

LISA 2015 Conference

Students at HiOA and UiO

November 2015

1 Introduction

This report is was jointly written by ten students from the Master's program Network and system administration, which is a collaboration program between the University of Oslo and the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. The report contains information about the volunteer work they did at the 2015 edition of the LISA Conference which held at the Marriott Wardman Park hotel in Washington D.C

LISA (Large Installation System Administration) conference is a System Administration themed conference which focuses on the full spectrum of concerns that a system administrator has to deal with regularly or occasionally, and innovative ideas and solutions designed to boost efficiencies in this domain. The conference is organized by the USENIX Association, in cooperation with the League of Professional System Administrators (LOPSA).

The conference in view was the 29th edition and for the second time in the annals of the LISA conference, it was held in Washington D.C.

1.1 Attendance

This year's LISA conference had in attendance representatives from several prominent companies within the IT industry including, Cambridge Computer, Google, Oracle, Redhat, Openstack, CoreOS, Vembu and so forth.

1.1.1 Students who attended

- Bilal Ahmad
- Arinze George Akubue
- Migjen Hakaj
- Hussein Abdi
- Stian Strøm Anderssen
- Henrik Volden
- Kabin Tamrakar
- Jostein Løvbråten
- Maghsoud Morshedi
- Ramesh Upreti

2 The Journey to Washington DC

The volunteers travelled from Oslo to Washington DC in different groups and following varied routes. Some got off at New York and New Jersey airports, and then made their way down to the capital by road while enjoying the spectacle of the intervening cities and panorama offered by the country-side, while others opted to skip such adventure and headed straight to DC.

There were minor hitches along the way, particularly ones that had to do with zealous border control personnel - at some transit airports - carrying out security checks as per due process.

There were different estimates on the approximate length of the journey, but one estimate was 10 hours for the flight time from Oslo to Washington DC excluding stopover and flight transfer time at Heathrow Airport, London.

The volunteers arrived at the Marriott Wardman Park hotel - where arrangement for lodging had been made for them by USENIX - at different times of the day. Those who had embarked on the long, continuous journey from Oslo were completely exhausted and quickly sought the comfort of their beds after they had checked-in at the front desk.

2.1 Preparing promotional bags

The next day, following a night's rest that just didn't seem to be enough, all the volunteers hauled their groggy selves into the Jefferson conference room to partake in the first of their duties: stuffing USENIX branded bags with sundry stickers and fliers. It also served as the first meeting with Hillary Hartman and Howard Lem, who formally welcomed the volunteers and gave them a short pep talk.

The bag-stuffing exercise turned out to be a rejuvenating one as the team of volunteers found renewed energy when faced with the challenge of organizing around the task before them for the best possible completion time. The volunteers had quite some fun with the task although there was the awkward moment when one of the USENIX staff (name withheld) made them redo all the work because of a late delivery of some items which needed to go in the bags.

With the task completed, a few volunteers assisted with less demanding work such as folding T-shirts and slapping LISA 2015 stickers on USB sticks, while the rest took off to attend to other immediate interests.

3 Volunteer work

We worked as volunteers at the conference and helped out with different tasks while it lasted. There was a schedule put together before the conference where we could sign up to different types of work. The tasks included manning the T-shirt booth, registering attendees, monitoring rooms, tearing down booths, et cetera. The USENIX staff were always on-hand to help us gain quick familiarity with our duties and to aid us when challenges cropped up; they were very supportive and demonstrated sheer professionalism and cheerfulness in everything that they did. It was a nice experience to observe their work and see how a big conference like LISA is successfully organized.

3.1 Registration Worker

When working at the registration booth, the task primarily involved welcoming attendees and handing them their conference badges. These badges served as both as a pass to get into different talks, workshops, for meals, etc. The badges were not pre-stuffed so when anyone came up to the booth and requested a badge, we had to insert specific vouchers based on the conference package they paid for; some attendees paid for a limited conference package and could therefore not enjoy the same privilege as those who paid for the full deal.

In the registration booth we handed out the promotional bags as well as a USB-drives containing all tuition and support materials for the different talks and workshops of the conference. By virtue of being in charge of the registration booth we were sometimes the go-to people when attendees needed certain conference related questions answered.

3.2 T-shirt Booth Worker

At the T-shirt booth we helped handout T-shirts to individuals who presented their T-shirt vouchers. The T-shirts had earlier been arranged into neat piles sorted according to size and print (some T-shirts were complementary tokens, while others were retro T-shirts from previous LISA editions and unofficial LISA T-shirts on sale) making it easy to locate and pick-out the right requests.

3.3 Room monitoring

When having a shift as a room monitor the tasks were to greet all attendees and stand at the door to ensure that only those with the correct credentials/tickets had access to the talks and other events. When everyone was seated, we would take a head count in the different rooms and record this on an Excel sheet. This was done so that the USENIX staff could have an idea of the popularity of talks and workshops as well as average daily attendance.



Figure 1: Greet attendees/welcome them to the conference; provide their badge (pre-stuffed) as well as conference goodies and general instructions/directions.

4 Conference part of LISA15

The proceedings of LISA 2015 were divided into two major halves: the first half involved in Learning topics, and the second half, which commenced on Wednesday 11th of November, featured Conference topics.

In all, the conference covered a wide range of topics which fall under these four main categories: Organization Culture, Monitoring & Metrics, Site Reliability Engineering & Software Engineering, and System & Network Engineering. Under each major topic were a rich set of of different yet interrelated sub-topics. The topics were presented by industry professionals and academic speakers, each offering a subtly differentiated novel or enhanced way to facilitate system administration.

The second half of the conference proceedings involved a two-day exhibition as well as numerous talks. The talks were structured a bit unlike in the first half with shorter durations which translated to more per-day talks. The second half witnessed a bigger attendance, with the exhibition being the main attraction. The exhibitors included Google, Puppet, Vembu, Disney, Redhat, CoreOS, and Docker. All the participant companies were particularly generous with their branded t-shirts and other fine memorabilia.

Each day of the second half started-out with a keynote address delivered by an invited speaker. Such presentations mostly dealt with the speakers observations and experiences in the IT domain, with particularly leaning towards system administration. The first keynote speaker was Mikey Dickerson. His talk largely referenced

system administration efforts that went into the everyday running of the new U.S. digital service. The second keynote address delivered by Christopher Soghoian emphasized the role of system administrators in the security of an organization. The third keynote address was delivered by Jez Humble, Vice President of Chef, with focus on Lean Configuration Management. The thrust of his talk was on the important role of configuration management as its proper implementation usually leads to a high IT performance yield.

The final and closing address of the conference was an electrifying and riveting commentary delivered by Jame Mickens from Havard University. He had the audience sitting on the edge of their seats and erupting in laughter as he dished out a lengthy supply of innuendos mostly aimed at social networking services - especially those of the "dating" variety - for how they have distorted the meaning of dating and for heaping misery on their hapless users.

5 After hours

After long days of work and talks people were eager to explore what Washington D.C had to offer. As many had different schedules the touring itself had to be on an adhoc basis. Most of the spare time was used for activities like going to the zoo, shopping, and seeing tourist attractions like the white house, Lincoln memorial, national air and space museum etc. There was also an organized dinner for all students and teachers from the netsys group. We ate at restaurant called Crawfish where people were eating out of buckets with plastic gloves. Call it American style. After the dinner the end of the Lisa conference was celebrated with some festivities amongst the students.

5.1 BoF (Birds of a Feather)

The day-program during the conference started 08:00 AM, and ended 5:00 PM. At the end of every day, the USENIX staff arranged different events called BOFS. A BOF was a place to hang out for the conference attendees, where one could meet people from different companies and discuss different IT-related subjects. Some of the BOF events focused on small specific IT-fields, and was intended for people with such passions. Some of the BOF events housed a lot of attendees, and was a good place to meet new people.

Some of the BOF attendees are in the IT-business known to be experts at what they do. The volunteers attended some of the BOFs where the only intentions was to listen to the experts discuss different subjects.

The most famous BOF was the Google BOF. The Google BOF was held the last day of the conference. During the BOF, Google gave out lottery tickets to all the BOF attendees. One of the volunteers (Jostein) was lucky and won a set of BOSS headphones.

5.2 The Reception

The reception was on Thursday, second last day of the conference which started at 6 PM. The party was organized by USENIX for the LISA attendees. Food and beverages were available for all the participants. The organizer thanked everyone for being there and making LISA15 a grand success. The prime goal of the reception was to hang out with other attendees and to share and gain practical ideas and knowledge in different fields of IT. There were experts, geeks, employers, managers, professors, IT enthusiasts, IT employees and students. It was a great time to get in touch with the high profile personnel to grasp practical aspects and real IT operations in large scale system administration.

All of us, students from Oslo and Akershus University College were there and accompanied by our professors Hårek Haugerud and Boning Feng. We were there in different groups of two or three and got acquainted with different personnel and got to know about challenges and aspects on real world IT operations. We took some photographs with other participants and also got their visiting cards. The organizer also gave away some prizes to the participants by exciting lucky draw.

5.3 Social life in Washington DC

All though we where busy during the conference we also made sure that we would be able to take some time of and exchange impressions and information. For one of these occasion we went out out to eat at a place called "Hot'n'Juicy Crawfish" where we got to wind down and enjoy some fantastic crayfish.



Figure 2: Our group enjoying the Hot'n'Juicy Crawfish experience.

This dinner was really the only instance where we managed to gather the whole group to do something. The nature of the conference made it hard to find a time slot which worked for everyone, mostly due to the different times people were working.

Some of us did also manage to see some of the great and well known landmarks which can be found in D.C. But this is a tour which takes several hours, thus making it impossible to make this trip as a group and simultaneously tend to our duties at the conference.



Figure 3: Evening picture taken of the Washington Monument

6 Conclusion

This was a golden opportunity for all of us to attend a highly regarded conference in the system administration domain. The conference was socially and intellectually beneficial to us the volunteers. It brought us in close contact with experts with specializations in different facets of IT, some of who we ordinarily would only experience via Youtube videos or written material. Seeing, chatting and having a laugh with the likes of Tom Limoncelli, John Willis (Docker), and other eminent personalities in the SysAdmin world was an eye-opener on the possibilities there are if we tapped into our passion for a topic area in IT and worked hard to towards making a significant contribution to the field.

We would be remiss not to mention that this trip would not have been a success without proper coordination and wonderful support from several people. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who directly or indirectly made this possible: to the USENIX organization for availing us the opportunity to attend such a prestigious conference. We take with us wonderful memories of the awesome hospitality, the new work techniques and technologies that we learnt, the new friendships built, and other aspects of our time spent in Washington DC. To Kyrre Begnum we say a big thank you for blazing the LISA trail and for providing invaluable info on what to expect not only at the conference but in the US in general. In the same light, we would like to thank Hårek and Boning for being with us and guiding us throughout the conference; your presence was indeed reassuring. Last but not least, we are immensely grateful to NUUG for the financial support provided; it would not have been a successful trip without that element of organization. Thank you so much.



Figure 4: Group picture at LISA 2015