

MATT SIMMONS

LISA: beginning the journey



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TWENTY-FOUR. THAT'S THE NUMBER OF hours I spent in structured training in 2009. Zero hours were spent the year before that. And the year before that. Not coincidentally, twenty-four is the number of hours I spent in classrooms at LISA '09, being trained by some of the best in the world.

Prior to attending LISA '09 in Baltimore, MD, I had been to exactly one conference, and that was the second year of the Ohio Linux Festival. Visiting an established conference that was professionally organized and executed was a new experience for me, and it opened my eyes to a world of system administration whose existence I had little suspected.

I learned several lessons. First, the LISA acronym is really a misnomer. Large Infrastructures are relative. I met people who measured their computing power by rooms, and others who made my paltry 100 nodes seem complex. Both were there to learn how to better manage their infrastructures. Both could learn from each other, and for the most part saw each other as equals.

I learned that during a time of tight budgets, there are a lot of companies around the world that see the value in having their people trained by experts who not only know the field but, in some cases, invented it. And yet, though the administrators were from diverse backgrounds, countries, and tongues, we all shared the same types of problems. We could commiserate, tell war stories, and complain about (and be thankful for) users.

I also learned that maybe the most important component of success in the long run is a sufficiently deep support network. Although we use mailing lists, IRC, and instant messaging to communicate with other administrators in the field, making a physical connection to someone is different, somehow. Shaking someone's hand and looking them in the eye says more than a dozen emails can. Making contacts, acquaintances, and friends increases our network of resources when we have problems, and gives us someone to talk to when we aren't getting answers.

All of this I learned before I ever set foot in a classroom.

These lessons not only make me a better administrator, they make me a saner administrator. I extended my experience through the people that I met, and made contacts and friends that I expect to keep for years to come. The extracurricular

activities held at LISA were the flip side of the coin, where you really got to know the people you met during the hallway track.

The Birds of a Feather I attended were fascinating, and as informative as classes, themselves. Even though it was my first LISA, I got my feet wet and hosted a couple of BoFs myself. One of the forms of evening entertainment was unique to my experience. BigFix, a conference sponsor, held a Sysadmin of the Year contest with a rock star theme, the results of which were to be announced at LISA. No celebration is complete without a cake, and no rock star themed party is complete without a rock band. To satisfy both requirements, BigFix got Baltimore native Duff Goldman, of Food Network's *Ace of Cakes*, to make a cake, and he and his band played the party. I was even lucky enough to get an honorable mention!

The combination of the hallway track, BoFs, vendor floor, and being surrounded by sysadmins was incredible, especially for someone who hasn't been in that situation before. As amazing as all of these things were, what was going on inside the classrooms was even more amazing.

In a few days, I attended eight classes, and got deeper knowledge of the technical subjects than if I'd spent an entire week teaching myself the topics. I suspect that all system administrators are autodidacts to one extent or another, but receiving first-hand information from someone who has been in the field 20 years is a fairly efficient method of knowledge transfer. I started with Maurita Plouff's class, "Management Skills, or Don't Panic!" The title of this class might as well have been "Directed Social Engineering," because the omnipresent theme was efficiently getting people to do what you wanted, whether they are your supervisor, users, or some other stakeholder. These skills are valuable, particularly in a field where labels like "people person" aren't thrown around often.

;login: editor Rik Farrow spoke to my heart with his SELinux course. The first slide in his deck was "Re-enabling SELinux," which made the absolutely correct assumption that the first course of action most of us take when building a new machine is to turn it off. Working from that premise, Rik built his case for the usefulness of this feature from the ground up, discussing secure-computing history, as well as the background for the early decisions that led to the Linux kernel modifications enabling this software. Rik gave us several tools for evaluating the SELinux configuration for our machines, and encouraged us to move our policy setting from Disabled to Permissive, at least until we can develop a working security policy that will allow us to function under Enforcing.

It's beyond the scope of this article (and your patience, I'm sure) to give a detailed review of every course I took at LISA, but one really stands out in my mind. Before going into Linux Performance Tuning, I hadn't heard of Theodore Ts'o, which says more about me than it does him.

If you use EXT3, EXT4, or Linux in general, you're using Ted's code. According to his Wikipedia page, he was the first North American Linux kernel developer. It's probably better for me that I didn't research him before I took the class, because I might have been too in awe to fill up the eight-plus pages of notes that I managed to scribble during the class. Prior to this class, I was under the impression that I understood a decent amount about how the operating system worked. I was incorrect.

This course would have been worth the entire trip by itself. It is directly because of my experiences in this class that I have received numerous accolades from my supervisor and the heads of other departments in my company. By applying the lessons I learned (and information that I researched

because of it), I am in a much better position to plan, implement, and maintain my infrastructure. I am a better administrator because I was in this class. It's as simple as that.

The aggregate effect of my experience is relatively easy to measure. After seeing the value of formal training, and thanks in large part to my experiences at LISA, my company's management has taken a new track. We have already scheduled over forty hours of training in the coming year, several of which will be at LISA '10 in San Jose.

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