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Whither LISA?



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I'VE BEEN A LONG TIME LISA ATTENDEE, having been at every LISA since 1992 (LISA VI). I have a fond memory of my introduction to what it means to be in a room full of sysadmins when Michael Cooper presented "Overhauling Rdist for the '90s." Memorable quote: "I'm not the guy who wrote rdist, I'm just the guy who fixed it." Things have changed.

LISA has always been an intimidating conference for the new attendee, what with people who write books walking among those who buy them. In 18 years of attending the conference, I've seen it grow, shrink, re-grow, and shrink yet again. The focus has shifted from extremely technical, to human oriented, and back. But what I've really been observing for all these years has been the growth of an industry. That's something that has both upsides and downsides.

I've been mulling over patterns of development as they apply to everything from businesses to professions and even governments. As our occupation has grown from "those weird people who do things with those weird computers," we've experienced that which other occupations have experienced: legitimacy, growth, formalization, specialization, and something bordering on stagnation. Are we at stagnation yet? I hope not.

At that first conference I attended, my co-worker, Dan, and I were in one of the sessions where someone said, "It's OK to make system administration your profession." This was like an epiphany for Dan. Dan had been a technical support specialist and wanted to get more technical (TSSes were not actually all that technical, it turns out). When he made the transition to system administration, Dan had a hard time explaining to a lot of people what he did and why he chose to do it at that point in his life (in his 30s).

Remember, at that time, sysadmins were often actually classified as operators, and the position was usually thought of as a stepping-stone into true development work. All during the '90s, I met a lot of software developers who would tell me, "I used to do what you did." Implicit in this was that they'd moved onward and upward, to something respectable and better-paying. But during this time, the profession became accepted. People posted jobs for it. It was no longer a student position, or an

entry-level position for people who weren't quite up to snuff in coding or lacking in software development classes.

The flipside, the real upside, of this time was that people who were in the position generally really cared about what they did. To be in a job no one understood took a lot of self-confidence. And the people who forged that new path either knew what they were doing or moved into other fields.

The Roaring '90s

It was a heady time of system administration. The conference was a wonderland, where you could steep yourself in the environment of people who did what you did, inculcate yourself in a culture you might not have known even existed. Tools were written by people who had the same problem you had, not by companies hoping to make a buck. Support was checking the code or emailing the original developer. You gave your changes back to help others.

By the end of the '90s, we had a profession. We had certifications. We had a huge conference—even LISA-NT! We had legitimacy. Along with this was the introduction of products. No longer was the Vendor Exhibit six vendors who were mostly conference attendees who happened to work for the vendors with tables and some printouts and a few geeks standing around. We sysadmins were in demand. We'd known all along that we were needed, but now the companies knew it, too. The Internet ran on sysadmins! Having great sysadmins could make or break a company—or so everyone thought.

This led to hyper-inflation in the sysadmin field. Those of us who lived through it (and went to the conferences) will never forget the insanity. Dan and I walked into a hospitality suite one night in Chicago. We were greeted with (and I'm not making this up), "Hi! Come on in! You want to work for us!" My friend said, "How can you know you want to hire me?" which garnered the reply, "Well, you're at the conference, right? We want to hire you!" We drank some—OK, a lot of—vodka and kept our existing jobs. But we all remember that huge influx of newbie sysadmins who were like doe-eyed children in a candy store.

Of course, a huge number of inexperienced sysadmins were ripe for vendors to expand their professional services offering ("Doing the work so you don't have to learn how!"), as well as other companies either productizing open source applications or creating their own closed source versions. And with companies that had so many inexperienced sysadmins, who could blame them for purchasing things that did what sysadmins used to know, or would have learned, how to do?

The Bubble

Everyone remembers the dot-com collapse. I like to believe no small part of it was the idea that what the sysadmins had done had led people who didn't understand what we do to believe anything was possible. When you sweep the hubris aside, I think there's some truth to the idea that those tools we sysadmins wrote to help us get things done morphed into a lot of online applications, in one form or another, that made the basis of a lot of the dot-com bubble.

I know I paint a jaded picture of this time. I also know there was a fair amount of innovation and advancement in the field of computers. The complexity of environments was also exploding. This led to a legitimate need to add tools and hardware that were extremely complex and cost a lot

of money. The seeds for my discontent were sown then, and it doesn't really matter if it was through folly or genuine need.

From the ashes of the dot-com conflagration, the IT phoenix rose again. My recollection was that LISA finally did generate enough attendance that it exceeded the peak of the dot-com bubble. It took a while and was a rough time. The focus on the profession was about putting your head down and getting things done. (I think LISA '03's line summed it up best: "Effective Real World System Administration: Virtuosity, Flexibility, Ingenuity, Perseverance"—i.e., stay the course.) Attending LISA during that time brought the realization, for me at least, that our profession had survived the first two phases of development (initial acceptance, or legitimacy, and exponential growth) and had now started down the path of formalization.

While there had been efforts to create certification processes early on, those efforts were joined by companies offering training and certification on the administration of their own products. And that paved the way for the next stage: specialization. One reason it was so difficult to get a certification for "system administration" was that it was such a broad spectrum of work. Two sysadmins from two different companies might do drastically different tasks. As companies offered administration certification on their products, naturally those products had special functions. And the OS vendors also realized that as companies embraced what we did, they could have certifications not in (or at least in addition to) "system administration," but in networking, storage, and security. Much like the medical profession saw specialists as the technology matured (or the knowledge increased past the ability for one person to understand it all in their own head), so, too, did system administration. Not only was it a horizontal spread, but also vertical: junior storage admin, senior networking admin. You get the idea.

Today

So that leaves me at the current day. This is where we are. When I showed up at LISA '09 (LISA XXIII for us old-timers), I was somewhat despondent. The desire to express my frustration at the situation led to writing this column. And an interesting thing happened during the conference: I saw hope for the future. In an effort to see how other people felt about the conference, I learned that my views were not universal. Many, many folks had the same wonderment and enjoyment of the later conferences as I had of the earlier ones. I truly had become jaded. However, once again, I learned I was not alone. There was a sizable community of people who were looking for the next level, as it were. A way to get back to some of what we've lost. I've joined some people who are considering a possible new track at LISA for the future. Nothing is a done deal, but it brings me hope. And once again at LISA, I've found a community of like-minded people who are motivated to better our profession, to help others and make things work. I guess it's just what system administrators are hardwired to do.

So, yeah, LISA has changed over the years. My hope (and part of my reason for writing this column) is to call other system administrators to action, to egg them on to join me in the process of providing that forum we all would find useful. To recognize that it's our responsibility to better our profession by getting out there, writing tutorials, papers, presentations and talks, or whatever. We each need to do our part to bring the depth and breadth of our knowledge into the world. It's our choice whether we let vendors and others outside our profession drive us or whether we take the wheel ourselves and head off in the right direction.