

Ahoy Mate! Paradigm Shift Dead Ahead!

by Greg Kreis



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Apple's latest innovative product is called the Newton MessagePad. You have probably already seen or heard references to it by now. You may even be one of the pioneering owners of this radical shift in technology. Opinions on the Newton and other PDAs (personal digital assistants) run the gamut from rabid zealotry to skeptical criticism. The critics point to glitches in the hardware and software design and talk about the technology as immature and not ready for "prime time." These disparaging remarks remind me of the early reviews of the first microcomputers. Is there any doubt about what these "toy" computers have wrought?

You may be asking what a PDA has to do with M Technology. Maybe nothing, maybe everything. PDAs represent a dramatic shift in computing. They don't look like computers (no keyboard), they are designed to venture into the rough and tumble environment outside the office, and they will soon be sporting voice recogni-

tion. What will it mean to be able to retrieve and share any information, anytime, anywhere? Think about it.

Same Old Same Old

For years, I have struggled to compartmentalize my computing efforts into things I can do with M and things I can do with other software. Realizing the benefits of standards, I have been reticent to use nonstandard M commands to access applications outside of M. If I rely on proprietary M features, I know the difficulty I will have in porting my software to different M implementations. The time is fast approaching, however, when the distance between M and the advances in mainstream computing will become so large that M may never catch up. Will we wind up in the backwater?

If we want to avoid the backwater, we could extend the M language to duplicate every technological advance we see around us. But, the effort to develop an all encompassing standard and the cost of implementation would soon overwhelm us. Fortunately, there is an alternative—standardized interfaces. These will soon be the norm in the M world and we must embrace them. For example, the MUMPS Development Committee (MDC) has hammered out a very innovative approach to windowing via the MWAPI (M Windowing Application Program Interface) standard. It is up to you and me to show the vendors

that we are serious about using this new technology, but how can we do that?

Agents of Change

We need to accelerate change by acting on several fronts.

1. Review the technologies that are presently available and on the horizon. Look for the advantages they will bring to your M systems. (Tell your management and generate excitement.)
2. Assess the upgrades and changes in software and hardware needed to bring the new technologies into your organization's environment.
3. Inform the MDC and M vendors of the new features you want from M. Seriously consider joining one of the MDC committees working in the area of your interest. (Contact the MDC Secretariat, Don Piccone, at the MTA office.)
4. Participate in the MDC canvass process. Learn what will be in the new standard and prepare to use it right away. (Reread *M Computing*, February 1993, p. 39-42, for Thomas Sallander's column "The Making of a Standard," which discusses the canvass process.)
5. Call the M vendors and let them know that you need to see working versions of the proposed standard and that you plan to use the new standard as soon as it is accepted.

Call to Action

The M language is at a critical juncture. I believe we are on a perilous voyage as we move from a closed to an open language design. The myriad technological advances going on in computing today are our challenge. We must learn and master new technology while thinking of innovative ways to integrate it into the M Technology. To do any less puts our professional careers and the health of the M language at risk. If we don't act now we will be driven aground and broken up by the tides of change. Let's all help guide M to safe passage in the voyage to open waters. I want to be able to see this new world from an M perspective. Don't you? ■

Greg Kreis has been active in MTA since 1984, and has been on the Board of Directors since 1992, the same year he chaired the Annual Meeting in Phoenix. He is director of training with Paragon Training, Inc., near Atlanta.

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2 Results Way
Marlboro, MA 01752-9102
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Fax: 508-467-1605

Greg Kreis
Member at Large
Paragon Training, Inc.
3783 Upland Drive
Marietta, GA 30066
Phone: 404-975-9282
Fax: 404-509-7329

Catherine N. Pfeil, Ph.D.
Member at Large
VAISC6-San Francisco
301 Howard Street, Suite 600
San Francisco, CA 94105
Phone: 415-744-7520
Fax: 415-744-7530

CALENDAR

February 14-17, 1994

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "VA Information Technology Conference," Austin, Texas. For more information contact the Austin HELP DESK, 512-326-6780.

February 24-27, 1994

MDC Meeting, Houston, Texas. (Tentative)

April 26-28, 1994

National Small Business Innovation Research Conference, Houston, Texas. Phone 407-791-0720 for location and details.

June 13-17, 1994

MTA-NA 23rd Annual Meeting—Windows of Opportunity, Reno, Nevada.

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