mulder
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Dan Geer had an interesting column in the July 2001 issue of *;login:*.

I completely agree with his thoughts about pursuing excellence in your work, learning as much as you can, working hard. I also, like Dan, have found the USENIX association with it's publications and conferences, to be a great source for learning and networking. I'm already looking forward to attending the LISA conference in December.

Yet I was struck by his comment: "For much of my career, I have attended USENIX on my own nickel . . ."

My initial reaction was that I wasn't sure if this was realistic or even possible for most people. However, Dan goes on to say "the pain was more than compensated by the gain." I can't really argue with that, it's one person's opinion after all. Affordability is a judgement call also – once we decide something is important, we can usually find a way to afford it.

Still, I thought it would be a worthwhile exercise to do the math here, and share the results with you. Let's just see what Dan is suggesting here . . . (I've detailed my calculations below). I came up with a cost of approximately US$1650 for someone to attend the LISA conference this December. (Or about $2500 in Canadian funds, for someone like myself.) I find that to be a pretty steep price to pay.

Furthermore, I have to assume that if I'm paying for it myself, then it's also on my own time, so that's four days out of my annual vacation.

So, was Dan writing in his column in is official capacity as president of the USENIX association? Can we conclude that it is the official policy of the USENIX board that their conferences should be affordable enough for us to pay out of our own pockets? (OK maybe I'm being a bit facetious here)

I checked the 2000 USENIX salary survey, and if I read it correctly, the majority of USENIX members receive 3 or more days of training per year, paid by their company. Hopefully this is not an issue for most of us. I would be curious though to know specifically how many people do pay out of their own pocket to attend the USENIX conferences. Perhaps a more specific question on next years salary survey?

So what about myself, would I be willing to pay for this most excellent conference out of my own pocket? I think I am reasonably well paid, and I think I get a big benefit from attending, but 4 days out of my personal vacation time, plus $2500 out of my family budget? Sorry, No.

I think I can say in conclusion that I'm glad that my employer has a travel budget and sees the value of conferences for its employees.

My Calculations:

$120 – USENIX membership fee, might as well include it, as we'll need to pay it sometime during the year.
$510 – LISA technical sessions fee (Wed-Fri, Dec 5–7, 2001) (NOTE: adding a one-day tutorial would nearly double this)
$374 – hotel costs for Tue. – Sat. evening (The travelocity web site gives the conference hotel cost to be $747 incl. taxes) assuming that you share the room with one other person and that you stay in the conference hotel (which USENIX requests us to do since they would incur substantial penalties if they did not fill up the block of rooms arranged in their contracts. I further assume that this prevents them from informing us of cheaper hotels in the vicinity).

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I also assume that the average attendee will be flying in, and will, therefore, require a hotel for Tuesday-Saturday evening. (It had better be the majority, if this truly is a international conference) Note this requires at least 4 days off from work. (If you only earn two weeks of vacation, this is virtually 50% of your vacation allotment, if three weeks, this is still 25-30%)
$150 - food 6 days (Tue-Sun @ $25/day)
$100 - incidentals (taxi, bus, long-distance calls, fudge factor)
$400 - Average flight cost: The travelocity Web site gave these flight costs – as of July 2001: Chi-San Diego = Average $330, NY-San Diego = avg $400, Denver-San Diego = avg $440, Atlanta-San Diego = avg $393. And the Air Canada Web site gave these prices : Toronto-San Diego = $CA 840 (US$540) Vancouver-San Diego = $CA 700 (US$ 455)

$1654 – Total US Dollars ($2544 Canadian Funds)

Dan Geer comments:

Of course, only a tiny percentage of USENIX attendees pay their own fees; most are covered by their employers. I think that education really is less expensive than ignorance and wanted to emphasize that thought.

AN EXCHANGE ON CHARITY
from Anne Bennett
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I just read Andrew Hume's note "What's Up with Charity" in the June 2001 *;login:*. I was pleased to see USENIX getting involved in providing and setting up computer equipment for poor people, even though so far the efforts (or at least those he reported) have been centered in the States.

It's easy for many of us to forget that there is very much a "digital divide" between the rich and the poor (this is true not only within first world countries such as the USA and Canada, but even more so on a planetary scale). Yet, we computer professionals are very well placed to understand the huge negative effect of not having access to the net on someone's ability to function in society – and it seems a particularly appropriate form of charity for us to try to remedy this problem, even in small ways. I'd be very interested in seeing the results of those projects published, so that others who also want to help can learn from our successes and failures.

I'd like to see this type of project continue to be funded by USENIX.

Dan Geer Replies:

Thank you for your comments.

Might I ask you in return if you think it better to overcharge for the services USENIX offers and then to put that money to unrelated charitable work or to undercharge so as to permit any charity to be a decision left to the individual member as to what charities they wish to support and how, a decision then unbuffered by the personal whims of a simple majority of the USENIX board? This money is not free money – it is your money and when any middle man, USENIX being no exception, handles monies said monies shrink. This is true of taxation; it is true of the United Way; it is an economic reality.

You doubtless did not wish to enter debate, and you are clearly welcome to demur further conversation. Your note is one of a tiny few received in any case, which thus makes it special.

and Anne Bennett replies:

It's true that I'm not really yearning to debate this at length, but your points are relevant, and they are certainly issues that I have considered. In the general case, I'd agree with you – for example, if USENIX proposed donating to some random charity, even one I agree with, I would not be in favor, for exactly the reasons you raise. In fact, despite my support for the EFF's work, for example, I'm not particularly in favor of USENIX donating funds to it (though I would not jump up and down to prevent it, either). Supporting that cause with expertise in our area is another matter.

However, the examples given by Andrew Hume seemed to me quite different, in this respect: they address needs which the "general charitable community" is not really yet equipped to handle. It is not only difficult to find and to evaluate the expertise needed to "put the poor on the net," but more importantly I think, the need to do this is not yet properly recognized by the general population. This is an area in which we computing professionals are in the best position to kick-start the action; in fact, as fans of UNIX and as proponents of open-source software (which I suspect a good number of us are), we would do well to seize the opportunity to show that open-source operating systems on older machines can serve such needs at a fraction of the cost of commercial systems.

In any case, whether or not we are able to use this kind of charitable opportunity to advance the cause of our operating systems of choice, it still seems to me that, until the general population realizes that access to the Internet is about to rival access to affordable education with respect to each individual's full functioning in society (or until the digital divide disappears, hah!), it is very appropriate for us of USENIX to get involved in solving this problem.

So yes, I'd like to be overcharged for my USENIX membership (which to me is not only a question of "member services") in order to permit us to support charitable work which I consider far from unrelated to our goals. The "innovation and research that works" which we are supposed to be fostering has to "work" in society, not just in the lab.