

Eric Allman

EMAIL

ARCHITECT

Eric Allman wrote sendmail in the early eighties so that he didn't have to administer lots of user accounts. Linux Magazine talked to him about this seminal coding and its development over the last 20 years.

Linux Magazine In 1981 when you first developed Sendmail, did you expect email to change the world?

Eric Allman Yes and no. I was an email lover from the first time I used it and thought it absolutely wonderful. I thought everyone who was in science or academia and into technology would be using it so yes I did think it was important. But I didn't predict that everyone – even my mother – would eventually be using it. It's now at the stage where people go out to buy a computer just so they can use email so no, I didn't envisage it becoming that pervasive.

LM How is Sendmail the company coping with giving away the source code that it has spent so much time developing?

EA As a hybrid company we do not give everything away. The core technology is Open Source and it is the right thing to do. There are lots of cases where companies have taken over Open Source and both the Open Source part and the commercial part die. We are well known and respected and that would be harmed if we were not Open Source.

LM Would you agree that giving away the source encouraged innovation?

EA Absolutely – The OS community of developers is small and the group that contribute back is smaller but it is still significant. Even if it is just a bug report it helps to move the software forward.

LM Has the initial business plan that you developed with Greg Olson worked out well?

EA Again, yes and no. The original concept was mass sale, with the intention of getting one per cent of the Open Source over to commercial with between one and 10 thousand dollars. That failed because of resistance due to the "It already works so why change?" attitude. What has worked well is selling to people who have problems. They want high-end technical support. They want everything including the design of the whole email system.

LM Is the hybrid business model a good commercial success?

EA It is, in fact, working very well for us. It seems to

marry the benefits of Open Source – innovation – together with traditional business. This has been useful in financing rounds. The general IT downturn has effected us but less so than lots of companies.

LM How do you see email developing?

EA It was fairly obvious that email was the killer application for the Internet. The Web may pull in people, but email keeps them there. Email will continue and we will get low cost access for the world. Digital signatures will become more widely accepted, but overall it will become bigger, faster and there will be more of it.

LM Although you support Linux and NT, do you still use BSD at home?

EA Yes – FreeBSD

LM Do you see Lotus Domino and Microsoft Exchange as a serious threat?

EA No, they're complimentary to groupware. Sendmail Inc. is about standards-based email. Many companies use Sendmail as their Internet gateway into a company and then run groupware. Microsoft sees us as a competitor, less so with Lotus. We have a good partnership with IBM.

LM What have been the benefits and downsides of having partnership programs rather than adding the content yourself?

EA We cannot do everything. We are not a virus filtering company and never will be. But rather than say we cannot do this we have partners. IBM is a partner and so we both win. The downside is sharing revenues.

LM Do you see a market for policy driven content management such as the removal of spam and Internet blocking?

EA Absolutely – this will be one of the biggest areas for growth. As the Internet has become bigger it is no longer possible to say "tut, tut" to someone when they have made a mistake. Filtering of outgoing mail for viruses and legal liabilities such as sexual harassment and customer lists will become necessary. Also the use of encryption for financial and medical matters. ■

