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motd



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EVERY YEAR, SAGE ADMINISTERS A salary survey. This year's survey garnered over 4,000 responses and included an Unemployment Survey for those who were out of work for more than half the year. Some of the statistics turned out to be interesting or counterintuitive, and the respondents' comments make thought-provoking reading.

Of those respondents employed more than six months during 2003, over one in ten (10.9%) was unemployed for at least a week (by simple arithmetic, almost 90% were employed steadily throughout the year).

This year's survey asked respondents what they thought about certifications. We received a number of extremely vehement responses from an obviously vocal group. The question was, "Do you think certifications are a good thing for the profession in general?" 48% answered, "Sometimes, it depends"; 19.1% checked "Rarely, a few are good"; 9.3% checked "No, generally they are worthless." 11.7% thought they were a good thing, and 10.0% checked "Usually, most are pretty good." Tallied up, almost 70% think that certifications have at least a somewhat positive impact.

Subtracting years of experience from a person's age gives a suggestion as to what age they entered the field. Figure 1 shows that over a third of the respondents entered the field when they were 25 or older. Figure 2 shows the bell-curve-like distribution of experience, including the big bubble of people entering the field during the dot-com boom. Mean experience was 8.01 years; median was 5 years.



FIGURE 1

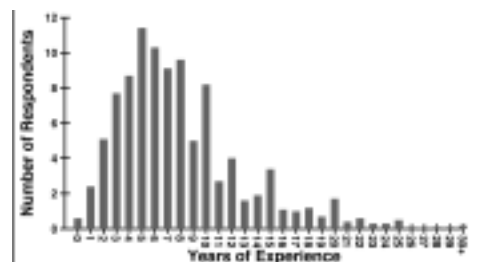


FIGURE 2

Many sysadmins were not educated in a field they thought was relevant (e.g., computer science). Only 7.4% had a bachelor's degree or higher in a relevant field. See Figure 3 for the surprising distribution.

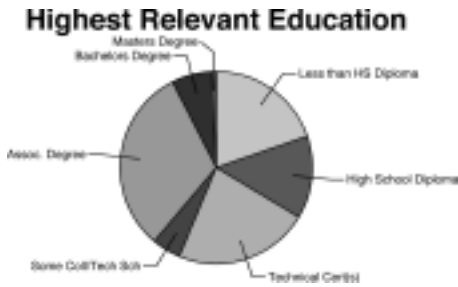


FIGURE 3

74.6% of those responding increased their salary during 2003. The average increase of those who improved their lot was 8.18%; the median was 6.06%. 15.4% saw a 0–0.99% increase, while 10.8% earned less in 2003 than in 2002. See Figure 4 for the distribution. Respondents cited a variety of reasons for their improved salaries. Those items checked by 5% or more of the respondents (each of whom could check as many as three reasons) included:

- Performance
- Goal achievement
- Standard raises/cost-of-living adjustments
- Increased responsibilities
- Hard work
- System stability
- High-profile projects



FIGURE 4

Several respondents were frustrated with the profession, as indicated by their responses in the comments section:

Future not so bright, shades no longer required.

I'm depressed. I'm now making less than when I first started years ago, as if my career has been wiped away.

Too many people with MCSEs who think they know everything. The management in my department has threatened to replace me with a lower-paying position. The secretaries and administrative support folks make as much money as I do, even though they are not as skilled or required to keep

up with technologies. I feel underappreciated as a result.

They also had comments about system administration as a profession.

UNIX is cool, sysadmin is cool, large-scale corp IT is not. To paraphrase a book I read recently: "IT is not like football. In football the coaches are proud of star players; in IT the managers/execs want to be the star players as well."

Employers need to have a better grasp of exactly what it is that system administrators do and why our job function is so important.

The biggest problem I'm experiencing currently is now that technology is so widespread and that non-IT managers read the latest "trends" in magazines such as *Business 2.0*, many managers are forcing themselves into technology decision-making roles when they have absolutely no competence to do so. This is disrupting workflow, time, and wastes tons of money.

This one was particularly interesting:

Open Source Software is eroding the desirability and marketability of traditional UNIX sysadmins. Employers are increasingly more reluctant to pay high salaries to manage what they see as a "free" software. As more high-end UNIX installations (enterprise-class servers) are replaced by racks of whitebox Linux servers, companies are looking for cheaper manpower to manage them.

A subsequent query to the sage-members email list revealed that this attitude, while not widespread, does appear in some companies.

Many had advice. This paragraph was illuminating:

As an industry, we need to clear up the "old school thinking" and make a concerted effort to understand the businesses we work for—try to align strategies, to use technology to best make the business work, etc., but most of all, we need to educate the business about what we do, how we do it, and why, and to earn mutual trust and respect so that they direct us in what they want achieved and let us decide how to do it.

All in all, system administration doesn't appear to be doing tremendously badly. Nevertheless, the same complaints about misunderstood job functions continue to appear year after year.