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inside:

APROPOS



## USENIX & SAGE

The Advanced Computing Systems Association &  
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# apropos

## Living on Borrowed Time

System administrators like to tell “war stories.” I hypothesize that our retelling of stories serves our community much the same way story-telling serves many cultures: by passing along traditions, values, and experience. With the explosive growth of our industry, it seems there are ever more experiences to share and more stories to tell. I received this note from one of my friends via email last week.

I’m writing this note from the co-location cage at Exodus. Good connectivity from here :-). Over the last few months that I’ve been in here, I’ve wondered who the next cage over belongs to. I’ve never seen such a mess. Their racks are stuffed full of bare motherboards (no cases) that are as crooked as the hind leg of a dog, bowed in the middle from the weight of the CPUs and other components. There’s a “bridge” of sorts over the doorway. It is built up of those long power strips (plugged in and in use, of course) on each side. Over the top, connecting the two sides, are two Panduit wire-management trough covers that are duct-taped together. They support a thick bundle of Ethernet cables. The right side support is held up by being duct-taped to a shelf. The left side support is wedged between two stacks of computers piled on the floor, each about waist-high. On top of the pile closest to the door is an HP hub. The place makes your belly churn to look at it. I’ve always wondered who this mess belonged to. Today I found out. It’s [Editor’s Note: name removed to protect the innocent] . . .

Stories like this do make seasoned system administrators wonder why that hardware is in such disarray. The popular excuse these days is often “the company is running on Internet time.” I gotta say, this one doesn’t hold much water for me any more because in fact, it’s often the very reason the company’s network should be a showplace for industry best practices. It’s obvious, isn’t it? If a company’s business is the network, doesn’t it follow that the network is the most important priority and has to be done right? Sadly, as we hear from my friend, it’s not always the case, which is what makes it noteworthy.

Cultures tell stories that have special meaning and have the intent to pass on wisdom to the listener. Veteran system administrators are virtually screaming at the tops of their lungs in many forums to take the time to design and deploy networks that can scale, be reliable, and are secure. Heed their advice and avoid the temptation to cut corners and create network monstrosities in the name of “Internet Time.” If you do, you’ll find out all too soon that you’re living on “Borrowed Time.”

by Tina  
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