

Helping yourself in the quest for solutions TO NAGGING PROBLEMS

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[below]
Websites can
be helpful

Things go wrong, sometimes they were never right, but with a bit of effort maybe you can fix that gripe or at least learn to live with a foible with a workaround. Here is a little reminder to the various sources of solutions to nagging problems for the Linux user.

Linux started out as, and hopefully will always be, a collaborative effort. People from around the world we able to bring together their best efforts and develop something that many like to think has become greater than the sum of its parts.

Support can also be thought of as a collaborative resource, information, understanding and just plain, good old fashioned help can be found in a variety of places, so, just because you have some problem to solve doesn't mean that you

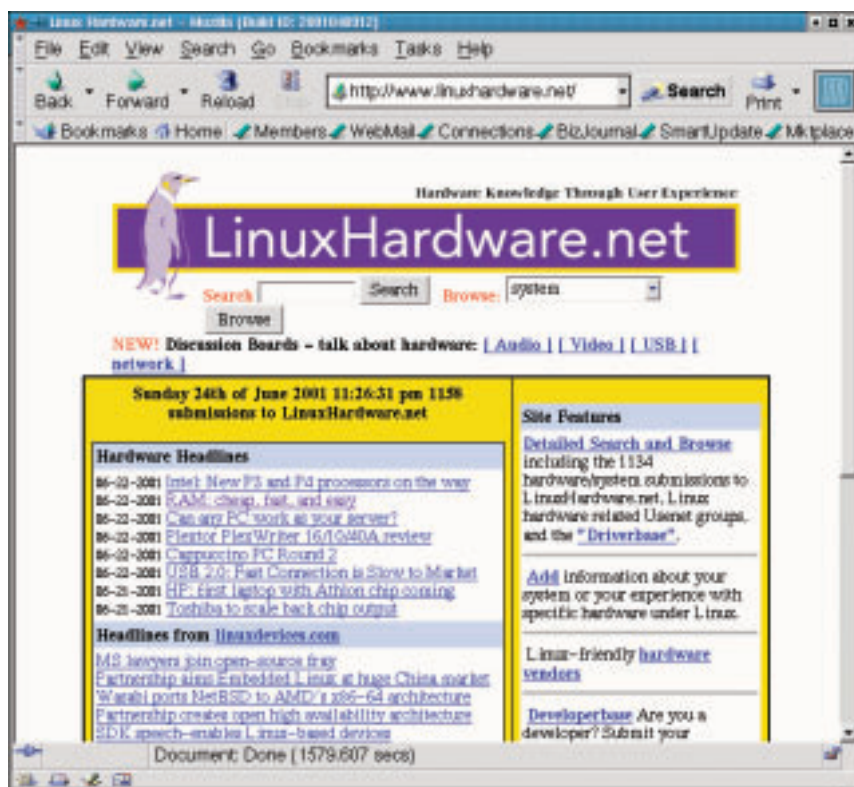
should feel isolated because of it. Someone, somewhere out there is more than likely to be able to help you, or at least be able to share in your suffering and offer sympathy - which is better than nothing. The trick is to be able to find them.

The internet played a huge part in allowing the development of Linux, and it is true that a lot of support can be found there as well.

The Web page

Each distribution seems keen to develop it's own community, which can be seen from their web pages. Mandrake are developing their 'Mandrake Expert' web portal where you can pose questions to 'experts' who have put themselves forward as being willing to help on their specialist subjects, while SuSE have their 'Support DataBase' which allows you to search for solutions to problems that people have previously suffered with. Other distributions will offer similar resources so you should always check the support options as your first port of call. Non-distribution specific information can also be easily found on the web.

Hardware compatibility has never been something that you can assume with Linux and many web pages are now set up to help the unsuspecting through this minefield. Compatibility databases like www.LinuxHardware.net will help you decide if that second hand scanner you've seen is going to work on your machine, or www.linuxprinting.org will help you locate that driver which will allow you to get your hands of the printhead of your GDI printer, so you can change the ink cartridge without having to take the case apart.





The mailing list

Almost all of the distribution manufacturers will run one or more mailing lists which you can all upon for support and sometimes this can also be a valuable source of support. A mailing list is an email based discussion group, so a message sent to the mailing list is copied to all of the people who subscribe to that list. Some lists can be very busy, sometimes with hundreds of messages a day, with only a small percentage of which will be relevant to to any one persons interests - this is especially true of lists which are quite general in there subject matter, "newbie@linux-mandrake.com" for instance. To get around this some mailing lists have a more defined subject area, Suse run a list for discussion just about Lotus Domino or instance. You do get the chance, in most cases, to search the archives for past solutions to your problem.

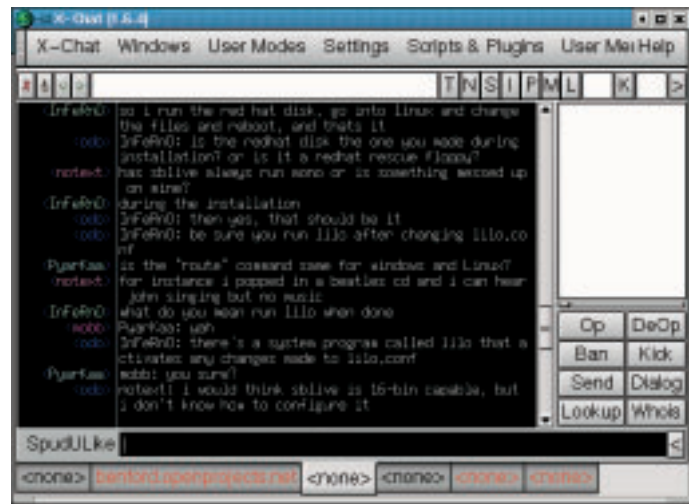
Mailing lists are not just the domain of Linux distributors, applications often will have mailing list support and other specific areas of interest may have mailing lists dedicated to them.

For distribution specific mailing lists, a search from the distributors web page will be the best way to find what's available or for something more subject specific a web search through something like Google on "Subject" + "mail list" will usually bring useful results.

Busy, or 'high bandwidth', mailing lists can be a cross to bare, but they do provide you with the latest news, of developments, or of problems just discovered or solutions just found. They are also very good at providing a sense of community and of the spirit that goes with it.

Internet relay chat

If time is of the essence then IRC might be your support solution. Web pages can take some time to trawl through to find just the snippet of information that you require and you might have to wait a day or more for a reply from a mailing list. It does depend much more on luck than judgment though



as it does rely completely on who is about at the time. Simply connect your IRC client - I like Xchat, just one of many - to a server like *irc.openprojects.net*, join one of the rooms like *#LinuxHelp* and ask your question. A lot depends now on your conversation skills. Expressing your problem with unfamiliar terms can be a struggle, but most are patient and some are quite skilled in extracting the information from you that they need to solve your problem. It can be fun as well - it's quite nice to find yourself in a position where you can answer other peoples problems, making you realise that maybe you are about to outgrow you 'Newbie' handle. It has made me reconsider my abilities to solve my own problems, occasionally with some success.

Magazines

Most magazines will have some kind of online forum or maybe their own IRC #room in which to pose your problems. Letters pages must be the slowest route to solving a problem, but maybe the topic has been covered in the past, in letters or feature articles, so keeping a magazine library can be a useful asset.

Your local user group

LUGs are a valuable asset to the Linux community and you really should try and make use of them if at all possible. This magazine has a list of user groups and you should see if there is one that is in striking distance to you. If not, maybe the potential is there for a group but it just needs a nucleus for it to form around - maybe you could be that nucleus and start your own group. The rewards you get from a LUG do depend on the amount of effort you put into it, you do need to ask your questions and make your presence known, which is easily achieved in amongst friendly company. Some LUGs have the facilities for you to bring your own equipment along, so that you can go through your problems first hand. An ideal solution to any problem. ■

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Beware of high
bandwidth lists

[right]
XChat in action