

book reviews



ELIZABETH ZWICKY, WITH DAVE JOSEPHSEN AND BRANDON CHING

AUTOMATING SYSTEM ADMINISTRATION WITH PERL, SECOND EDITION

David N. Blank-Edelman

O'Reilly and Associates, 2009. 616 pp.
ISBN 978-0-596-00639-6

This is one of those books that make me wish I had a time machine, so I could go back and give it to my past self. I think back to the hours and hours I spent gritting my teeth and picking through all sorts of documentation, whimpering, “Why will nobody tell me just the basics of this stuff, nicely and clearly? Surely if I had a basic understanding and maybe an example, I could beat this to death with a Perl program smoothly and elegantly,” and I hope that the next person stuck in this situation has a copy of this book. This book will tell you (among other things) how to subdue a log file, send mail, query a router’s status or a database’s contents, create or delete a user, and find out what’s going on on a machine, in Perl, on a UNIX-based or Windows operating system. It’s a gold mine of information on how to do intermediate system administration tasks in Perl, and it covers exactly the sort of things that are frustrating and time-consuming to figure out for yourself.

There are two classes of things it won’t tell you: basics and advanced knowledge. It doesn’t give you the basics of either system administration or Perl programming. If you need to know how to name your users, when you should delete a user account, or basics of TCP/IP, you’ll need to go elsewhere (and it gives suggestions as to where). Similarly, you should either have written Perl programs before or be an intrepid language-learner. It does give you basics of all sorts of complex topics, like LDAP, SQL, SNMP,

and XML, but not details and not advanced knowledge. The goal here is not to make you a skilled database administrator, for instance; it’s to equip you to bludgeon a database into giving up its secrets in a competent and workmanlike manner. But there are plenty of references to places with more information.

Along the way, you’ll pick up a lot of information about good system administration programming practice and thought patterns. There’s a nice balance between instructing the reader on what a clean, elegant solution looks like and how to build it, and instructing the reader on when a dirty, clunky solution is the way to go and how to build it.

SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Ken Lawson

Barron’s, 2006. 235 pp.
ISBN 978-0-7641-3246-9

I picked this up because it looked like a non-threatening, easy-to-read introduction to “leadership,” which is one of those nebulous concepts that is simultaneously completely bogus management-speak and genuinely incredibly important. And, indeed, this is relatively easy to digest, and it should at least half-way convince you that something real is being discussed. But it’s not quite what I was hoping for.

Imagine a course entitled “Successful Leadership Skills”; now imagine you skip the lectures and read just the slides. Also imagine that the presenter is competent but not terribly imaginative, so the slides do not include any pictures or graphs. This is what you’d get. It’s a rapid tour of mainstream thinking about leadership, presented almost entirely in numbered lists and written in high-quality business-standard prose. It is as neutral as possible, clearly trying to avoid strong points of view.

There are two situations where this book may be useful to you. First, if you want to jump-start your personal thinking about leadership, you might want to chew over a few pages at a time as a way of clarifying what you think. Since the book is not trying to be particularly persuasive and doesn’t bring a lot of rhetorical devices to bear, you are left to bring your own content in. If you don’t want to do that, you’re unlikely to learn a lot. But if you want a framework you can fill in, it will take you a lot further than a book that’s pushing a particular agenda.

Second, if you want to know what management thinks about leadership, it’s a concise introduction to mainstream management beliefs. It will teach you the relevant buzzwords, what’s supposed to be good, what’s supposed to be bad, and how the space divides up. That helps a lot when you’re talking cross-

culturally to management types. If you happen to know what particular philosophy your management subscribes to, you'd probably be better off researching that, but if you don't know or it's just too painful for you to read, this will give you a basic conceptual survey. And it's mostly painless.

ANDROID APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT: PROGRAMMING WITH THE GOOGLE SDK

Rick Rogers, John Lombardo, Zigurd Mednieks, and Blake Meike

O'Reilly, 2009. 334 pp.
ISBN 9780596521479

REVIEWED BY DAVE JOSEPHSEN

I was really excited to hear that there was an O'Reilly Android book out, and I'm equally excited to be able to say that it's exceeding my expectations at every turn.

I had my doubts when I got my hands on it. It is by no means a heavy book—just over 300 pages and yet is co-authored by four people. But true to the adage, this is no book to be judged by its cover. I found it to be well written and densely packed with well organized, clearly conveyed information.

The book has two parts, "Development Kit Walk-Through" and "Programming Topics." I read through all seven chapters of the first part in linear fashion and was introduced to Android's design and the basics of the IDE. If you've ever done mobile Java programming, you're probably aware that learning the intricacies of the development environment is at least one-third of the problem. Most of the trouble you'll have early on centers on cross-compiling, storing and retrieving resources such as strings and graphical sprites, and resolving library references—things that require familiarity with the IDE to get right (and debugging when what you get is wrong).

The authors have a great feel for what you want to know when you're getting started. At least for me, they seemed to have an uncanny knack for providing exactly the right piece of information just at the moment I started to wonder about it, and by the end of the first part I felt I had a pretty good grasp of the architecture. I also had the IDE installed on my MacBook and Linux workstation, and a "Hello World" program running in the emulator on both.

The second part of the book focuses on specific portions of the Android API. Topics include SQLite and content provider access, GUI views and widgets, and the mapping and location API. I've only read portions of the second part of the book, because the first part got me far enough to start work on porting an app I had written for Sidekick over to Android, but the chapters I have read in support of that effort are as well written and informative as those in the first part.

I could probably stop there, but there are a few things I'd like to give kudos to the authors on. The first is that they avoid the jargon-heavy language used by so many authors of Java-related books. They've made an obvious attempt to avoid using heavily Java-centric language, and as someone who only casually programs in Java (and avoids it when he can), I appreciate the effort. Second, as someone who doesn't use Windows at all, it was great to see the extra effort they put into being cross-platform, often providing details for Linux and Mac OS X as well as Windows.

This book isn't a comprehensive tome of everything you'll ever need to know about Android, but it's a fantastic primer and, as a supplement to the official Google documentation, it won't make the migration from desk to shelf anytime soon. Good work, guys.

PRO OPENSOLARIS: A NEW OPEN SOURCE OS FOR LINUX DEVELOPERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Harry J. Foxwell and Christine Tran

Apress, 2009. 280 pp.
ISBN 978-1430218913

REVIEWED BY BRANDON CHING

Choosing a development environment for either desktop or Web-based application development is generally a trivial thought experiment. Most experienced developers have their preferences and generally don't deviate much unless a new method or tool becomes available that better fits their development needs.

The OpenSolaris operating system is attempting to be that new tool that developers will want to have around. A community-developed and -driven project based on the Solaris 10 code base, OpenSolaris is attempting to lure away the growing cadres of Linux-centric developers and administrators. Touted as a platform for both desktop application and Web development, OpenSolaris is a promising and viable alternative to Linux-based development.

In Pro OpenSolaris, Harry Foxwell and Christine Tran delve into the key features that make OpenSolaris an attractive option for developers and adminis-

trators. Topics such as the Service Management Facility, the ZFS file system, and OpenSolaris virtualization are all covered in sufficient detail. While not an exhaustive text on the topic, the book is an excellent introduction and starting point for developers not familiar with OpenSolaris.

The book is broken down into three parts, with nine chapters in all. The first part offers a general introduction to OpenSolaris, including its history, unique benefits over Linux, a walk-through installation, and general usability coverage. For most experienced Linux developers, the first part of this book will probably not be as valuable as the remaining two. The OpenSolaris installation follows the general Linux installation process with the exception of virtualization options which are addressed in greater detail in Chapter 7. Once installed, the default GNOME desktop environment should be familiar to most.

Part 2, “Working with OpenSolaris,” is where the fun really begins. In Chapter 5, Foxwell and Tran introduce the Service Management Facility (SMF) of OpenSolaris. Replacing the familiar `/etc/rc*` files and methods, the SMF is a service daemon that is responsible for all service management. The authors do an excellent job of introducing the SMF and its associated tools, including feature outlines, screenshots, technical details, and a number of good examples. Each aspect of the SMF is well covered, with detailed explanation and demonstrations. By the end of this chapter, you should be an expert in the SMF.

In Chapter 6, the authors dive into what I feel is the most exciting feature of OpenSolaris: the ZFS file system. As a Web developer, this was my first exposure to the ZFS and, as in the previous chapter, Foxwell and Tran do an excellent job of introducing the technology. The major features of the ZFS are massive addressable space (128 bits), active integrity checking, and, my personal favorite, “nearly unlimited and instantaneous file system snapshots” (p. 103). The authors relate the system snapshots to Apple

OS X’s Time Machine, but from their descriptions it seems like a more customizable implementation. As with the previous chapter, this one is also full of tool usage details, snapshots, and practical examples.

In Chapter 7, “OpenSolaris and Virtualization,” Foxwell and Tran present probably the strongest chapter of the book. Over 40 pages, the authors provide great detail, background, and examples utilizing OpenSolaris-specific virtualization methodologies. Opening with a great general introduction to virtualization, the authors proceed to extensive coverage of OpenSolaris specific zones and zone management, followed by an introduction to the xVM hypervisor. Zones are incredibly powerful ways of managing applications, and the authors stress the use of zones throughout the book.

Part 3 takes you through setting up a development environment in OpenSolaris and an introduction to a few more OpenSolaris-specific features. Chapter 8 walks you through the installation of an Apache, MySQL, PHP (AMP) zone. While a seemingly trivial exercise to Linux natives, the authors cover OpenSolaris-specific considerations, including package management, service administration, and default file locations. The chapter closes with an introduction to the NetBeans IDE and integration of other third-party tools and products such as Subversion.

In the book’s final chapter, Foxwell and Tran seem to touch on a number of remaining OpenSolaris tools and features that just don’t fit anywhere else. Coverage in this chapter includes DTrace for system analysis, the Tracker utility for metadata file searching, and a few other resources for entertainment and educational pursuits.

Overall, Pro OpenSolaris is a great introduction to the features and tools offered by OpenSolaris. While probably not the most complete guide to implementation in OpenSolaris, the book is definitely of value to both Linux desktop and Web developers, as well as system administrators and information managers. The writing style is technical yet approachable and connects topics nicely. As I mentioned, the chapters on ZFS and virtualization are incredibly strong, and I would certainly recommend this book to anyone interested in a Linux alternative with cutting-edge features and an active community base.