A Day in the Life of... Richard Stallman

Name: Richard Stallman

Company: The Free Software Foundation

What I work on: The overall goal of my work is to give computer users the freedom to study, copy, modify and redistribute the software they use. In other words, I'm an activist in the Free Software Movement.

To give users these freedoms in a world where most software denies its users freedom, we had to write an alternate world of free software. In 1984 I launched the development of the GNU operating system, intended to be Unix-compatible and entirely free software. In 1991, Linus Torvalds wrote a free kernel, Linux, which filled the crucial gap in GNU, but development of GNU/Linux system continues today.

Since October 1985 I've been president of the Free Software Foundation, a tax-exempt charity to promote the freedom to share and change software.

How I arrived at my present job: I don't have a job. My last job as at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab, but I resigned in January 1984 as preparation for developing the GNU system.

Resigning from MIT was necessary because, had I remained on the MIT staff, the MIT administration could have turned my work into a proprietary software product. There was no use developing the GNU system if it would not make users free.

I made a living in the 80s by occasional contracting (teaching, and free improvements in free software), and in the 90s by speaking. But making a living is a secondary part of my life--I try to make it take up as little of my life as possible, partly by avoiding

expensive habits. That way I can spend most of my time doing something worth doing.

How I organize my day: I dislike having structure imposed on my time, so the only part of my time that I organize is what I do with other people. In between those activities I do my usual work, which consists mostly of dealing with the issues that raised by email each day, but also writing articles and working on Emacs. Whenever I feel like doing something else, such as reading, eating, listening to music, or taking a nap, I do it.

Amount of time spend working daily (at home and office): Ideally I would not have a separate home and office. If they must be separate, I spend as much time as possible at the office, and only go "home" when necessary. Of course, this presumes that the office is comfortable. If I had an office in substandard conditions, such as a cubicle, I would try to get away from there.

My problem-solving strategy: If I don't see how to deal with an issue, I just put it aside and come back to it later; in the mean time, I might think of an idea. There are so many tasks to be done that I can always procrastinate from one by doing another.

What I do to relieve stress: People who disagree with my views often say rather harsh and prejudiced things about me. When that makes me upset, I blow off steam, then read other mail until I am thoroughly calm. Then I go back to the issue.

The other cause of stress in my work is when I try and fail several times in a row to fix one single bug. When this happens, I can feel despair for a few minutes. Then I tell myself that there is no giving up and I must solve the problem. So I go back to work.

My hero, mentor, or person that I admire and why: I especially admire people who have worked for freedom--people such as Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King Jr, Daniel Ellsberg, Ralph Nader, and Noam Chomsky. I also admire scientists who have worked to advance human knowledge and health rather than primarily for profit.

What I do to mentor those who work for me: I have not made a study of mentoring, so I simply answer their questions as best I can.

How a negative event changed my life in a positive way: In 1981, when Symbolics hired away the other hackers from the MIT AI Lab, they destroyed my

community and left me in a state of aimless discouragement. But when they returned in 1982 bearing an ultimatum, they gave me a way to fight back. I rejected their ultimatum, and spent two years developing an alternative to their software. The book Hackers tells the story of this.

That experience honed my anger so that I could apply it constructively to other battles, and showed me I had the strength and persistence to undertake a large project such as GNU.

One event or decision in my life I wish I could go back and change: When Debian GNU/Linux was developing its own free software criteria, I should have thought about them more carefully. Over the past decade I had dealt with various issues of interpretation of the definition of free software, but I had not written down the conclusions. I should have raised these with the Debian leaders, but it didn't occur to me until later.

What values are the most important to me and what I value in others: Truth, beauty and justice are the important values. I admire people who devote their efforts to these goals; people whose goal is mere success have too small an ambition.

What inspires, motivates, or gets me excited about my job on a daily basis: Computer users deserve the freedom to cooperate. It's up to us to make that happen. We must not fail them.

Biography: Richard Stallman is the founder of the GNU project, launched in 1984 to develop the free operating system GNU (an acronym for "GNU's Not Unix"), and thereby give computer users the freedom that most of them have lost. GNU is free software: everyone is free to copy it and redistribute it, as well as to make changes either large or small.

Today, Linux-based variants of the GNU system, based on the kernel Linux developed by Linus Torvalds, are in widespread use. There are estimated to be over 17 million users of GNU/Linux systems today.

Richard Stallman is the principal author of the GNU C Compiler, a portable optimizing compiler which was designed to support diverse architectures and multiple languages. The compiler now supports over 30 different architectures and 7 programming

languages.

Stallman also wrote the GNU symbolic debugger (GDB), GNU Emacs, and various other GNU programs.

Stallman received the Grace Hopper Award from the Association for Computing Machinery for 1991 for his development of the first Emacs editor in the 1970s. In 1990 he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, and in 1996 an honorary doctorate from the Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden. In 1998 he received the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Pioneer award along with Linus Torvalds; in 1999 he received the Yuri Rubinski memorial award. In 2001 he received a second honorary doctorate, from the University of Glasgow, and shared the Takeda Award for Social/Economic Betterment with Torvalds and Ken Sakamura.