

;login:

THE MAGAZINE OF USENIX & SAGE

April 2001 • volume 26 • number 2



inside:

APROPOS



USENIX & SAGE

The Advanced Computing Systems Association &
The System Administrators Guild

apropos

More Than Money

We all work for something. I tell my kids that school is their “job” and their grades are their “pay.” For adults, it’s more concrete; we “do our time, we get our money.” For consultants it can be even clearer that the paycheck is tied to the “deliverable.” But occasionally we’re reminded that there are rewards other than money for a job well done.

Last week I was talking to a colleague of mine and we got started on an old client of ours. We frequently discuss this particular client because, frankly, we didn’t like the ending we had there. I guess it’s the nature of conscientious people to dwell on regrets over successes. I say “regrets” rather than “failures” here because, realistically, we didn’t come close to failing this client, yet my colleague and I just feel that there was so much more we could have accomplished there.

This was a young business with young employees and gobs and gobs of networks and machines, and it was still growing phenomenally. For a network addict it qualified as a “big fix,” and for a seasoned admin it called out for vision and leadership; in short it had “all the right stuff” to be a really great network with fabulous challenge and potential to work on.

We jumped right in, quickly getting our bearings and assessing what needed to be done. The application was very demanding and the network growth necessary to keep up with the growing success of the application was nothing short of staggering. We needed to sustain existing capability and simultaneously get a handle on growth, so that machines and networks could be deployed and administered in a predictable and reliable way.

We laid out a course of action, including specific recommendations and action items to bring this test-bed environment up to industry standards for high-profile, highly-reliable, production networks. This is where we got stopped in our tracks. We had assumed that the sub-par condition and design of the network were a result of the extreme pressure to build a network and develop a product in ultra-compressed “Internet” time, coupled with a young and inexperienced system administration staff that, in their defense, probably had never seen a “production network.” When we presented them with concrete steps which would ultimately lead to a securable and scalable production network, we discovered a corporate culture which consistently took network security and reliability risks.

Ultimately we had to settle for chipping away at the problem by implementing little pieces of “good practice” wherever we could. But it did not approach the deliberate, top-down plan we felt was warranted. This is the source of our regret and our conversations about “what could have been” and what else we might have done to persuade them to change their ways.

Unlike many of the conversations about this client, this one had been sparked by some unexpected good news. My colleague had gotten mail from one of the client’s system administrators who had moved to another employer, saying that he was deploying many of the individual pieces and, most importantly, the overall approach to his new network with great success, and he wanted to thank him for his example and for what he’d learned.

Making a positive impact on the career of another system administrator has got to be one of the most rewarding things to do and worth far more than any paycheck. Sometimes you’re fortunate enough to hear about it. I know that single email message will change the tone of every future conversation we have about that client since we’ll now have to count it among our major success stories.

by Tina
Darmohray

Tina Darmohray, co-editor of *login*, is a computer security and networking consultant. She was a founding member of SAGE.



<tmd@usenix.org>