

What is the Value of Standards?

by Art Smith



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What is the value of a standard? Some of you “old timers” may remember the “Remember the Fire!” buttons that were handed out at the MUG meeting in Washington, D.C. back in 1992. For those who missed that meeting, the buttons referred to the Great Fire of Baltimore which occurred on February 7, 1904. This fire consumed 1,500 buildings in 80 blocks of Baltimore, Maryland.

So, what does that have to do with standards? As the fire grew in size, fire departments from all of the surrounding counties were called in to help out. Unfortunately, they could do very little. None of their pumpers could connect up to Baltimore’s fire hydrant system because they all used different pipe threads!

Today fire departments anywhere in the country can assist one another because all fire hydrants and hoses conform to national standards. This also makes ordering equipment much easier. When the Millersburg Fire Protection District (our local department) orders a new nozzle, it is enough to specify that it needs a 2 1/2” coupling. Any 2 1/2” nozzle from any manufacturer will fit any of our larger attack hoses. This is largely a result of the Baltimore fire, which demonstrated in very certain terms the real dollar value of standards.

What about M standards? What are they worth to you? I’m not asking for lip service, now, I’m asking about real dollars and cents (or marks and pfennigs, pounds and pence, yen and sen or whatever your local variant might be). I’m sure many of you at this point think that the standards are a nice idea, but have no real value to you or your business. Let’s examine that a little closer.

Have you ever had to port your application software from one M vendor to another? In the last six years, we have done this twice. While it wasn’t exactly a fun experience, it wasn’t terribly traumatic, either. With very few exceptions, all of the software moved seamlessly from one system to the next. The only exceptions were where we had used non-standard extensions. All in all, porting the applications took about 20 hours of effort. Imagine doing this without a standardized language.

I remember moving some programs from GW Basic to Borland’s QuickBasic a number of years ago. I recall that it took about the same time (20 hours) to move a twenty page application. Sounds comparable? Well, consider that our applications comprise some 1800+ routines at about three pages each, roughly 5,400 pages of code. At Basic’s rate of a page an hour, that would amount to well over two per-

son-years! How much is the M standard worth to our institution? Let’s see, two person-years twice (two ports) in six years. That works out to 2/3 FTE, just in the ports! I know what my salary is. Plug in yours and think about it!

Ok, you say. But we wouldn’t have even tried the ports without the standard, so the cost wouldn’t have been incurred, right? Perhaps. On the other hand, what is the cost of being locked into a single vendor instead of being able to move from one competing source to another? I think enough of you have had that experience to know that it is even more expensive than the above numbers.

So maybe we’re unusual. (Those who know me are probably nodding emphatically at this point, but I’m talking about the fact that we have ported our application twice in six years!) Perhaps your system has been running on Vendor X’s M for years, and you never intend to change. Do you pay a maintenance fee on that software, or do you purchase updates? What do they cost now, when you can “easily” move from one vendor to another? What would they cost if you didn’t have that option? Standardization definitely enables competition. If you think your costs are already high, try talking to your local Oracle (or Sybase or Informix or whatever) rep about purchase and

update costs. Be sure to tell them how many users you support, because you'll need bigger hardware!

On a more personal note, suppose you decide to change jobs (willingly or otherwise). You're an M programmer (with some other skills, perhaps). Enough said. No employer who knows the industry cares about whether you are a Vendor X M programmer or a Vendor Y M programmer—M is M! Granted there may be concern about experience with a specific application, but not the underlying standardized language. If you subscribe to comp.lang.mumps, or its mirror, the MUMPS-L listserv, you know that there are many M programming jobs out there. You have a valuable and transportable skill, and much of that is due to the standards.

On a broader scale, perhaps your application runs in an international venue. How do you handle different character sets, number conventions, date formats, and currencies? If you deal with these issues, you probably know that the M has made many steps towards standardizing these issues and has more standardization efforts in the works. Moreover, the M standard has, whenever possible, achieved this standardization by binding to other existing standards so that M data and output files can be easily transported to non-M systems. What is that worth to your institution?

So why am I bringing this up? The MUMPS Development Committee (MDC)—the body that produces the M standards under the auspices of the American National Standards Institute

(ANSI)—is having a particularly tough budget crunch this year. So tough that, as this is being written, its very continuation is in question. By the time you read this you may already have been requested to contribute to the MDC. If not, you very likely will receive such a request in the near future. Think about what standards mean to you and your company and what they are worth. Don't wait for a big fire to find out that standards matter to you, too! Please consider having your institution pay its fair share for this very valuable commodity. **M**

*Art Smith chairs the MDC and is in charge of computer systems at the University of Missouri's Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.
Email: Emergent@sockets.net*

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email: jglaser@partners.org

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Seattle, WA 98108-1597
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Fax: 206-764-2923
email: fdsm@forum.va.gov

Gregg Seppala (1996-1998)
Member at Large
Dept. of Veterans Affairs
Washington CIOFO
8403 Colesville Rd., Suite 200
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: 301-427-3751
Fax: 301-427-3711
email: seppala.gregg@forum.va.gov