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March 2015

Joe Devon



In Memory of Carlo Flores

Burnout

I hate that I'm writing this. This shouldn't have happened. One year ago I went to SCALE <http://socallinuxexpo.org>, the largest annual L.A. Open Source conference of the year, and spent a couple of hours chatting with Lars Lehtonen, @alrs on Twitter. He is cofounder of the DevOpsLA user group. We discussed burnout, business, and life.

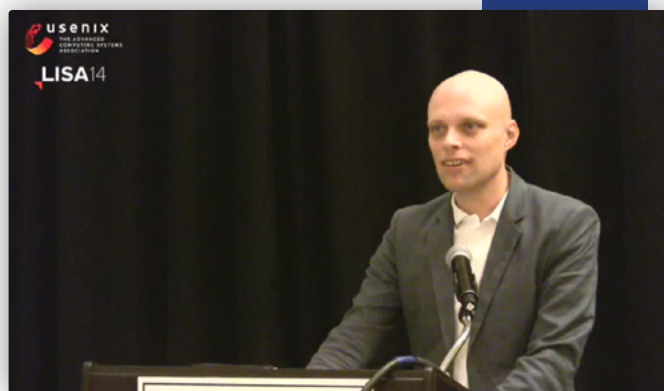
He had just given a very well-received talk about Burnout and Ops <http://j.mp/scaleopsburn>. You can view a version of that talk on video here <http://j.mp/larstok>. Unfortunately, this year he kicked off DevOps Day LA with another talk, featuring a eulogy of his DevOpsLA cofounder, Carlo Flores.

As a member of DevOpsLA, I received a note titled "Carlo Memorial" and that was how I found out that Carlo took his own life. I don't know the details of what happened with Carlo, and this article isn't about blaming anyone or trying to figure out what happened in Carlo's specific case. Rather, it's about the fact that we have a problem in our family. And by family, I mean our industry, which employs engineers of all kinds to run the companies that are changing the world around us.

A lot of programmers and developers work long hours and many of us are always checking in on work long after we've gone home. But it is particularly hard on infrastructure engineers.

Lars Lehtonen on Burnout and Ops

FIGURE 1



We Need to Codify Best Practices in Managing Ops & SREs

This is a call to action. I will try to share what I've learned from Lars, but before going further, I urge you to watch his presentation. Here it is again <https://www.usenix.org/node/186465>. It has changed my thinking. It has also made me finally understand how we were able to have this discussion and awareness, and one year later, Lars' friend was still a victim.

Carlo did the right things. He took a few months off from work trying to come to equilibrium, but it was too late by then. I won't ask what happened, but rather will ask: What are we doing to make burnout an epidemic?

Our industry is rife with high and unrealistic expectations. I've personally experienced building the website for a popular television show and having to work 36 hours in a row with an eight-person team. One member of the team arrived on Monday and didn't leave until Friday. I don't know how he did it. But it shows part of the problem. We drive ourselves sometimes as engineers, to prove our abilities. We pride ourselves on knocking it out and getting 'er done. Which is good, within limits.

But this is different than what we expect of our ops engineers, they often work in a constant state of urgency. We expect to call them late at night when there's a problem. On vacation. Many organizations expect migrations to happen overnight. If something goes wrong, then the blame falls squarely on ops. If there's a success, the congratulations go to the developers who built the stuff.

If the ops people warn the devs of problems scaling things the way they want to, they are an impediment. But if servers crash, they are to blame.

The pressure we are putting on ops is unfair.

What Do We Do?

I don't have all the answers. But taking a cue from Lars, here are a few things that will help:

Lars tells the story of being asked to do a migration that had to be done at 10pm. He finally pushed back and said, OK, but you'll be presented with a large bill for that. Suddenly the manager decided it was OK to do it at 3pm instead. Demand for resources is infinite when the cost is free. The takeaway: if you are an ops person, charge extra for unusual work.

Management: Leaders and project managers often commit to aggressive schedules, overpromise, and frankly don't manage scope and priorities well. So lead by example. You will know if your request is urgent and appropriate, if you are right there working on it next to the System Reliability Engineer (SRE). If it isn't worth your extra effort, don't expect the same of your people. You will earn respect and take care of your own, if you put your money where your mouth is.

If you are benefiting from someone's thankless work, say "Thank you." Make it clear that this is a team. That infrastructure people are as crucial to your success as the developers. When you celebrate, call out the ops team as much as the others. A pat on the back for hard work does wonders for the soul.

Proper procedures. If you've set up your operations such that maintenance has to happen off hours, you've probably set it up wrong. Investigate why it is that way and fix it. As a side benefit, your operation will be much more reliable.

Awareness. Understand that burnout is a bigger issue for ops teams than for other engineers, and check in on your ops team. Ask them if they're OK. If they need a break. Communicate. Especially if you're management, but also if you're just an engineer on the team.

I'd like to call out an initiative by EngineYard. It's called Prompt <http://prompt.engineyard.com>. Their goal is to encourage the community to add speakers to conferences and meetups who will speak about mental health.

Along those lines, evangelize this issue.

Please share any other ideas you might have.

About Carlo

I first remember meeting Carlo at an event one of us were running. He came up to me and thanked me for all the tech meetups I've run over the years and was extremely encouraging and nice. Running events isn't easy, but it's people like Carlo that make all the effort worthwhile. He was such a nice guy.

He ran JS.LA and DevOpsLA with Lars. Both impressive groups with tremendous respect from the community for the work they've done.

Over the years we met a couple of times at events, and almost got drinks a couple times, the last time just weeks before this happened. I sent him an email probably a couple days before... He never replied.

Carlo was a superstar. I went to a Christmas party at Edgecast, the company he was working for. Everyone sang his praises. He rose through the ranks and was clearly an important part of their success. He had an important role at Verizon when they bought Edgecast.

From the outside, it looked like a great guy, doing a wonderful job and enjoying the spoils of success. I was very happy for him. But looks are often deceiving.

I hope he knew how much we all respected him. As an engineer. As a community leader. As a mensch. RIP Carlo. We miss you.

If you'd like to help Carlo's family, you can contribute to his memorial fund to help his family at <https://www.giveforward.com/fundraiser/6vt7>

One Last Thing

Before we move to the upcoming events section of this article, I'd like to suggest that we take Engine Yard's lead and create more talks surrounding mental health and tech. Some brave voices in the PHP community have recently shared their personal stories. Don't waste this chance to approach them as speakers and have them share how they coped. You might just save a life.

Past Events

BrightonPHP User Group: Talk about User Testing

February 16, Brighton England
<http://j.mp/brtntstg>

Confoo

February 16-20, Montreal Canada
<http://confoo.ca>

PHP UK Conference

February 19-20, London England
<http://phpconference.co.uk>

SCALE 13X

February 19-22, Los Angeles CA
<http://socallinuxexpo.org>

A11ycampBay hosted by LinkedIn

February 28, Mountain View CA
<http://www.accessibilitycampbay.org>

CSUN 30th Annual International Technology and Persons with Disabilities Conference

March 2-7, San Diego CA
<http://j.mp/csun15conf>

Las Vegas PHP: Talks about Travis CI & PHPStorm

March 3, Las Vegas
<http://j.mp/vgstrvs>

DrupalSouth Melbourne 2015

March 5-7, Melbourne Australia
<https://melbourne2015.drupal.org.au>

Wearable Technology Show 2015

March 10-11
<http://www.wearabletechnologyshow.net>

Vault Conference

March 11-12, Boston MA
<http://j.mp/vaultcnf>

PHP Australia Conference

March 12-13, Sydney Australia
<http://www.phpconference.com.au>

Upcoming Events

Midwest PHP

March 14-15, Minneapolis MN
<http://2015.midwestphp.org>

Lone Star PHP 2015

April 16-18, Dallas TX
<http://lonestarphp.com>

Peers Conf

April 30 - May 2, Philadelphia PA
<http://peersconf.com>

4th PHP Unconference Europe

May 9-10, Palma de Majorca
<http://www.phpuceu.org>

Smart Fabrics & Wearables Conference

May 11-13, San Francisco CA
<http://j.mp/fabrconf>

Global Accessibility Awareness Day

May 18, Earth
<http://globalaccessibilityawarenessday.org>

php[tek]2015

May 18-22, Chicago IL
<http://tek.phparch.com>

J and Beyond 2015

May 29-31, Prague Czech Republic
<http://jandbeyond.org>

Wearable Tech Expo

July 13-15, New York, NY
<http://j.mp/wrblcnf>

PHP Southcoast 2015

July 18, Portsmouth England
<http://2015.phpsouthcoast.co.uk>

By the Community For the Community

If there are particularly compelling talks I should cover in this column, or PHP-related conferences coming up, please reach out and let me know at phparch@dws.la.



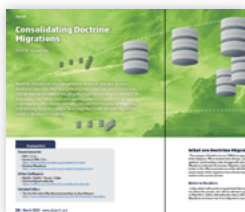
JOE DEVON has been developing in PHP since Version 3. He is an advisor or board member at various companies, non-profits and conferences. He is Founding Partner of LAPHP user group; Diamond, a Digital Agency in Venice; Television Four, a Digital Media startup and Global Accessibility Awareness Day (#GAAD). He is passionate about Digital Accessibility & encouraging the UX & Development Community to produce accessible content. He blogs at <http://dws.la/author/joedevon>, LinksIn @ <http://linkedin.com/in/joedevon>, tweets @joedevon and may be reached at phparch@dws.la.

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