

Commentary

by Sean Kamath

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LISA '03

I've been attending LISA regularly for so long that I can go to two conferences, back to back and not wear the same LISA t-shirt more than once. I have to pick and choose which USENIX/SAGE t-shirts to bring. I started coming here (I'm at LISA '03 as I write) in 1992, before the start of the Tech Bubble. I've seen a lot of change in the 12 years I've been coming here, some good, some bad.

One of the most interesting changes is the way papers are presented. The refereed track is now just one of two or three tracks worth going to. It used to be the only track. So, there's more choice. On the other hand, the papers aren't as revolutionary as they used to be. I'll never forget the guy who got up and said, "I didn't write rdist, I just fixed it." Gotta love that confidence. Papers seem to have split into two camps: theoretical (and nearly incomprehensible) or . . . well, variations on a (set of) theme(s). And, this isn't all a bad thing. Our profession is maturing, and along with that comes specialization and refinement. And, don't get me wrong, there are a number of very interesting papers.

Another noteworthy change is the quality of the tutorials. I talked to my coworkers about the quality of their tutorials, and we agreed across the board that they were better than normal. I saw Dan Klein walking down the hall and had to stop him and mention this to him. Hats off to him and the entire training program group. I attended another well-known open source conference this year, and the quality was significantly better here at LISA. (Granted, some of the instructors were the same, so some of the tutorials at the other conference were pretty good. But for each good one, two or more were a waste of time.)

I've chatted with a number of people here this year, and we're all agreed that this conference is very subdued. Part of this is undoubtedly the result of the San Diego fires that are raging about five miles from the hotel. Some people are having problems with the smoke, and it's hard to go out to eat (many places are closed, including the only walkable place to eat "off-campus"). It's also difficult to focus on abstract problems when real people are losing their homes.

However, I've noticed a decline in enthusiasm and determination in the attendees for a number of years. Sure, there are always the hard-core "true believers." They'll stay up and have meaningful conversations in small cliques late into the night. But with the post-bubble decline in attendance and the isolation-inducing use of laptops (more on that later), it's getting harder and harder to have cool conversations with people.

I think this decline in the socialization aspect of the conference is due not only to laptops, but to the composition of the people attending LISA. During the "boom" years, everyone and their sister attended LISA. As times have gotten tough, though, most people who show up now are newbies (typically, a group of support people will send the new people in the group to the conference, since the others have previously attended). There is a significant reduction in "graybeards." The number of people wearing past LISA t-shirts is in sharp decline.

Clearly, it's important that we have "new blood." I think it's important that more managers attend, and that the NT administrators of the world "join the fold." But, as a side effect, we have a group of people with a little less in common. And, especially here in

the US, we prefer to hang with people who are like us. (I personally enjoy hearing the horror stories of university administration, as well as hearing the lucky people complaining about where they're going to put their next SunFire 12K. It's all interesting to me.) That personal preference makes it harder for us to reach out.

Regarding laptops, I believe they are double-edged swords. On the one hand, being able to keep in touch with stuff going on back home is really handy. The overcrowding of and long waits for the terminal room are a thing of the past. But at the same time, I see people doing their homework in tutorials and the disappearance of many a great hallway-track conversation. That's right, in the hall waiting for the terminal room to have an open spot. I see more and more groups of people sitting together, but each person's head is down focusing on his or her laptop. Newcomers and old hands would have an easier time communicating if it weren't for their laptops.

Last night, I was with a couple of other people, everyone's eyes trained on their laptop screens. Then one of the guys asked us a question. It was relatively innocuous, but what a change it made! After almost an hour of chatting, it was late and I had to go to bed. But that conversation was one of the most rewarding things I've experienced here.

I guess that's what I miss most about the conferences of late. This is an opportunity to meet people in a variety of roles around the world. And you don't meet someone by sitting down next to them, cracking the laptop, and reading. I hope it's just a fad.