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**Tylock:** Confessions of a Sysadmin Turned Salesman

**USENIX & SAGE**

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The System Administrators Guild

# confessions of a sysadmin turned salesman

I have no regrets.

I still consider myself a system administrator. I'm not sure why though...

It's been quite a while since backups and restores were my responsibility. Haven't added a user since I don't know when. The last time a system crashed, I was the one who got the call letting me know how long it would be down.

But still – I can be a sysadmin, can't I?

## How Did I Get Here?

I was definitely a sysadmin at the university, that much is clear. The professor offered me the job that May I graduated. Sure, it was hourly until his grant came in, but the grant did, and I got the position (even though it had to be posted). My title was "Computer Programmer," but they didn't have anything closer. All the elements of a beginning sysadmin were there – a more learned mentor or two, figuring out that automation is a good thing, first exposure to USENIX (no SAGE then, sysadmin topics were part of the main conference). By the time I was leaving I had ported a driver, broken in a couple of undergraduate assistants, and submitted my first paper to USENIX.

Most of my tenure in industry was as a sysadmin. Sure, I opted for the switch from the school setting to business – better pay, moving to a city I wanted to be in – didn't everybody, eventually? The title was "Software Engineer," but several years after I'd left they adopted a series of "System Administrator" titles. The first few years flew by as an "individual contributor": creating a program to mentor admins and techs, pulling some of the related departments together, upgrading OSes to consistent and current levels. There was that stint as a software developer for a product, but it lasted only nine months – the project was successful, but the work didn't agree with me.

Maybe that jump back into sysadmin was the start of it – creating a "self managed team" with the three of us. There was no doubt that I was the leader of the team, but it worked well. (People I bump into still think of it as the best environment they ever had.) Maybe it worked too well. After a few years there weren't as many complex issues, and management didn't show me a path forward.

I learned a lesson about titles with the next switch. "Systems Manager" sure looked like a management position on the internal posting . . . too bad it meant manager of systems to some of the people. It had elements of hands-on system administration though! Who knew I would have to be the one closing the MRP system at the end of each month. And even after I added the two technicians and the three engineers, I was still in the thick of it helping and mentoring them.

Jumping to a consulting firm didn't change what I was doing much. They called me a "Senior Systems Architect," but it was just like system administration except that I wasn't overhead anymore, and the client actually wanted me there. It was definitely a step back toward technical administration. Too bad it degenerated more into staff augmentation than real consulting. But that pushed me to the director position, so it can't be bad.

### by Steven M. Tylock

Steve Tylock has been managing infrastructures for the past 15 years in the Western New York area, and helped organize GVSAGE as a local SAGE for the Genesee Valley region.



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“Director of Desktop and Network Services” – man, I liked that title! I upgraded the company’s entire email structure as an audition for the position – that was sysadmin work. Of course, after getting the position, my direct work was cut way down. But that was best for the company and the team – they needed help getting the individuals to work together. Politics, budgets, and an infrastructure that was being held together on the backs of overworked, underpaid and under-appreciated tech staff. What bigger challenge could I ask for?

While there were times I’m certain the guys thought I was unfit for actual sysadmin work, I think they ultimately realized what I was doing and felt better off for it. True, I spent a great deal of time straightening out the budget and dealing with management, but I was there when they needed me – helping guide them, breaking up the Windows-UNIX fights, pulling together short- and long-term plans for the infrastructure. We built an impressive list of accomplishments in a fairly short time.

I started looking before the end came, and we were still doing fairly well then, but oddly enough I thought that the one experience I was missing was being a part of something that failed.

True, the company still has its doors open, but it is not the same place that it was. They dropped consulting and project-based work in favor of selling software. While they needed a reasonably sized group to manage the five sites and 200 employees with continual demand for special projects, it doesn’t take too much to keep 40 people and two sites working.

### Close but No Cigar

I was out, pounding the pavement, but that was okay.

While it was not as nice for my bank account to be on the outside, it was a whole lot better for my head. The family and I struggled through by doing what had to be done.

I’ve always thought it would be no problem finding a job if I really needed to. Who would know that the conditions would get that tight for so long. While there were occasional situations that looked good, simple odds were not in my favor. At this point, I wasn’t an easy fit – too experienced for lots of situations, and not experienced enough in management for those infrequent positions.

While I didn’t have a job or a title, I sure felt like an out-of-work sysadmin.

### Going a Courting . . .

The beginning of the end came at a technology show (see the February 2002 issue of *login*: for more info on this topic). When I wasn’t staffing the GVSAGE booth, I was walking the floor and networking.

One of my walks took me past the booth of a salesman I knew. We had brought their equipment in for evaluation, but had been unable to convince management that we should invest (in hindsight, the reasoning seems *sooo* obvious now). He said we should talk more.

The show was good to me; I had a number of leads to follow up on, one being with this VAR. Pre- and post-sales work – I could do that; it’s like showing the customer how the product fits in and then making those connections.

### But . . .

The shoe fell when I found out there would be pre- and post-sales work available when I found prospects ready to buy. Sysadmins are generally smart enough to put two and two together, and I'm no exception to the rule. This was a position in sales.

### Sales . . .

So I did what any engineering-minded person would do: I began studying the sales profession. I "did lunch" with a couple of sales people I liked and respected. I started reading everything I could get out of the library on the topic. And I kept working the other job leads I had going.

### A Whole Lot of Emotions

The world of sales is a bit different. The tie from "success" to "reward" is pretty darned direct. You are not contributing to a project, or providing the environment for the project to succeed in, you are helping someone else get to the point where they think that the product is worth purchasing. The sale starts the flow of money into the company – without it, the company stops existing. If the product costs the company \$X, and the customer is paying 150% of \$X, your company is "ahead" by that 50% of \$X.

At the most basic of levels, you are paying yourself out of that percentage. The upside is that exceeding expectations should be both immediately obvious and rewarding. The downside is that lack of success is also readily evident with notable consequences.

The exact distribution of this success varies by sales domains and organizations. Safety for the sales person comes in the form of a base salary. Risk and reward comes in the form of commissions.

So while I was excited about the prospects ahead, the fear of failure had financial as well as mental strings attached.

### Don't Give Up the Day Job

The first iteration on "I'll do it" was – what if I found another part-time contract sysadmin job that would allow me flexibility. That's what wannabe actors do, right?

As luck would have it, I kept moving forward on all of the potential job fronts, but every other opportunity dropped out – until I was left with just the sales position.

And somewhere in there it hit me – why am I resistant to this position? If something like this opened up at one of the big manufacturers, wouldn't I be banging on the door asking for it? I knew it was something I could do, but did I want to? (It's not like I'd be selling snake oil; the product was one that I had looked into buying myself!-)

### Just Because . . .

Just because some other sales people push bad products on unsuspecting customers doesn't mean that being in sales is bad. And that image is what I didn't want to become.

On the other hand, I've seen people in the USENIX / SAGE world move into sales positions (when you take a piece of software and make a company devoted to selling it or services related to it, you are in sales;-). I've seen them get out of sales positions, and that downside isn't as bad as I'd imagined either.

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## **Signing on the Dotted Line**

So I was convinced, and the deal was worked out. I like to think that we negotiated to the point that encouraged me to act “hungry and motivated, but not desperate.” The VAR wants to motivate sales, but not at the expense of longer-term relationships with the customers. I needed to make sure the bills could get paid in the short term, and the potential was worth my effort.

Reactions from my family cover the gamut. Some are positively enthusiastic, some are unsure but supportive, and one thinks I’ve made a mistake. True to form, I’m out to prove the naysayer wrong.

## **But I Can Still Be a Sysadmin, Can’t I?**

As you can see, I took each of these steps in a logical fashion, one after the other.

Maybe it’s like in the medical profession when a doctor joins a pharmaceutical company and no longer sees patients – they’re still a doctor. Maybe being a sysadmin is not just the knowledge you have, or the activities you perform, or the title on your door. If we are a profession, and I say we are, it’s got to be something more than managing user accounts.

So, yes, I am a sysadmin and a card-carrying member of SAGE, the professional organization of system administrators. (Okay, I really don’t carry my card around – but I could.) And, currently, I am simply providing better data storage solutions to businesses that need them.

As I said, I have no regrets.