

Dvorak on M: Part II

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 II 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 II

Hiltz: I have a suggestion. You folks can hear us any time, but we won't hear Mr. Dvorak very often. So—I have a question for you, sir. Interoperability, one of the great buzz words of the last few years, means, I suppose among other things, that databases will have to exchange information readily. These days everyone says the answer is SQL. But, I'd like to ask you: What about the post-relational database—how will databases be communicating in the future?

Dvorak: You mean the famous post-relational database that doesn't exist? There is nothing on the horizon that I know of that takes the place of SQL. And obviously Oracle has made a name for itself just exploiting that situation. I think data interchange at that level is still something that hasn't been finalized. We have a way to go before that happens. Otherwise, I think it might be going on now and you guys might be out of a job. The possibility exists that somebody might come up with an entirely new system that looks cool—because people are buying what looks cool as opposed to green screens.

There's this situation at IBM that is kind of an inside joke. You go in where the AS400 guys are and there is just this green glow. Then you go over to where the RS6000 guys are and they have all this cool-looking stuff. The program is do-

ing exactly the same work in both places, but for some reason it's just so much nicer to look at the color monitors and the pretty displays and click on things versus the "green monster." And anyone who is familiar with the AS400 architecture will go on and on about how wonderful it is, but wonderful or not, people prefer the other stuff. I suspect the potential exists—not with the VA but maybe in smaller hospitals that have long-term strategies, I hope—for someone to come along and be able to move all the data to some other data form and make it secure. Obviously with hospitals a big liability issue is secure data—heaven forbid some hacker could come along and have access to somebody's chest pain record.

But the potential does exist and something really cool-looking will probably come along and you'll have a move away from the established standard. Not an easy thing to do. I recommend people read the February 1990 issue of *Scientific American*. There's an article in there about increasing returns, kind of the reversal of the theory of diminishing returns you learned in college economics. They are thinking just the opposite now . . . it explains a lot of marketing situations where somebody gets a leadership role and the next thing you know they own the market, which is kind of what M did with the hospitals. It's very difficult to unseat a group or a standard that establishes itself that way. On the other hand, it's not impossible. We've watched the fall of IBM over the years so we all know that's true. You're actually probably lucky that there's nothing like that, I think.

Another thing—people who come to these meetings tend to be worried about their future. The M community probably—unless they don't know how to do a job search, which is get an Internet account—is as secure as any group of programmers you can find. There's not a lot of training necessary and you don't have a seller's market, in the sense that a whole lot of M programmers are being cranked out of schools—that's a rarity and in a situation like that you usually have job security. Even if the whole world dropped M and went to something else, the process required to go from point A to point B requires even more hard work. And in the process, all of you would become experts in the movement, so the job worries are minor.

Aud. Q.: Being outside our community and looking in, what do you think are the one or two top things we should be aware of or we should do to get to the next level of success?

Dvorak: Concentrating on graphical user interface design, object orientation, basic modern interface concepts, would be a really good idea. In marketing, I appreciate that you want to expand the market you have and that's good because you'll control it even more, but I think there are still a lot of other good opportunities out there for complete solutions. I keep going back to my example of small police departments, and I think there are a lot of agencies like this—especially when you're dealing with the government—and I don't think they would have any qualms about taking on a MUMPS-based application . . . as long as there isn't that one know-it-all in the office who says, "Well, I think Windows-NT Server is the way to go," which he cites up from a copy of *PC Week*, written by somebody who doesn't know anything! You have to be that way too and out-nerd anyone else in the office.

Aud. Q.: I have a question about Digital's exodus from their MUMPS group . . .

Dvorak: Somebody here is quite closely familiar with the Digital thing, so do you want to answer . . .

Grabscheid: Would you repeat the question, please . . .

Dvorak: Yes—he's worried sick because Digital bailed . . .

Aud. Q.: Well, the number of vendors is getting fewer.

Grabscheid: It's always a little perilous for me to try to say why Digital did what they did. Clearly, Digital has adopted a strategy of focusing on some smaller number of things and is shedding a lot of software products, not just DSM. I can tell you Digital does have people here at the meeting and that they do still think of themselves as participants in the M community. From a dollars and cents standpoint, they have a lot of hardware business tied to M and would like to see that grow, not shrink. They are, in many areas, getting out of being a software vendor.

I always looked at the DSM Group as being very underappreciated within Digital. They accomplished a tremendous amount without ever being thought of as an important strategic product. You shouldn't view this sell-off as a non-interest in M but just as part of a corporate decision to focus more on selling hardware.

Another question from the audience mentioned there being fewer vendors of M. I think your perspective on that question depends on whether you think we're in the M market or the database software market. I can tell you as someone who spends most of my time trying to get people to use our products that the competitors we face day-in-and-day-out are Oracle, Sybase and Microsoft selling their database products inside the M community and outside the M community. Most particularly, inside the M community, people are constantly

looking at whether they should continue to use M or some other database technology. That's the important competitive battleground.

Dvorak: Why don't you three companies right here merge?

Grabscheid: No, we're not going to do that.

Dvorak: There was a George Bush sound to that answer . . .

Aud. Q.: I'd like to hear from the whole panel, and particularly Mr. Dvorak, what you think about the decision to combine our Annual Meeting with Database & Client/Server World? How good a show is it? And what can we do to position ourselves there to maximize marketing opportunities? I hope you have some sarcastic comments that will help us.

Dvorak: Sarcastic, huh? Well, let's start with our Micro-netics friend here. I'm surprised you don't have your own show.

Marcus: We do. Realistically, I think there are pros and cons. There are obviously some concerns when you join a show where you are roughly 600 out of 20,000. You think you might be swallowed, whether you say it out loud or not. On the other hand, you have to recognize the trend that show attendance at the MTA show has been going down and you can wait placidly for the end to come or find another field to play in and try to pre-empt it. Then the concern can turn into a positive force.

And having decided to go to Database & Client/Server World, we have to realize we're no longer competing against ourselves, M versus M. We're competing against people who are very used to participating in large shows. What it takes to get an application to the market through that environment is very different from what we're used to. In the old days, to get an M application out through roll-and-scroll, it didn't have to have documentation. I remember back in the '80s when people said FileMan didn't need documentation because it was self-evident, it was obvious how to use it. Nowadays, the expectation of the consumer at the large shows is that you have a shrink-wrapped application that's GUI-based, client/server—all the right buzz words. They won't even look at what your product does unless you mentally fit their checklist. If you're going in there, you better have a whole new look, a whole new outfit. To measure up you have to play by the new rules.

Swinton: I think there are two different perspectives. We have participated in this show with PowerSoft for the last two years and it's a great show. Tons of people come and it's all very interesting. For the meeting attendee, it's all positive—the familiar MTA conference is there, plus you can go to five sessions of the Database & Client/Server World conference

too. You can hear all the luminaries speak, like Epstein of Sybase and Litwak of PowerSoft did this year, who went out and made 20 million dollars and now they're experts about where the world is going.

I do agree from the exhibitors' perspective it can be kind of scary. I can deal with these guys, but now suddenly I'm across the aisle from Oracle and Sybase. But it's a win-win situation, so go back and talk it up and get lots of people to come. That's what makes the meeting useful—getting lots of people to share ideas and experiences.

de Moel: You know, in the MUMPS community we have tended to just have meetings among ourselves and “preach to the choir.” I think meeting in conjunction with another group gives us an excellent opportunity to convey the M message outside of our own group. Of course, I do share Dave's concern for how much of a non-identity will we have if we are only 2 percent of such a large group, but we will have the opportunity to teach our classes to some other people.

Marcus: From a user's point of view, I'm excited about it. Can you remember back to how it felt the first time you left home to go to school? Kind of scary, but would you ever want to go back? I doubt it.

Grabscheid: I think it's a wonderful idea. I look at the 2 percent or 4 percent or 5 percent in a slightly different way and think it will be great if we can interest just 2 or 4 or 5 percent of all those people in what we are doing. It's diving into the deep water, which is where we need to be. We have a choice of pretending the rest of the world doesn't exist and staying sheltered, or getting right out there with them. I think we're much better off getting out there with them.

Dvorak: You wanted my opinion. I, for one thing, don't believe you will be outclassed in the exhibits area. You're not out of line in terms of the kinds of booths you see at the higher end shows. We're not looking at a users' group thing here with a bunch of guys with hand-painted signs. You would blend in already—you've got the work stations and the whole look. In fact, you need to be in a more mainstream situation.

Another thing, you have probably at least 500 people who are real advocates, as opposed to most of the showgoers who aren't congealed necessarily as any group. And, if you're going out there to preach, you really do get to fine-tune your arguments when you're in with the other guys. When you just go on with each other about how wonderful the product is, you never really learn anything—except how wonderful the product is according to you and him. You get to fine-tune your responses and you get to see what the objections are and find out what you need to do to correct them.

I think what you'll probably find happening as you blend into this larger scene is that . . . probably you'll find the market double. That wouldn't surprise me.

Aud. Q.: Is it a good show?

Dvorak: It's a fair show . . . it's not a bad show and, believe me, I've been to bad shows . . . it's a good show. It's an intelligent show . . . people who go there are pretty bright.

Aud. Q.: Not like us, huh?

Dvorak: Yeah, I'm looking forward to that new book “MUMPS For Dummies.”

Aud. Q.: Will the vendors' presentations at the show be more like a consolidation or more of an individual nature?

Swinton: Well, if someone doesn't know anything about M, they don't care if MSM talks to DSM talks to GTM talks to . . . I think the common trait for all of us will be more education about what this is and why it is good. And we probably will make sure we're hitting the same points. That will make a certain amount of sense. While this is a community, we are still competitors. I think the wider world is probably less concerned with the interoperability. But I think the MTA can work to make sure all the vendors, not just the implementors, have some common themes to their messages. You guys know what it is but the majority of the people there will say they've never heard of it.

Marcus: I think the kind of interoperability questions you'll get will be more like “Can I have a database that's partially in M and partially in Oracle?” “Can I use PowerSoft?” “Can I use Visual Basic?” “Can I use OLE 2?” They want to know if they have to throw away their entire previous investment in order to benefit from M. So, they really want to know what's the advantage to them and what's the interoperability there, not to the vendors.

Aud. Q.: If we're going into this larger pool with all these people we can emulate, what do we want to be sure to bring of ourselves that we don't lose?

Dvorak: I don't think what you've just described is necessarily a bad thing . . . making your presentations more professional . . . putting stuff in shrink-wrap . . . making the box look good . . . having the right people in the booth. If you learn all these things from the people who do it right, you become more professional at it. And maturation tends to be a process of emulation anyway.

Whether or not you bring anything to the party, I just think that's natural fall-out. You go, you learn, what you bring is what you already have, which are the basic aspects of the M language itself.

Hiltz: Don't forget one important thing we bring, which hasn't even come up yet and I'm surprised: an American National Standard language, which leads to multiple sourcing. The M community can bring forward all of our standards, which most of our competitors don't have.

Dvorak: Like Windows?

Marcus: I can think of another positive potential that shouldn't be ignored. Ask all the non-M trade journalists to stand up right now and see how many non-M journalists are actually covering this show. It's probably zero. At a show like Database & Client/Server World, you're going to get coverage. It can be a double-edged sword because you might not like the coverage you get, but you're going to get it. I think as a community, we're ultimately going to benefit from the coverage.

Aud. Q.: We've always been such a user-driven community. Can you talk about the strengths we bring because of this?

Dvorak: Our user can answer this one.

Hiltz: The fact that we have a standard that is extremely broad and answers a lot of the users' real needs is probably the result of being so user-driven.

Dvorak: Can I stir things up a bit about this one? It seems to me that I could make the converse argument here—that perhaps M has lagged behind because it has been so user-driven instead of vendor-driven. Users don't have to make a profit so they have to push things like Intel is doing, for example, right now by promoting faster and faster processors over and over again. And I think users generally, collectively, have a great brain trust but they never really have the same "edge" that people have who work in the industry day-to-day developing products, as opposed to using them. I think it's maybe a weak point. But, then again, who would you blame but the vendors themselves for not promoting themselves better and pushing it harder.

I like users' groups. I think they account for a lot and contribute tons of things, but I don't think that user-driven from the get-go is necessarily good and may be a handicap.

Aud. Q.: How can we get more institutions of higher education involved in courses about M?

Dvorak: I don't know what these guys think but I'm going to tell you my experience with higher education and the computer technology scene. Except in EE, where they're getting a degree in engineering . . . I don't even know if there's that much connectivity between Microsoft and the University of Washington, except for a pittance. I just don't think there is much connectivity between the college computer technology

programs and the outside world. I think it lags, just generally—every school I've looked at, every professor I've talked to. Some places are still, I believe, teaching 360 Assembler.

I don't think there is a solution. I've never heard a good idea about how to correct this situation.

de Moel: From a different engineering-oriented background (I used to work in a physics department), our computer science educators insisted on teaching Pascal, but as soon as students came to a level where they got to play with the real equipment that physicists play with, they had to use FORTRAN, an assembly language that they had never learned. If you look at motivating schools to teach a particular subject, I think there are two motivations. One is its scientific value and I believe Pascal has some scientific value to teach the basics of the structure and processes behind programming. And, the other motivation is that there are great jobs to be had out there if you have these skills. I think we have an opportunity to do some PR and show people that if you have this skill in M there is something you can do with it.

Swinton: The problem isn't motivating schools, it's motivating students. If you say to them, "What do you want to do?", well, the answer is "I want to do Windows and C and GUIs and you can't do that in M." I think the message is—make this an environment people want to work in. It's a PR issue as much as anything else.

Aud. Q.: As a recruiter who spends seven hours a day talking to people about this, I agree absolutely that it's a PR issue. I think education, not from academia, but from all of us is what is needed.

Dvorak: You know, with the better programmers, it's not a problem to be capable in multiple languages. In fact, the really great programmers—I don't know how many of these are here today, but I imagine more than two—can pick up a language and run with it within a week or so because the fundamentals of most of these things are basic (not the BASIC language). Sometimes, you get a screwball, totally whack-o language like APL, but even that is not a hard language to learn. So I don't think it's a big deal for somebody to be hung up on one language and think it's the only one to learn.

Aud. Q.: We talk about trying to compete against Oracle and Sybase. Why do those two get a lot of industry-wide press and MUMPS doesn't? I guess what I'm asking you is, what are you going to write about M?

Dvorak: Probably nothing. No, you know I already did write about it. That's why I was invited here . . . 'cause I did the one write-up that I think exists.

The thing is, it's a public relations effort and you have to get the paid professionals who go out there and beat people up over these things again and again. Then, you get a big spread in *PC Week* in a special section, one of those long, boring articles about how everybody is benefiting from something. And you just keep doing that.

You don't want to get into touchy-feely stuff like the Amiga users did, always complaining that they never got any coverage. They had multi-tasking before anyone else and nobody ever gave them any coverage. The problem is that all their mailings were coming from the users.

This effort has to come from the top down with professional PR techniques. And you have to know what the message is: "MUMPS is good" is not good enough. You have to come up with the real benefits. And it would be a big plus if you modernized everything so there was no "green screen" effect anymore. And I like the idea of hooking in with Visual Basic and the concept of making MUMPS an extension, for example, to something like Visual Basic. I would take it and sell it like this. Visual Basic (and the other things like it) are fine but diminutive . . . they really don't have the power that the big boys require, for example, like hospitals with all their security issues. And here you are with the extensions that plug right in and provide that power. Why would anyone not want to use them? I don't think you should become incredibly arrogant, but that stance does work sometimes, especially when you have an edge already over the competition. You might as well brag about it in a very professional and matter-of-fact way.

Aud. Q.: What do you think about the standards process?

Dvorak: When you talk about standards, this is what happens—it's a committee problem. You just have to suffer with it if you're going to go with a standards kind of argument. It may break down at some point . . . I think if M became hot all of a sudden, the standards may just go by the wayside. You start seeing proprietary solutions . . .

Marcus: In fact, we can look at Objects as a good scenario. We have already implemented Object technology using OLE. The standard is still debating how to do it. And we can't wait for the standard to come around because the customers don't want it two years from now—they wanted it two years ago. The real danger you can run into is that one vendor goes one way and another vendor goes another way and the standard is in the middle. Then, it becomes a major question.

Dvorak: We have time for one more question.

Aud. Q.: I have a comment, not a question. I think the best thing MTA has probably ever done since I've been a member is asking John Dvorak to be here with us.

Dvorak: Thank you. Does it look like I set him up to say that?

Aud. Q.: Can I get one more actual question in? How are we going to get shelf space if we shrink-wrap our products and make them attractive like the other guys' products?

Dvorak: You're going to have to go direct, unfortunately, during this period. You're not going to get on the shelves.

We need to bring this to an end. I want to say thank you to our panel and all of you. I hope the rest of your day is great. **M**

This concludes Part II of the M Technology panel discussion. Part I appeared in the September/October issue of M Computing.



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