

Hi I am Janet,

I've been involved with a team which deployed a thin client LAN into a community centre as a volunteer project. So far we have all survived this project but we have learned a lot along the way.

Volunteers and not for profit community groups/centres are an important segment of the OS market. People often volunteer in order to gain experience, references, glory. Groups are often short of funds and looking for IT options. Unfortunately this means both parties are at risk of getting off on the wrong foot.

The vol because they want to conquer/save the world and the group because they are inclined to see the vol as the answer to all their problems.

This is a problem because people are finite. And volunteering is generally done for a season. This means that if the group becomes dependent they will not feel they can 'cope' when you leave. They will not feel that the network is an asset and they will not be likely to have nice things to say about it after you finish. Because you're not there and they have a paper jam that day etc.

How we start the work has a big impact on how the relationship develops and whether the org is still standing/smiling when you leave.

No capes or undies on the outside. If you say you can save them from their evil MS network they will put you on a deity pedestal. This means they are mere users and not responsible for anything. This bites in the long run. You want partners in this project not dependents.

No scope no glory. If you define the limits of what you can safely offer and deliver then you have some prospect of success and closure. Sys admin work is open ended in nature so creating finite stages and celebrating them gives you all a sense of progress and satisfaction. If you don't do this it is possible for people to never be happy because the job is never finished.

Better the devil they know than the devil you don't.

If you're not prepared to get deeply into Scribus do not migrate people from Publisher. Same re Gimp and Photoshop. If you (or your team) don't want to offer the training and support don't go there. Implement what you're able to support and to build their skills in.

Stepping back.

We walked straight in and learnt the above the hard way.

We then realised we needed to define scope and we started this conversation with a basic framework for thinking about IT.

I can – everyone in the org can do this – well they can once you've trained them, and helped their sharps to feel good about training new folk. INGOTs Bronze

We can – their sharps can specialise in specific apps or in basic user administration, add a user, change permissions, rebooting, printer jams, your call – train them up and they'll make a big difference. INGOTs silver or custom. Howtos with their letterhead.

They can – the org has partners who can do some things – you would be one of these, define what you can offer, and deliver it – be fair dinkum. Other groups or individuals such as ISP or local council might offer other components.

Can we – at any time there will be a wish list of things which can't currently be met. Jobs looking for answers. That's fine.

At this point we met their smiling assassin.

A guru of ITIL and veteran of many SLA negotiations.

This turned out to be a great blessing.

He incorporated our steps and documented all the things which were beyond our scope.

This gave the group an understanding of what was required to do IT thoroughly and that they hadn't been planning time for training or budgets for hardware or backups. It gave a context in which to understand the contribution of the sys admin as a contribution to a system they needed to participate in and manage. We also started a weekly meeting pattern using someone who was not the primary sys admin negotiating weekly meetings. eg X person has 2 days available what are your priorities for this week. this meant the sys admin was not getting wrangled into saying yes they can do everything.

Sharing glory

We needed to share the glory with the org so that their experience of Linux was rewarding.

We encouraged them to feel successful by;

ITHelp book – where they increasingly contribute to the answers.

Training lvl 1 and lvl2 folk

Howtos on their letterhead.

Radio interview, promoting their centre,

further training with grant funding for their org and Linux trainers,

Newspaper article.

In conclusion

The kinds of groups which are common targets for vol sys admin work are likely to want you to just fix it. They are inexperienced but this is part of the problem.

Think about your exit strategy and how you can help them to partner you in the project.

This way you'll be undertaking projects which have better odds of being a long term success story even after you've left, which is usually when you'll be wanting that reference.

It's also important for getting healthy case studies for open source,