

Auroville Today : Article on BlueLight -2016



AUROVILLE SERVICES : On Geckos and Penguins

The Blue Light team. From left Bharathy, Daniel, Ramachandra, Philippe and Charles

I imagine you're

tapping away on your computer, diligently doing your work for Auroville. It's bucketing down rain outside, and your computer starts to assert its feelings about the monsoon humidity – stuck keys, a haywire cursor, documents that freeze 66and programmes that get stuck in never-ending sand clock icons... Just as your patience starts to disappear along with the sand sifting through the hourglass – the computer crashes altogether.

You phone Blue Light, Auroville's go-to tech guys. You assume they will instantly mount their chargers and gallop over and sort out your computer problem pronto. The only problem is, they're inundated with similar requests and are busy sorting out the myriad of colourful problems that confront computer users in Auroville, from crashed servers to fried geckos. Yes, fried geckos. "Several times we found them inside the power supply unit part of the computer," says Blue Light's Phil. "Pow! With smoke and everything! We open it and find a fried gecko in side. Big ones! It is impossible for this big thing to go inside. So, they go inside when they are small, and spend their whole life there and eat bugs. And some day, they move too much, and then the computer goes pzzzzttt!"

His colleague Charles chimes in: "So what we do to avoid trouble is cover the hole with fine mesh – we make the computer gecko-proof!"

Charles and Phil are part of the Blue Light team, which provides computer support for the city services, schools and a few commercial units, totalling more than 200 computers.

While the monsoon in Auroville poses challenges for all units and services, Blue Light is particularly affected because computer 67technology is especially susceptible to weather conditions. "There are so many electronic failures," says Phil. Charles continues: "You get lightning on top of dampness damage, and we just can't support all that stuff. Most of the people are understanding. This is India, lots of things don't work some of the time! So people have that mentality to find a way to work around things."

Blue Light started eight years ago out of Future School, to address the lack of overall computer strategy and effective computer support in Auroville. "Each unit would buy computers from wherever and get whoever to install them and they didn't network together well, and the backups were patchy," says Charles. "To address this weak base, Blue Light came along and developed a standard package that it could roll out. From small beginnings, it's grown."

"There are other IT professionals inside and outside Auroville,

and they all work individually, as far as we know," says Phil. "We try to work in a team, so when someone leaves, it does not interrupt our service. So far, it's amazing we're still alive, because losing three key people last year was really terrible, really bad news."

Charles says that the major challenge for Blue Light is retention of staff, because they are mostly volunteers. "A lot of good volunteers came and left. They'd commit for a year and we would spend a lot of time inducting them, but then they left after two months after getting disillusioned with Auroville. In the eight years of Blue Light, there's only one person who's been here since the beginning, and that's Bharathy."

There are now six full-time workers and one part-time, with the current team consisting of Andrey, Bharathy, Charles, Daniel, Keerthi, Philippe and Ramachandra. Yet the team finds the 68 workload a challenge. They fix well over 2000 computer 'issues' per year, documented in their Issue Tracker. "There's not enough of us to do the work," says Charles. "It's high tech. It requires a lot of knowledge, training and experience to do it well." And it's difficult to attract people with the required level of skills, given the attractive salaries on offer outside Auroville. "A good IT professional with ten years experience in Bangalore or Chennai, would be paid 10-15 lakhs per year," says Phil. "That's about ten times an Auroville maintenance. So the only realistic option we have is to invite some volunteers who are passing by for a short period or long term like us. They have to be enthusiastic and competent technically, and also completely idealistic to drop a salary that's so high in India and come here and get zero maintenance."

So why do Charles and Phil do this?

"We're stupid!" quips Phil.

"It's gift economy. Karma yoga. And plus, it's what we do," says Charles.

In order to address the staffing problem, the Budget Coordination Committee (under which Blue Light is classed as a 'service activity') recently gave the team some funds for their first full time employee from outside Auroville. "Keerthi is working out very well," says Charles. "The salary is an ongoing cost each month, but BCC was happy to do it, and maybe we can do more." The other team members are Aurovilians, with only three taking a maintenance. It is quite a feat that the bulk of Auroville's computer systems are maintained on such a small budget.

The shoe-string nature of the Blue Light endeavour is probably not foremost in the minds of Aurovilians when their computers play havoc during monsoon. So what is it like being on the 69 receiving end of the phone when an electric storm has crashed many Auroville computers and everyone thinks their computer or deadline is more important than the next person's? How do the Blue Light team feel when clients get emotional after their computers fail and they can't get instant attention from the tech warriors?

"We don't do emotions ourselves! We're techies!" quips

Charles. "We think it's a part of our karma yoga and we have to work on ourselves," says Phil more seriously. "With the kind of work we do, providing the support infrastructure, there's one big catch. When we do our job well, then everything works well, and people don't notice. Then they say, "Why do we need these geek people? Everything's running fine." When we hear from people, it's almost always a complaint, because something doesn't work. That's a big catch, the nature of the industry. So sometimes it's a bit frustrating."

Phil points out that while Auroville has different ideals around how its services function, individuals may have expectations about their computers that are more akin to a commercial arrangement. "Normal commercial businesses outside Auroville have a Service Level Agreement (SLA). It means that the computer support company has to provide a certain level of service to the client. The higher the level of service, the higher the cost. Here in Auroville, we're trying to stick with the idea that there shouldn't be an exchange of money in the work we do. When people can't work because their computers don't work, they shout at us, "How am I supposed to work?!" This is completely right. But maybe their problem is only a small printing job that impacts one person. Meanwhile, a whole server could have collapsed elsewhere, and if there's a risk of losing data 70 or a whole team can't work, that takes priority. In the commercial world, the big organisation pays more and is therefore prioritised. But we don't want to operate like a business unit and bill people for the level of support that we do for them. We haven't found a

valid model to help us, which we can explain to our clients and help manage expectations."

Blue Light also spends a good portion of its time being proactive, monitoring systems and looking for things that can go wrong. "We watch to see if the hard disks are filling up," says Charles. "Before they fill, we contact the users and recommend solutions. We tell them if things are degrading. We take regular backups of the data anyway, and wherever practicable we copy the most important data off site. So if there's a disaster, we have the most important data. In this way, we try to avoid crises."

They would like to proactively build a more efficient service. "But we need time to transition from where we are now – which has grown ad hoc with a bunch of different people with different skill levels – into something that is smart," says Charles. "And because we're busy supporting people in their day-to-day work, we may go a week without any time to spend on improving our systems. So the workload compared to the resources is one big issue."

Blue Light promotes and uses Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), such as the Linux operating system, the symbol for which is Tux, a healthy and peaceful penguin. The software is not only free of charge, but users are permitted to modify the software, as long as they give back those modifications to the community. Another group of FOSS enthusiasts can then pick up the modification and develop it in another way, which is called "a fork" in the software's development path. It's largely a gift economy, as Charles points out, which is "akin to the ideals of Auroville."

"We're basically a bunch of open source enthusiasts", says Phil, "the concept of open source fits well in Auroville." While the team's focus is on supporting FOSS, Blue Light also looks after the Windows system computers in the Town Hall, because they inherited these systems when they took over supporting the Town Hall's computers three years ago.

Blue Light also offers website hosting, and currently hosts around 25 Auroville-related websites, such as those of Sadhana Forest, the Auroville guesthouses and for the Residents Service. It also formerly operated the internet browsing centre at La Terrace, which has now closed because people generally travel these days with tablets and smart phones and no longer need desktop computers to access the internet. In conjunction with the site operators, Blue Light still provides the Wifi Hotspots throughout Auroville, where guests and Aurovilians can pay to access internet on their own devices. For this operation, Blue Light rents a server in Germany, where Internet connections are more reliable and cheaper than India. However, Charles points that they want to offload this aspect of their business, despite its profitability, because it is not part of their core mission of supporting the city services.

While Phil says they'd like to overcome the pejorative connotations of the term 'geek' as it "throws a curtain" over their work and makes them sound like strange guys tinkering away in a dark room, Charles laughingly claims it as a "badge of pride: The Geeks!" They point out how creative and interesting much of their work can be. "Once you get past those negative concepts," says Phil, "you realise we are architects, masons, plumbers, garbage cleaners. We are all that, we do all that!" Charles chimes in: "After all, we have engineers who come to Auroville and turn into foresters and yoga teachers. So we need some foresters and yoga teachers to turn into engineers."

So, next time your computer goes bonkers and you pick up the phone, spare a thought for these technology warriors of Auroville who will come and heroically retrieve the fried gecko from your computer.

Lesley

For more info visit bluelightav.org or contact bluelight@auroville.org.in.