

# Dvorak on M: Part I

*John C. Dvorak, one of the computer industry's best known and most controversial commentators, served as the keynote speaker for the 24th Annual Meeting of M Technology Association in Chicago this past June. Mr. Dvorak graciously accepted MTA's invitation to moderate a panel discussion about the future of M Technology with a panel composed of M community leaders. What follows are excerpts from part I of a very candid discussion.*

**Moderator:** John C. Dvorak, noted computer industry columnist and author, and MTA conference keynote speaker.

**Panelists:** Ed de Moel, MDC Chair, Chief Software Specialist, SAIC; Paul Grabscheid, Vice President, Strategic Planning, InterSystems Corporation; Fred Hiltz, Principal Software Designer, Center for Applied Medical Information Systems Research, Brigham & Women's Hospital; David Marcus, co-founder and head of Development Staff, Micronetics Design Corporation; Neil Swinton, Marketing Manager, Greystone Technology Corporation.

## Part I

**Dvorak:** This can be a question and answer session with all of you chiming in. I was told that basically we're all here to say how great M is . . . you don't have to be with this group long to catch the litany. Here's a prepared question: "What are good new markets for M and why?" Well, I've suggested to some of you to look at police departments. I've been working with one local police department in a town of 35,000, and when you do the research, you find that no one has exploited this vertical market . . . the small operations are all doing things manually, and I think one good application would do it.

**Hiltz:** Lots of county justice systems in Florida are on M and that could well be emulated anywhere in this country.

**Marcus:** I think you have to look at it from two points of view. One thing is to select the market, whether it's police departments or the burglar alarm industry or whatever. A second thing is to realize that most of these people have a tremendous investment in existing applications and the question is, how do you take advantage of what else is out there. I think M's growth is going to come, not because people are going to write brand new applications for brand new industries . . . it's a question of how you take your existing application and merge it with something like Visual Basic or Excel or any of

the other tools that add functionality that M doesn't have. I ask people when was the last time you saw a good word processor system written in M . . . I've never seen one. I think where M is going to go to is bringing the power of M into the rest of the world so you can do a component type software—part of it could be in M, part of it could be outside of M.

**Dvorak:** So you guys see more hybrid type uses with M . . . Do you think M might just disappear into the woodwork?

**Marcus:** I don't think it will disappear. It will be a part of the total solution . . . today people want to take advantage of the Delphis, the Visual Basics, the Powersofts, and interact with all the databases. In reality, M is not everywhere . . . but I think it will blend into an integrated solution.

**Grabscheid:** I have a different perspective. I think it needs to reappear. I think virtually all of the M systems in the world are invisible, imbedded in some application . . .

**Dvorak:** Maybe it's ahead of its time, maybe it has already blended in.

**Grabscheid:** Maybe that's right. But in many ways I see our biggest challenge as making it acceptable for people to build applications using M. And the issues aren't technical—they're marketing and marketplace acceptance issues. When I talk to our customers they say "We love M but when we go to sell our applications, it's a barrier to making the sale." And I think our challenge is to remove that barrier. We're up against bigger technologies like Sybase and Oracle who are marketing the hell out of their products.

**Dvorak:** Wasn't Sybase just an unknown entity when M was first invented?

**Grabscheid:** Sybase was an unknown entity long *after* M was first invented . . . we had a big head start and yet they're a little bigger than we are.

**Dvorak:** Well, I think that deal they just made won't help them much. Any other thoughts on this?

**Swinton:** I don't think it's technical issues holding us back. It is a marketing issue. We talked before about what's more important—good technology or good marketing. I think they're both very important. Let me turn to our colleague on my right here [P. Grabscheid] and say: You guys have all the bucks, so what are you going to do?

**Grabscheid:** In fact, a lot of our focus is to get the word out about the technology, through PR, through advertising. And I think what we're doing with the Annual Meeting next year is a great step. I think moving the Annual Meeting into a forum where the rest of the database community can see a large number of people having great success with the technology is the right direction to go in.

**Aud. Q.:** I agree we've been preaching to the choir in our own Annual Meeting and that going to the database show is a good idea. When you went to COMDEX you were a very small fish in a huge pond. Now, how do you get the word out that M is a viable alternative to Sybase or Oracle to people making decisions who don't know about M already?

**Grabscheid:** For us, we have gone from probably 95% of our marketing spending going inside the M community to this year much more than half our spending going outside the M community. We have really shifted where our marketing dollars are going to try to recruit new developers into using the technology. . . . But look at these other companies. For example, last year Oracle spent about 44% of its total revenues on sales and marketing. That's a lot of money. That is also not what has characterized the M community—M implementors have spent most of their money building and supporting products, not broadcasting them to the rest of the world.

**Marcus:** I think the initial challenge, though, is not how to get the rest of the world to know about M. . . . We're taking the view—M, popular or otherwise, we'll advertise it, others will advertise it—the real issue is how do you take your existing legacy applications, the things you derive your bread-and-butter from today, and how do you go and compete against these other slick looking applications. We've heard the concept of "curb appeal." If you go in with line-at-a-time, roll-and-scroll—today the customer says, "This can't be good. This looks old. I'm used to a Windows, GUI, glitzy-type environment." From our perspective, we're focusing on trying to get you from where you are today to participate equally, if not superbly, in the GUI world. . . . We're focusing a lot more on this than on getting someone who uses C++ to look at M.

**Dvorak:** Eleven years ago the Macintosh set the mold for graphical user interface. Why did it take you guys, the two big vendors in the M community, so long to recognize that this was an obvious trend?

**Marcus:** There are some real simple answers. The M community was always facing inward, never looking outward at who was catching up with us. . . . we didn't hear the thunder hooves of the herds behind us. Basically, everything was going well, the MUMPS market was growing, there was no

reason to look at anything else. By the time we collectively decided "By god, we missed the boat!" it very quickly turned into a catch-up game. . . .

**Hiltz:** I'd like to say something for the users in this process. We didn't see any Delphi hooks, Visual Basic hooks or any GUIs from the vendors until about a year after the users got together and said, "We're going to mandate a standard M windowing API." It was the users who drove the push to the GUI and the resulting competition is causing some shake-out. And I think that has been very typical of the M community but not at all typical of the computing community at large—the M community has been user driven.

**Aud. Q.:** Look at the MWAPI in terms of what you all just said about M as part of an integrated solution. Wasn't it looking inward again. . . . keeping everything within M?

**Grabscheid:** I can speak to that and it's a topic on which I have lots of conflicts because I was the author of the standards document. It really has not come to much, but I think it's a good example of the standards process being a deliberate one, taking a certain amount of time, and the world changing a lot from the point at which we started to the point at which we finished. MWAPI was a solution conceived at a point in time when we said we need a standards-based solution that runs on "X Windows," the Macintosh, and Microsoft Windows.

**Marcus:** I would add that the MWAPI was a MDC-derived, user-driven definition. And because we as a company support the standard, we implemented it. We also recognize that it is not the only possible solution so we have also implemented OLE 2 support in MSM today so you can do other things. We want to open the gateway, be a really open solution, so you can mix and match as needed. Throwing away all your applications and starting from scratch is not a very pleasant idea.

**Dvorak:** Let's hear what Greystone thinks about this.

**Swinton:** We looked at the standard when it first came out and said we didn't see a good business reason to implement it right away. Our customers certainly needed a GUI solution, so we went outside and looked around and for various reasons—one being they're just a mile down the road from us—found this little company called PowerSoft and started working on some of the integration issues with some of their tools. I think it's a good example of how the future of M involves taking the best of breed no matter what it's written in, no matter where it's from, and making them all work together. That is very much our philosophy.

**Aud. Q.:** To what extent are the M vendors looking at software tools to aid in the development of concepts and the data

structures that support those concepts in new systems? You mentioned everybody is tied to legacy systems but the new information problems are much more complex, and we're going to need new software tools to formulate the concepts into a system design that the M environment can then implement. You've been talking about implementation techniques, but the content domain of what kind of systems people are going to need and what they will do with them—that's the direction market expansion is really headed.

**Marcus:** I think you need to recognize that M vendors are not going to generate or write their own versions of every tool. That's just not possible. The more practical approach is to provide the ability to integrate the solutions seamlessly, rather than re-invent our own. M has always suffered because we've tried to do that. Look at OMI which is a great example of this, so is MWAPI. As Lee Iacocca has said, "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." Well, when we have led, nobody followed, so we have to take a different approach and say: "We're not going to be as good at putting together tools as some other people are—people whose only livelihood comes from those tools. What we in the M community ought to do is connect the bridges so we can very easily integrate with what they have. They don't look at the M market as the reason for their livelihood."

**de Moel:** Yes, and how do we hook into those other tools out there? I think we've already heard about a couple of approaches—Greystone hooks into PowerBuilder and InterSystems hooks into Visual Basic. There is a lively communication between the various layers of a product, and effectively MUMPS supplies the database layer and the user interface is provided by other products that are good at doing their part of the job. **M**

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*The second part of this discussion session will be included in the next issue of M Computing.*

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