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Building and Maintaining an International Volunteer Linux Community

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Abstract

LinuxChix was founded in 1999 by Deb Richardson as a Linux community that would be friendlier and more welcoming than the average Linux user group. By June 2001, Deb was ready to hand over the reins of LinuxChix to someone else, and Jenn Vesperman volunteered for the job. Two years later, LinuxChix membership had grown significantly, gained a new, frequently updated web site, doubled the number of mailing lists, and in general had become a large, successful, all-volunteer international Linux community. This paper details what we believe were the key elements that turned a moribund Linux community into a dynamic, active force for promoting Linux and recruiting new members of the Linux community. What we learned can be applied to any international volunteer community with a technological bent. We also discuss extra hurdles for women's groups and some ongoing problems we are currently working to resolve.

1 Introduction

Deb Richardson formed LinuxChix[1] in 1999 with the goal of creating a welcoming and friendly environment for people interested in Linux. Soon, LinuxChix had a web site, several mailing lists, a logo, and a community of people interested in helping people, especially women, get started and stay interested in Linux. By 2001, LinuxChix was struggling, as the community continued to grow and Deb began to burn out. Deb asked for volunteers to take over as LinuxChix coordinator and chose Jenn Vesperman for the job.

Along with a large cast of volunteers, Jenn Vesperman set about learning how to run and organize a large international volunteer Linux community. Along the way, LinuxChix grew substantially, became more explicitly focused on encouraging women in Linux, and branched out into many new areas, such as free on-line classes on everything from ker-

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[1] http://www.linuxchix.org

nel development to starting a small business. Linux-Chix was and is completely volunteer-run and has no corporate sponsorship, which makes the accomplishments of the last few years even more impressive. What made LinuxChix such a success? This paper is our attempt to record and communicate what we learned about running an online volunteer organization to other free software communities.

We'll begin with the major lessons we've learned about running (or more accurately, not running) a volunteer organization. After that we'll talk about some of the problems specific to the LinuxChix community and some of the ongoing problems we haven't yet solved. We'll end with a summary of the big rules we learned while running LinuxChix.

2 Running a volunteer community

This section covers the lessons we learned by trial and error about running a volunteer community. Jenn had to maintain a clear direction for the community as a whole, while at the same time giving individual members the freedom and sense of accomplishment that makes volunteer work rewarding.

2.1 Build a sense of community

The first step in making LinuxChix work was to foster a sense of community. LinuxChix's goal of being a friendly and welcoming place helped considerably. People joining LinuxChix immediately felt like they had found a group of interesting friends, and wanted to be part of the community. Women were especially happy to find a place where they fit in and felt comfortable. Many women (including co-author Val Henson) expressed a profound sense of relief upon finding LinuxChix. Jenn receives a steady stream of email from women saying, "I didn't know other women felt this way about Linux" and "It's such a relief to find this place, I really feel at home." We feel this is an important way in which we are different from the typical Linux community, which is usually dominated by flame wars and ego battles and an attitude of "If you're not tough enough to

take it, we don't need you." Often this attitude is justified as a way of filtering out incompetents, but our experience is that many competent, intelligent, hard-working people are more likely to contribute when they are treated respectfully. As far as we can tell, being friendly and polite has not resulted in a higher proportion of incompetent people getting involved in LinuxChix – the reverse, if anything.

LinuxChix has more than a friendly atmosphere: it has a specific goal, supporting women in Linux and computing in general. As a result, everyone working on LinuxChix knows they have something in common with everyone else: the desire to support women in Linux. This common goal defines the limits of our community; LinuxChix is not an inclusive organization and those who do not wish to support women in computing are invited to find another group, or start their own. This exclusivity is part of what generates our sense of community.

A wide variety of mailing lists is crucial to generating sense of community. A community needs at least one general-purpose, everything-is-on-topic mailing list where people feel comfortable posting anything they want to talk about with other members of the community. Linuxchix has separate mailing lists for people interested only in particular topics, e.g., technical discussions or major announcements. The proliferation of mailing lists allows people to participate in LinuxChix as much or as little as they desire. We very seldom have subscribers complaining about the volume of email on a particular mailing list.

Our mailing lists vary in their level of publicness as well. Many lists are unarchived, or their archives are available only to members. Along with explicitly off-topic lists, this gives members a safe zone to express thoughts and questions which they would not discuss on a publicly archived list. Being able to open up more to each other and have a safe place to make risky statements further builds our sense of community. However, we keep purely technical mailing lists publicly archived, so that answers to questions already asked are easy to find via web search.

A key element to the LinuxChix sense of community turned out to be our semi-private IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channel. Hosted on a private server and advertised only by occasional posts to the smaller LinuxChix mailing lists, the IRC channel allowed LinuxChix members to form friendships and "hang out" with each other virtually. Occasionally the barbarians invade – usually teenage "haxors" offended by the idea of a women-focused group – and have to be driven off by IP filtering. For the most part, the LinuxChix IRC channel is one of the friendliest and most interesting IRC channels we've found.

2.2 Do nothing yourself

Jenn began her career as LinuxChix coordinator with a simple rule: Do nothing yourself. The last coordinator burned herself out by trying to do too many jobs all at once. Jenn delegated every job possible to other people, since being LinuxChix coordinator by itself strains the limits of anyone's volunteer time. Each job - webmaster, mailing list administrator, local chapter head - was filled by several volunteers. As we discovered, there are usually more volunteers than jobs.

2.3 Build the structure

In order for Jenn to do nothing herself, she needed a framework for allowing other people to contribute. The web site is managed through Zope, which allows multiple people to edit the web site through a web interface. The web site can be edited by anyone with an account, and account holders can give accounts to new volunteers, without going through a central authority. We use Mailman's web interface to maintain our mailing lists, and each list has multiple maintainers. The DNS password for the linuxchix.org domain is in the hands of several people. The web site and mail archives are backed up by several people across the world.

2.4 Delegate ownership

A benevolent dictator needs lieutenants who can be given significant responsibility and trusted to operate on their own. Jenn's goal was to turn over every major responsibility to a lieutenant. Once Jenn turned over a task to a volunteer, she didn't interfere, but she did continue to monitor. Jenn's role is to keep an eye out for burn-out, check for a match between skills and abilities, and make sure that volunteers have the authority and the tools they need to do their job. Sometimes it's hard to sit on your hands, but the payoff is a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility for the volunteers.

2.5 Give credit

Jenn can't pay her volunteers, but she can give them something just as important: credit. The LinuxChix web site includes several sections whose main purpose is cheerleading for the people who make LinuxChix work. One section is dedicated to news stories about members of LinuxChix,[2] another provides links to publications by members.[3] Jenn also

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[2] http://www.linuxchix.org/content/docs/press/ chixinnews.html

[3] http://www.linuxchix.org/content/docs/press/authors

gives out public thank-yous on the mailing lists, and makes sure to always refer to LinuxChix as "our" project, never "my" project.

2.6   Accept suggestions

LinuxChix is lucky to have a team of bright, trustworthy volunteers. Jenn learned to trust their instincts and give them room to try new things. New LinuxChix projects need to fit three criteria: Does the idea fit the core purpose of the group? Is someone willing to do the work? Are other people interested in helping? If the answer to all three questions is "yes," it's probably a good project.

The *grrls-only* mailing list was a good example of this rule in action. Several women asked for a mailing list that, unlike all other LinuxChix mailing lists, was limited exclusively to women. Val Henson was one of the women advocating this list and volunteered to run the list if Jenn created it. Initially, Jenn didn't want to create the *grrls-only* list because she felt that it would split the lists too badly. But many of the people who were advocating for it were people she thought of as highly intelligent, trustworthy, and thoughtful. She decided to trust her volunteers and created the list – and then watched and waited. A few people joined the women-only list and left the main off-topic list, but most were on both lists and were active on both lists. A small group of women were only on *grrls-only*, and felt much safer and freer to discuss some of the things that interested them. Overall, it worked out well.

2.7   Monitor volunteer health

LinuxChix is run completely by volunteers, with no corporate sponsorship or full-time developers. Our volunteers are the only resource we have, so we needed to make it easy and rewarding to volunteer. We have a mailing list specifically for volunteers, which anyone may join. "Job openings" sent to this list are usually filled immediately. Most jobs have two or three volunteers to fill them, and volunteers go on "vacations" of several months from time to time when real life gets too busy. Even Jenn goes on vacation, once writing an entire book while LinuxChix continued to function. If someone can't go on a vacation, what will you do if and when she can't volunteer for your organization anymore? Make sure every important job has at least one backup volunteer.

2.8   Keep rules to a minimum

LinuxChix has only two official rules: "Be polite, be helpful." Everything else is just a clarification of these rules. We avoid adding "clarifications" because if you have a long list of rules, people being impolite can claim that whatever they did was not written down as being against the rules. Whereas with "be polite, be helpful," the list administrators and core volunteers just have to explain why a particular behavior is impolite and unhelpful. In addition, many volunteers had had bad experiences with volunteer groups that over-litigated, and strongly resisted attempts to create more rules. These two rules are sufficient for everyone who shares the goals of LinuxChix. These rules didn't work for trolls or other person of ill will - but neither would any other rules.

That said, we came up with two clarifications which were helpful. First, never use "RTFM" as an answer to a technical question. You can say "the key word you're looking for is foo," or "read page bar of manual bar," but assume that the person asking the question has tried to read the manual. Second, when responding to a sensitive subject, always respond to the idea, never the person. Stay polite and respectful when talking about the person, no matter what you think of their ideas. When reading a post about a sensitive subject, read it assuming the other person is respecting the person they are responding to, even if they're attacking their ideas. Persistent and repeated personal attacks are one of the few ways to be banned from a LinuxChix mailing list or IRC channel.

The first clarification banning "RTFM" has given us a reputation for technical helpfulness. The second has allowed us to debate politics, religion, gay marriage, and preference for editors, with a minimum of people being upset and nothing that can actually be called a flame war.

Occasionally, of course, we get a person who comes in and is persistently impolite or unhelpful. Usually, we try to take them aside and explain, in private email, why they're being impolite. Unfortunately, few of them understand. Fortunately, most of them interpret polite requests to be considerate of others as "being picked on" and leave of their own accord. We resort to technological means to exile the few remaining offenders.

2.9   Laissez-faire government

While Jenn is a benevolent dictator and the unquestioned leader of LinuxChix, she got that way through a relaxed approach to governance. Any volunteer organization can only succeed if its members want to be part of it. Besides having few rules, volunteers are allowed to do whatever they think best. Linux-

Chix chapters, local groups of LinuxChix members that meet face-to-face, are each run in their own individual way. All the parent LinuxChix organization does is give out hostnames and provide a mailing list for chapter heads to communicate with each other.

2.10 Respond to problems right now

When a volunteer reports a problem, respond to it right away. Sometimes, the problem is that no one other than Jenn feels that she has the responsibility to take care of a problem, so the first thing to think about is whether to give the reporter the authority to fix the problem herself. If it really is the coordinator's responsibility, investigate the problem and fix it - right away. An unfixed problem is a little like an open source program that doesn't compile - the longer it doesn't work, the more volunteers drift away. Responding immediately also reassures the group that you care about the project.

2.11 Never turn down free press

News stories, whether about LinuxChix specifically or about a member of LinuxChix, bring an influx of new, energetic volunteers to the group. We encouraged everyone in LinuxChix to accept interview requests and mention LinuxChix if possible. One member of LinuxChix, a reporter for Newsforge,[4] an on-line open source news organization, ran an entire interview series with several prominent LinuxChix members.[5]

2.12 Give back to the community

Volunteers are more likely to join a community that is obviously active and contributing useful things back to the community. One of our most successful and surprising activities has been the development and teaching of free on-line courses on everything from kernel development to understanding file systems.[6] As a group, we have produced large amounts of documentation, all freely available on-line. We host a list for job postings, open to anyone to post or subscribe to.[7] LinuxChix often receives freebies from various organizations which we pass on to our members. Most importantly, we encourage friendships and networking with mailing lists and IRC channels specifically for conversation not directly related to the goals of our organization.

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[4]http://www.newsforge.com
[5]http://www.linuxchix.org/content/docs/press/chixinnews.html
[6]http://www.linuxchix.org/content/courses/
[7]http://linuxchix.org/pipermail/jobposts/

3 Problems specific to LinuxChix

Until now, we've limited our discussion to lessons which can be applie to nearly any free software community. LinuxChix is different from most such communities in one obvious way: we're an organization primarily dedicated to helping women. In this section, we'll discuss some of the problems that come with that focus.

Women's groups get more than the average amount of harassment, trolls, and cracking attempts. We start by making nearly all of our mailing lists members-post-only, which also cuts down on spam. Our IRC server is a frequent target of script kiddies with nothing better to do. Fortunately, with our international membership, someone with IRC ops is nearly always awake and around to ban troublemakers from the server. Our very reason for existence is often called into question by both men and women; we have addressed this problem by writing FAQs[8] and HOWTOs[9] and posting testimonials from people who were glad to find LinuxChix.

More subtly, we find that it's easy to accidentally subvert the founding goal of LinuxChix, encouraging women in Linux. For example, our mailing list for technical discussion is frequently overwhelmed by posts from men, both asking and answering questions. Some of them have no interest in women in Linux at all and are only here to get help with their homework assignments or job duties. More commonly, they are genuinely trying to be helpful and don't realize that by dominating discussion and rushing to be the first to answer a question, they are discouraging the women on the list from participating. Every so often, we have to remind the members of this list that its primary purpose is helping women in Linux, which includes allowing women to both ask and answer technical questions in a female-dominated environment.

We have a constant struggle between our desire to be inclusive and nurturing and our desire to focus on women in computing. If we helped everyone who was interested in Linux get started, our volunteers would immediately burn out, so we have to focus on helping women – and turn down many requests for help from men. Many women like the idea of a group explicitly dedicated to helping women in Linux and enjoy being part of a community in which women are the majority, yet feel uncomfortable with any method of creating and maintaining a female-

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[8]http://www.linuxchix.org/content/docs/faqs/
[9]http://www.tldp.org/HOWTO/Encourage-Women-Linux-HOWTO/

dominated community. In order to make LinuxChix work, we need both "bad cops" who argue for and enforce the focus on women, and "good cops" who keep us inclusive and welcoming. This results in a lot of arguments and heated discussion and a few people who leave the community, but in the end our primary rule of "Be helpful, be polite" helps keep the community together in spite of strong differences of opinion.

4   Ongoing problems

We have a few problems we haven't yet found satisfactory solutions for. At a technological level, we haven't delegated responsibility as well as we have on the organizational level. Only three people have root access to the system hosting LinuxChix, so it's the weak point in the technological structure of LinuxChix. The community is always evolving, and as LinuxChix becomes more popular, the male-to-female ratio is rising, and the feel of the mailing lists is changing. Constantly defending our right to exist is exhausting and leads to volunteer burn-out much more quickly than average. We still haven't gotten enough critical mass to have a LinuxChix Linux kernel development community, although we keep trying.

5   Conclusion

The key insight necessary to successfully run an international volunteer organization is "Do nothing yourself." Spread out responsibility and authority to as many people as possible. Create a sense of community, make participation rewarding, and take vacations. Take advantage of press opportunities. Keep rules to a minimum and use technological solutions to exclude people of ill will from your community. Most of all, have fun!

6   Acknowledgements