How SysAdmins Devalue Themselves

**AND HOW
TO TRACK
ON-CALL
COVERAGE**

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**What's
in it for
practitioners**

Viewed Regularly

Q: Dear Tom, How can I devalue my work? Lately I've felt like everyone appreciates me, and, in fact, I'm overpaid and underutilized. Could you help me devalue myself at work?

A: Dear Reader, Absolutely! I know what a pain it is to lug home those big paychecks. It's so distracting to have people constantly patting you on the back. Ouch! Plus, popularity leads to dates with famous musicians and movie stars. (Just ask someone like Taylor Swift or Leonardo DiCaprio.) Who wants that kind of distraction when there's a perfectly good video game to be played?

Here are some time-tested techniques that everyone should know.

Work more than 40 hours each week

This is the simplest, and possibly the most common, technique used by sysadmins. You can easily cut your hourly worth in half by working 80 hours each week. Start by working late one or two nights a week. Then add weekends. Soon you'll be well on your way to a full 80 hours.

Working beyond the hours you are paid is free labor for the company. This reduces your average hourly rate. Why hire more sysadmins when you are willing to take up the slack? Overpaid CEOs say things like, "My pay is

commensurate with my responsibilities.” Notice that they don’t relate their pay to how many hours they work. Neither should you.

Mock what you don’t like

If you don’t like Microsoft, call it Microsquish. Don’t say open source; say “open sores.” The more you can sound like a 12-year-old, the better.

If you want to devalue yourself, throw professionalism out the door. Show your disrespect in the most childish way possible. I know one engineer who spells the operating system that he doesn’t like “Windoze,” even in e-mails to his co-workers and clients who use it. Way to go!

Interrupt other people

Nothing says “I don’t want to be respected” like not showing respect to other people. That’s why it is important not to let people finish their sentences. Once you’ve heard enough to know the general idea, just start barking out your reply. It shows you don’t care about what other people are saying and they’ll return that lack of respect to you.

Not letting people finish their sentences shows them how smart you are. Your brain is so powerful you’ve developed ESP. Prove it by answering their questions before they’ve told you what the problems are.

Respect is a two-way street. It’s like a boomerang. You show others your disrespect, and they send it right back at ya.

The truth is that if you automate a task out of existence, there will always be more tasks waiting to be automated.

Don't document or automate your operations

This point is a little controversial. Some people think that they increase their value by refusing to document anything. It makes them unfireable. The truth is that employees who keep playbooks and other documentation up to date are highly valued by managers.

Likewise, some sysadmins fear that if they write too much automation, it will put them out of a job. The truth is that if you automate a task out of existence, there will always be more tasks waiting to be automated. The person who does this is a workforce-multiplier: one person enabling others to do the work of many. That's highly valuable.

Therefore, if you want to devalue yourself, don't document or automate. Assure everyone that you'll document something later: resist the temptation to update wikis as you perform a task. When asked to automate anything, just look the person in the eye, sigh, and say, "I'm too busy to save time by automating things."

Focus on technology, not business benefits

That new server you want to buy is awesome, and if the business can't understand that, yell louder.

Some people disagree. They think that each technology purchase should be justified in terms of how it will benefit the business in ways that relate to money or time—for example, a server that will consolidate all sales information, making it possible for salespeople to find the information they need, when they need it. How boring. It's much more fun to explain that it is 20T of SSD-accelerated storage, Intel

5655 CPUs, and triple-redundant power supplies.

If you want to devalue yourself, describe projects in ways that obscure their business value. Use the most detailed technical terms and let people guess the business reason. Act as if the business is there to serve technology, not the other way around.

Only hire people that look like you

Diversity is about valuing the fact that people with different backgrounds bring different skills to the table. Studies find that the addition of a single person with a different background improves a team's productivity.

Productivity? Sounds like the opposite of devaluing yourself. To truly devalue yourself, make sure everyone on your team thinks the same way, has the same skills and similar backgrounds, and makes all the same mistakes.

As I wrote earlier, respect is a two-way street. If you want to devalue yourself, don't value differences.

Be the weird one

Be "the weird one" in your company. It doesn't matter that your co-workers don't understand your obscure references to *LOTR*, *Animaniacs*, and *Dune*. The spice must flow so we can make the bologna to put in our slacks before we head to Mount Doom. Pretend you don't notice the confused looks you get. Surely everyone has read *Dune*. Don't explain your cultural references and don't stop making them just because nobody understands them.

Many may consider someone who is diverse to be weird, but these are two different concepts. Diversity is about valuing differences. Being weird is about being oblivious to other people's reactions. Diversity requires a commitment to educating and being educated. Being weird is the opposite.

Everyone should be free to fly a freak-flag. If you want to devalue yourself, never explain.

Refer to the server room as the Shire. Don't say "happy birthday," say "happy hatchling day." Any time something has a red button, ask if it is candy-like.

Be difficult to find

You can't be valuable if you don't exist. If you are difficult to find or aren't available when people need you, you aren't providing value to anyone.

Work strange hours. Don't arrive until noon—unless the corporate culture is to arrive at noon; then arrive early. Either way, make sure your work hours don't overlap well with the people who need you.

Conclusion

If we all make a concerted effort, then all sysadmins, as a community, can make sure that the role of system administrator stays devalued for a very long time.

Q: Dear Tom, We have a very simple on-call schedule, but all the substitutions needed during December make it quite complex. How should we organize it better? For example,

our team has a week-long on-call schedule (Monday to Monday). During November and December, however, there is a flurry of e-mail with people requesting to trade days to accommodate various family and holiday responsibilities. How can we manage all these trades without a zillion e-mails?

A: Dear Reader, You can make a simple on-call trading forum using a shared spreadsheet like Google Sheets.

Create a spreadsheet with the first column being the list of dates. Even though your on-call schedule is weekly, list the individual days. The next column should list who is on call, and a third column can list who is the secondary on call, and so on. Add a column called Notes.

Share the spreadsheet with the team and encourage everyone to use the Notes column to indicate “substitute needed.” Someone looking to accumulate favors can find people who need substitutes. Once the substitution is found, update the columns and erase the note.

You now have a way to find unsatisfied requests (look for notes), and you can even do fancy things like write formulas to indicate mistakes such as the same person being both on call and the secondary on call.

Obviously, any substitutions also need to be updated in your monitoring system’s pager-duty schedule. I know of no such system, however, that will manage the horse-trading of on-call days so fluidly. The fact that the spreadsheet is multiuser means that no one person has to coordinate it. The entire process becomes self-organizing.

Another useful shared spreadsheet to create is one that charts who will be available when during the holiday season. When you are on call and need assistance, it is good to know whom you can call and who was planning on being out of cellphone range that day. It saves time and frustration.

Another benefit to putting together such a chart is that it lets you check for coverage gaps ahead of time. For example, if only two people on your team know how to fix MongoDB problems, you can use the chart to make sure that at least one of them is available at any given time.

At StackOverflow we set up the availability spreadsheet as follows. The first column lists each day from November 1 until January 7. This covers all the major holidays and then some.

There is a column for each person on the operations team. We share the spreadsheet and ask everyone to enter “available,” “not available,” or “semi-available” in each cell. “Semi-available” means they are not working but can be reached in an emergency. “Not available” means they will not have any network or cell access. Conditional formatting turns the cells red, green, or yellow as appropriate. These phrases/colors are placed somewhere on the spreadsheet so that people can copy and paste them.

There are some additional columns that we find useful. We list who is on call in one column. Another column is for notes such as “office closed” or reminders of conferences or other potential events. We also place borders on cells to indicate the start of each week. Figure 1 shows an example spreadsheet.

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FIGURE 1: ON-CALL SPREADSHEET FOR HOLIDAY COVERAGE

Holiday Coverage ☆											
File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Add-ons Help All changes saved in Drive											
1	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
2	LEGEND										
3	Office	Will be in the office									
4	Remote	Working from home or home office									
5	Very Remote	Working remotely; too far away to come to the datacenter if needed									
6	Available	Not working but available in an emergency									
7	Unavailable	Not working, unavailable (no cell coverage, etc.)									
8	Date	Events/Confere	Oncall/Sb	Alice	Bob	Eve	Tom	Mallory	Oscar	Personal requests, notes, etc.	
16	November 9 Mon	LISA, WashDC	Bob/Eve	Unavailable	Office	Remote	Unavailable	Office	Office		
17	November 10 Tue	LISA, WashDC	Bob/Eve	Unavailable	Office	Remote	Unavailable	Office	Office		
18	November 11 Wed	LISA, WashDC	Bob/Eve	Unavailable	Office	Remote	Available	Office	Office		
19	November 12 Thu	LISA, WashDC	Bob/Eve	Unavailable	Office	Remote	Available	Office	Office		
20	November 13 Fri	LISA, WashDC	Bob/Eve	Unavailable	Office	Remote	Available	Office	Office		
21	November 14 Sat		Bob/Eve	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Bob is looking to swap oncall today!	
22	November 15 Sun		Bob/Eve	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available		
23	November 16 Mon		Alice/Bob	Remote	Office	Very Rem	Office		Office		
24	November 17 Tue		Alice/Bob	Remote	Office	Very Rem	Office		Office		
25	November 18 Wed		Alice/Bob	Remote	Office	Very Rem	Office		Office		
26	November 19 Thu		Alice/Bob	Remote	Office	Very Rem	Office		Office		
27	November 20 Fri		Alice/Bob	Remote	Office	Very Rem	Office		Office		
28	November 21 Sat		Alice/Bob	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available		
29	November 22 Sun		Alice/Bob	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available		
30	November 23 Mon		Oscar/Alic	Remote	Very Rem	Very Rem	Office	Office	Office		
31	November 24 Tue		Oscar/Alic	Remote	Very Rem	Very Rem	Office		Office		
32	November 25 Wed		Oscar/Alic	Remote	Remote	Very Rem	Remote		Office		
33	November 26 Thu	Company Holiday	Oscar/Alic	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable		Available		
34	November 27 Fri	Company Holiday	Oscar/Alic	Available	Available	Unavailable	Available		Available		
35	November 28 Sat		Oscar/Alic	Available	Available	Unavailable	Available		Available		
36	November 29 Sun		Oscar/Alic	Available	Available	Available	Available	Remote	Available		
37	November 30 Mon		Mal/Oscar	Remote	Office	Remote	Remote	Remote	Office		
38	December 1 Tue		Mal/Oscar	Remote	Office	Remote	Office	Remote	Office		
39	December 2 Wed		Mal/Oscar	Remote	Office	Remote	Office	Remote	Office	Tom's bday	
40	December 3 Thu		Mal/Oscar	Remote	Office	Remote	Office	Office	Office		
41	December 4 Fri		Mal/Oscar	Remote	Office	Remote	Office	Office	Office		
42	December 5 Sat		Mal/Oscar	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available		
43	December 6 Sun		Mal/Oscar	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available		

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LOVE IT, HATE IT? LET US KNOW feedback@queue.acm.org

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