

Open source's people problem

Projects are multiplying, yet a shortage of in-house skills could slow them down.

By Mary Brandel
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At ACP Interactive, a San Francisco-based marketing firm, IT Director Ed Skokowski says he too has lost staffers who have moved on after getting experience with an open-source application -- in his case, Perl, which ACP uses extensively.

Building the Skills

In light of the salary premiums companies have to pay to recruit people with open-source skills, it's no wonder the preferred method of acquiring such expertise seems to be training in-house staff. In *Computerworld's* March survey, 85% of the respondents said they chose that option instead of hiring outside contractors.

To Skokowski, teaching open source is like teaching an old dog new tricks. ACP has migrated about 80% of its Windows servers to Linux, and while those systems are now up and running, Skokowski says there were a few false starts over a five-year period. "Just getting the printers to work was a two-to-three-day chore," he says. "If you've lived in Windows a long time, you get used to the idiosyncrasies of getting it to work, and it's the same thing in Linux."

For instance, Skokowski says he has encountered discrepancies between what the Linux command line shows and what you see through its graphical user interface. He once made a change to an IP address through the GUI, but the system didn't reset. The problem was apparent in the command line but not through the GUI. "You have to know how to navigate via the command line really well," he says.

In another case, servers were automatically turning off at night. The solution turned out to be simple, but it was an obscure problem that required research on online forums to resolve, Skokowski says. What's nice about open source, however, is that when you do encounter a problem, you can capture a screenshot and pop it into Google to see if other users have a solution, he says.

Skokowski's staff mainly learned about open source through hands-on training, although he enrolled himself and a couple of others on his then-10-person team in a couple of systems administration courses at the University of California, Berkeley. "We set up a server and gradually built more machines to get more experience with it," he says. They also read books and visited online forums like LinuxQuestions.org. "The community is so good, there really hasn't been much we haven't been able to solve," he adds.

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