

Getting involved with Ubuntu Server

ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

Robbie Williamson discusses Ubuntu Server environments, building the server community, and his new role at Canonical.

BY AMBER GRANER



Robbie Williamson is Ubuntu Server Team Manager at Canonical.

Q You've worn many hats over the past few release cycles; can you tell readers a little about those roles and what your current role at Canonical is?

A I started out covering for Matt Zimmerman [1] while he took on an internal project, which was an eye-opening adventure. During this temporary assignment, I was involved in Canonical's work with Google on ChromeOS and partnership with ARM to roll out Linaro [2].

After this, I resumed my duties as both the Foundations [3] and Security Team [4] Manager and quickly assumed another role as the Ubuntu 10.10 [5] Release Manager, as Steve Langasek took on another opportunity with Linaro.

Shortly after 10.10, there were many changes to the Canonical Server Team [6] as my colleagues were moving on to other adventures. Because I was already

familiar with the team and had a server background from my time at IBM, it only made sense that I cover until we found a full-time manager for the team.

I then found myself becoming very interested in Ubuntu Server and the direction it is going as a product. The short of the story is, I applied for the Ubuntu Server manager role full-time and that is my current role at Canonical. However, until we find someone to lead Foundations and Security, I will remain acting manager of those two teams as well.

Q What was your first Linux distribution and how did you come to work at Canonical?

A My first Linux distribution was Red Hat [7] (6.2, I think). I had heard of and used Linux before then, but this was the first one I personally installed and configured. From there, I bounced around between Mandrake [8], SUSE [9], Debian [10], Fedora [11], and Xandros [12], depending on who had what cool new feature.

The first time I heard of Ubuntu was at a Linux World Expo in San Francisco ... back when LWE was a huge event, with insane booths and unbelievable giveaways. I'll never forget it. I was running the Linux Test Project booth in the ".org Pavilion."

At the time, I worked for IBM in the Linux Technology Center, and part of my job was maintainer of the project. We would hand out brochures on the LTP test suite, run demos, and try to get folks interested in contributing test cases.

So, one day while I was sitting in the booth, a group of people came running (literally) through the aisles placing CDs on everyone's table – Ubuntu CDs. Like any good conference attendee, I took the free CD and started checking it out when I got home, and from then on, it became my personal Linux distro of choice.

I remained at IBM for many years after that, where I learned a lot, both technically and in terms of leading people. However, after 10+ years there, I felt it was time for a change. So, one day I decided to check out Canonical's employment postings [13] and stumbled across the Foundations Team manager job. I applied online, went through a few interviews, and somehow got lucky enough to get the job.

Q As you stepped into the role of Server Team Manager, what was your strategy for determining where the Ubuntu Server was at and where it would need to go?

A My first approach was old school and very corporate – analyze the competition, download each major Linux server, address our shortcomings, and leverage our strengths.

However, I realized this wasn't the most productive use my time and, even more importantly, it was just stupid. I don't even feel like these server distributions are competition; they are our allies. More importantly, I want to ensure that Ubuntu Server isn't just a clone of any one of them.

I want folks using Ubuntu on their server for the same reasons that people use Ubuntu on their desktops, laptops, and netbooks – because it's easy to use, easy to install, fast, technically innovative, up-to-date with the latest hardware support, and backed by one of the best

open source communities in existence – not to mention, of course, it’s free.

Q Is the Ubuntu Server moving away from the physical server market and targeting the cloud guests as its main audience?

A Absolutely not. Make no mistake, I want Ubuntu Server to be the best operating system for the cloud (period). The success of Ubuntu Desktop led to Ubuntu’s being the most popular OS used in “the cloud” today, and we’d be fools to ignore this. The traditional Linux server landscape has been dominated by RHEL/SLES on the licensed install side and Debian/CentOS on the no-cost license side, and finding a way to squeeze Ubuntu Server in would be a steep uphill battle. Our success in the cloud is the disruptive force that we need to get us in the game. For Ubuntu Server to be the best operating system for the cloud, we have to succeed in two areas: cloud hosting (i.e., we provide the infrastructure to run a cloud in your own datacenter) and cloud instances. I believe both efforts will incorporate and require help from our existing Ubuntu Server community and hopefully grow it.

Q Speaking of growing the Ubuntu Server community, I’ve read a lot recently about Ahmed Kamal [15], of the Ubuntu Community Team, working to build the Cloud Community. Do you work together on this front? How would you like to see both the Cloud and Server Communities grow? How can people get involved, and what do you think is the biggest community need the server team has?

A It’s a very symbiotic relationship: Without a product, Ahmed would have nothing to build a community around, and without a community, our team would have no one to help grow and sustain the product; we need each other. We are very lucky to have someone like Ahmed helping us.

Our engineers are able to focus on integrating key technologies needed to deliver a great cloud computing experience, with the comfort of knowing we will get the immediate feedback from the community on the choices and decisions we’ve made. In terms of seeing the com-

munities grow, I’m greedy. I’d like to see more involvement in Ubuntu Server feature planning, development, testing, and bug triage. I’d also love to see people improving documentation, adding appor hooks to key server packages, packaging applications they know people want, and blogging about their experiences using Ubuntu Server. If you are interested in the cloud, then by all means, focus your efforts on applications, features, bugs, and workloads in and for the cloud. Likewise, if you are interested in clustering, failover support, rapid deployments, Linux containers, virtualization, hypervisors, or anything else involving Linux server technologies and you want to see it rock in Ubuntu Server, then join us and contribute; we’ll welcome you with open arms.

I encourage everyone to visit the Ubuntu Server wiki, where we have details on how to get involved, as well as links to our team blog, product details, and the Ubuntu Cloud Portal.

Q Sometimes in open source, and especially with Ubuntu and Canonical, it is hard to see the line between community offerings and Canonical pay-for solutions. With the various server and cloud solutions being offered, where do you feel that line is, and who is the target audience for the Ubuntu Server Community side vs. the Canonical pay-for Ubuntu Server Solutions side?

A I think it is important to separate Ubuntu Server the product from Ubuntu Advantage the service. The Ubuntu Server team is 100% committed to ensuring our users will always have the freedom to download, run, copy, distribute, study, share, change, and improve Ubuntu Server for any purpose, without paying licensing fees. Take cloud, for example: The ability for users to deploy their own Ubuntu-based cloud infrastructure (i.e., private cloud) and/or run an Ubuntu Server instance in a public cloud, such as in Amazon’s Elastic Compute Cloud, is part of Ubuntu Server. These technologies are a part of the product itself, and so access to them must (and will) adhere to the same philosophy the Ubuntu project has always stood for.

Ubuntu Advantage is an enterprise-level service provided by Canonical for

both Ubuntu Desktop and Ubuntu Server. It is in line with Mark Shuttleworth’s vision for Ubuntu, where free software is made available free of charge to everybody on the same terms, funded through a portfolio of services provided by Canonical. The Ubuntu Advantage program is run outside of the Ubuntu Platform team that I and most of the Canonical-employed developers working on Ubuntu are part of, so I’d recommend people visit the website for more info.

Q Thank you, Robbie. Is there anything I haven’t asked you about that you would like to mention?

A Not really. I suppose I would like people reading this interview to understand that this is not a one-man show by any means, and I certainly don’t have all the answers. All I want to do is help make Ubuntu Server the best it can possibly be. ■

INFO

- [1] We’ll See – Matt Zimmerman’s blog: <http://mdzlog.alcor.net/>
- [2] Linaro website: <http://www.linaro.org/>
- [3] Ubuntu Foundations Team wiki: <https://wiki.ubuntu.com/FoundationsTeam/>
- [4] Ubuntu Security Team wiki: <https://wiki.ubuntu.com/SecurityTeam/>
- [5] Ubuntu 10.10 Release: <http://releases.ubuntu.com/10.10/>
- [6] Canonical Server Team: <https://wiki.ubuntu.com/ServerTeam>
- [7] Red Hat, Inc: <http://www.redhat.com/>
- [8] Mandrake now known as Mandriva: <http://www2.mandriva.com/en/>
- [9] SUSE: <http://www.novell.com/linux/>
- [10] Debian: <http://www.debian.org/>
- [11] Fedora: <https://fedoraproject.org/>
- [12] Xandros: <http://www.xandros.com/>
- [13] Canonical Careers: <http://www.canonical.com/about-canonical/careers>
- [14] Not lucky all the time, but smart everyday ... <http://undacuvabrutha.wordpress.com/>
- [15] Building the Ubuntu Cloud Community: <http://www.ubuntu-user.com/Online/Blogs/Amber-Graner-You-in-Ubuntu/Building-the-Ubuntu-Cloud-Community>