MTA Conferences '96 and '97:
Some Questions Answered

by David A. Holbrook

Following MTA's 1996 Annual Conference, some attendees raised questions on the Internet M newsgroup, comp.lang.mumps, about MTA's plans for 1997. In response, Dave Holbrook, vice chair of MTA's Board of Directors and a member of the 96 Conference Steering Committee, posted a message to clarify the decision-making process and circumstances that led to the 96 partnership with Database & Client/Server World and to MTA's current planning for 97. For the benefit of readers who aren't tuned in to the newsgroup, Dave's message (with editorial additions in brackets) is reprinted below.

As attendees to the 1996 Annual Conference were leaving Boston on March 28, our plans for a conference in 1997 were evolving daily. Let me try to explain some of what was going on at the conference, and update those who were not there.

To tell this story we have to go back a few years to 1994, when the Board had a 3-day strategy meeting to decide how to turn around the lack of growth in membership, conference attendance, and revenues. One of the major outcomes of that meeting was a decision to reinvent the Annual Meeting. This meant canceling the contract we had to go to Philadelphia in 1996 with our standard Annual Meeting and then investigating three reinvention options: 1) expand our own Annual Meeting, 2) create a new meeting with a partner, or 3) become part of another major show.

MTA staff researched the options and in February 1995 the Board narrowed the options to becoming part of another major show. Nine shows had been reviewed with three making the final cut. In May 1995 the decision was made to go with the Database & Client/Server World trade show.

The change in venue had three advantages over previous Annual Meetings: it would provide our membership with exposure to other technologies that can work with M; it would give M exhibitors an opportunity to show their products to thousands rather than hundreds of people; and it would put M Technology into the public eye rather than keep it hidden away at what has always been a private meeting. We were very excited about the new venue and were sure we were doing the right thing.

Although our years of growth were over, we had a healthy fund balance [about $203,000] and the rate of decline was very slight.

As we expected, membership, attendance, and revenue were down by the 1995 Chicago Annual Meeting. Our rate of decline was accelerating, however, and we began to dip into our fund balance—we needed to make payment [$90,000] up front to Database & Client/Server World to reserve exhibit space we would later resell to M vendors.

The 1996 Conference was affected by several bad things that we did not plan on. These included: the government shutdown, which cost us attendees; the difficulty in selling the exhibit space to M vendors, including the loss of one large vendor who bought space directly rather than through MTA; and a much-lower-than-anticipated attendance from the Boston area, with its large block of local M users.

When we all started arriving in Boston, again our membership, attendance, and revenues were down. Prior to the meeting, DCI (the sponsor of Database & Client/Server World) wanted MTA to purchase exhibit space for 1997. We simply did not have the money and after our previous experience, could not take the risk. This is why the message was circulating during the Boston Conference that there would be no exhibits for the 1997 conference.

Although the Boston Conference was not a great

financial success for MTA, DCI did very well with our exhibitors and did not want to lose them in ´97. When they heard that we would not be back in ´97, they approached the staff and offered MTA free meeting rooms in exchange for the opportunity to sell exhibit space directly to our vendors.

Because exhibitors and attendees were enthusiastic about having our conference in conjunction with Database & Client/Server World, this seemed like a great solution, and we were elated to have found a way to have a similar meeting in ´97. This elation was short-lived, however. In the middle of the conference week, the staff and Board went over the budget and discovered that, if we continued on our current path, we would run out of money in January or February of next year and could not make it to the ´97 Conference. We went to bed that night feeling pretty poorly.

It was clear to both the Board and the staff that the only way to survive to ´97 was to cut costs in a substantial way. Because MTA has already been trimming expenses to the bone, the only way to do that was to lay off staff. The MTA staff was cut from 10 to 6—down from 15 just a few years ago.

For ´97, several M exhibitors put a clause into their contracts with DCI making their commitment with DCI contingent upon MTA having its annual conference in conjunction with the show. This is a great benefit to MTA and gives MTA more bargaining power with DCI.

I hope this helps you understand the still evolving plans for our Annual Conference in 1997. As of April 22, MTA is continuing to negotiate with DCI to bring the conference portion of our meeting back to Boston in conjunction with Database & Client/Server World the week of May 19, 1997. The Board has tried to be honest and direct with the staff, vendors, and members. But it was not possible to communicate this rapidly evolving story to everyone at the conference.

Despite all the bad news, I have been so impressed with the enthusiasm and dedication of the M community. No one is willing to give up on MTA. The challenge is to find a set of services that the M community wants and is willing to pay for.

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Dave Holbrook is a long-time active member of MTA. He joined InterSystems Corp. in 1994 after working as development manager with Digital Equipment Corp.