

Foreword

Twenty-seven years ago, in 1983, I wrote what may have been the first system administrator's guide for the UNIX operating system. I'd been hired as a contractor to write documentation at a UNIX workstation company called Massachusetts Computer Company (MASSCOMP for short). When I finished the graphics programming manuals I'd been hired to write, I was casting around for something else to do there. "When any of us have system problems, we go to Tom Teixeira," I said. "What are our customers going to do?"

The answer was quick: "Uh, oh! We really need a manual." I was soon rehired to extract as much information as I could from Tom Teixeira's head and put it onto paper.

That book covered the basics: the root account, account addition, permission management, backup and restore, a bit about networking with UUCP, and so on. It was oriented toward System V, one of the two dominant flavors of UNIX at the time (the other being Berkeley UNIX).

All things considered, I did a pretty good job of extracting information from Tom and other members of the then rare caste of elite system administrators. But there was no question in my mind that when the *UNIX System Administration Handbook* (USAH) came out in 1989, the bible of the field had arrived—captured not by an amanuensis, but direct from the keyboards of the masters.

By then, O'Reilly had become a publisher. Recognizing that many of my technical writing customers were adopting UNIX, I had begun retaining the rights to the manuals I wrote so that I could resell them to other companies. In late 1985, we introduced our first books that were sold to the public rather than licensed to companies. We focused first on small books about individual topics such as **vi**,

sed and **awk**, **termcap** and **terminfo**, and the UUCP networking system. We called them “Nutshell Handbooks” because we wanted to capture everything “in a nutshell.”

We didn’t really know anything about publishing. Our books had no spines (they were stapled), indexes, or ISBNs. We sold them by mail order, not through bookstores. But bit by bit, we learned. And eventually, we came into competition with the existing world of computer book publishers.

General UNIX administration was an obvious subject for us, but we didn’t tackle it till years later. Why not? I am a big believer in filling unmet needs, not competing for the sake of it. And it was so clear that there was already a book on the topic that was not just good but GREAT! I could imagine neither the need to compete with such a comprehensive book nor the possibility of success in doing so.

Eventually, as our business matured and we entered the retail computer book market, we realized that competition can actually help grow the market. People see one book, and it’s an outlier. They see more than one, and, to quote Arlo Guthrie, “they may think it’s a movement.” Besides, in that first edition of *USAH*, the authors had a clear bias toward BSD-based systems, and we thought there was room for a book with more of a System V bias.

In 1991, we published our own comprehensive book on UNIX system administration, Æleen Frisch’s *Essential System Administration*.

As an author, editor, and publisher, I never paid much attention to the competition—except in a few cases. This is one of those cases. The *UNIX System Administration Handbook* is one of the few books we ever measured ourselves against. Could we be as good? Could we be better? Like the NBA duels of Magic Johnson and Larry Bird, the competition brought out the best in us.

Uh, oh again! Fourth edition? Æleen had better get back to work! :-)

Tim O’Reilly

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