

Foreword to the First Edition

The administration of UNIX systems has always been a somewhat neglected subject. I think this happened for several reasons, all connected to various aspects of its unusual history.

First, the creation and early spread of the system took place among devotees, people who soon became knowledgeable of its nooks and crannies. These groups were often irritated by the formalities and procedures common in the big computer centers that were the chief computational resources during the 1970s, and they were ingenious in developing their own wizardly administrative recipes instead of relying on cookbooks.

Second, a typical UNIX system inhabits a computing niche unusual until recently. Most commonly, such systems are either medium-size machines serving a single department in a company or university, or workstations used by a single person but connected by a network to many other systems. For the most part—though there are now exceptions—UNIX systems are not big machines with professional, on-site staff from the manufacturer or a big computer center, nor personal computers owned by isolated individuals.

For a large machine, it is expected that professionals will provide the support. For the personal computer, the manufacturer is expected to write the administrative cookbook for the limited range of uses to which the machine will be put. The purchasers of a midrange machine may find themselves suddenly nominated to be the staff; this can make them feel nearly as much on their own as if they had bought a personal computer, but they must face the complexities of keeping an eye on multiple users, dealing with one or more networks, and handling all the other daunting conundrums that turn up.

Finally, UNIX systems come from a variety of sources. Although there is a common core of useful administrative tools and procedures, not all suppliers provide a useful degree of support. Also, many sites import substantial amounts of software from university distributions, Usenet, or other places that provide the programs, but little else.

Despite the problems, many of the purveyors of UNIX systems do a good job of telling their customers how to run them. Nevertheless, a comprehensive book discussing administration is clearly needed. The manufacturer's theory of what you want to do is not necessarily your own, and the documentation may be scattered; your supplier may be more talented at building hardware than at generating useful manuals; or you may be using popular software that didn't come in the box.

Therefore, this book is most welcome.

Dennis Ritchie
October, 1988