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FROM THE EDITOR

Appearances Can Be Deceiving

by Richard F. Walters



Richard F. Walters

I am writing the first draft of this editorial on an airplane, on my way to the MTA office to help Marsha Ogden (who does the real work) put the finishing touches on this, the April edition. The plane is completely full between Sacramento and Chicago. A few laptops have appeared, some people are finishing their morning papers, and others are starting to get on with planning for the workday ahead.

It occurred to me as I started this column that a show of passengers' hands on this plane as to who had heard of M would produce one lonely hand. A more careful analysis, however, as to who on the plane was directly or indirectly affected by M-based applications would probably produce some surprising results. For instance, a friend of mine who retired recently from IBM told me that a survey his company had made of the banking industry produced overwhelming confirmation that M is widely used in that field; surely many, perhaps most, of my fellow passengers would find their financial lives intertwined with M-based software. M also plays a dominant role in hospital laboratory support systems, reaching another large segment of our population. In this issue, you will find some brief allusions to a growing influence of M in the legal marketplace—a field not many of us would have expected to produce many M enthusiasts. You will also find a few (though not many) references to the use of M in the commercial sector, suggesting another growing sector of influence of the language.

If we accept the premise that M probably touches the lives of a large proportion of the U.S. population in ways just described, the next question naturally arises: Why don't more people know about M? Insiders, such as the readers of this journal, worry about this fact, and the M Technology Association's Promotions Advisory Board, with the support of the Board of Directors, has taken a fairly dramatic step to heighten M's visibility with a major exhibit at the Spring COMDEX show in Atlanta. Clearly, M has multiple advantages, some described in the following pages, others evident to astute software developers who are quietly converting their M expertise into significant competitive advantages over other solutions in the commercial, financial, legal, and health-care fields.

That last sentence bears study: "quietly converting their M expertise" is a euphemistic way of saying that these developers, in addition to knowing a good thing when they see it, are not that eager to let the word get out. One such developer told me that her company is reluctant to share its insights because, if others saw how easy their work is made by using M, they might lose what is now a significant competitive edge in a high-growth-potential market.

There is a two-edged sword to this situation. On the one hand, maintaining a lead over the competition is important, and it will continue to be one of M's strong points, especially as the language evolves toward the newer domains of transaction processing, graphical user interfaces, and internationalization. On the other hand, as noted in the February issue of *M Computing*, there is an increasing demand

... maintaining a lead over the competition. . . will continue to be one of M's strong points . . .

for M programmers, which must in some cases be met by in-house training. Smaller firms must balance the cost of training programmers against the profits derived from using a little-known but powerful technology.

The M community needs to increase its visibility, partly so that more skilled programmers can contribute their insights to new applications based on M. At the same time, M users must realize that some industries, such as banking, have "made it" using M without ever becoming active or visible in the broader M user community.

Perhaps this line of reasoning explains in part the difficulties I have as editor of *M Computing* attracting articles written about the commercial sector. I wish my task were easier, but if my problems are a symptom of quiet success, then I can't fault those whose success depends on their keeping a low (but profitable) profile. In any event, we do welcome contributions from those willing to share their commercial successes and ideas, regardless of the featured topic. We know that our readers have a keen in-

terest in this field, and perhaps more visibility will lead to a broader market for their products.

My brother, who was in sales, remarked as he was looking for his first job that all he wanted to do was to help promote a worthwhile product. The word *worthwhile* landed him a number of offers, and he did well with that philosophy. We have a worthwhile product, and we too can do even better if we help promote it. After all, that is what this journal is all about. **M**

Dick Walters is the executive editor and has been a member of the M community for many years. He is a professor at the University of California at Davis. He welcomes your ideas and comments. Write to him in care of the managing editor of *M Computing*.

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