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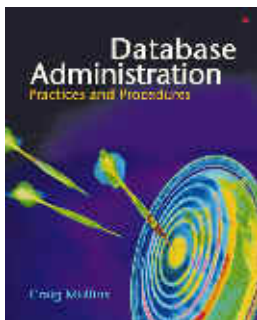
February 2007

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The DBA Corner

by Craig S. Mullins



Two Good New Year's Resolutions for a DBA

By the time you read this, many of you will have already broken your New Year's Resolutions. That's okay, if you're a DBA, I'll help you to make some new ones.

Number One: remember, it is all about the business. DBAs tend to be overly fond of technology. We like to immerse ourselves in the bits and bytes of technical solutions and learn all there is to know about the software we use. This is fine as such, but technology-

loving DBAs have to be sure they do not blind themselves to the business reasons for the software and hardware they love so much.

The DBA's work must be integrated with the goals and operations of their organization. Doing so requires merging business with technology to build what is known as Business Service Management, or BSM. DBA services need to be integrated with the other core components of the IT infrastructure. Although this is not simple, more work is required than just linking to the IT infrastructure. To fulfill the promise of BSM, business services must be linked to each component of the underlying technology.

This means that a DBA should be able to immediately ascertain that an outage in a particular production database, server, or transaction translates into a particular business outage. For example, the DBA should be able to immediately comprehend that an outage to the XYZ database means that stores in the Western region cannot conduct sales. Yes, the DBA must focus on fixing XYZ, but communication to management and end users has to focus on the business impact. And the severity of the business impact must guide and prioritize the actions taken by the DBA.

Of course, there may be other types of DBAs, too. The point is that there is not one simple job out there with the title DBA. There are actually many jobs that fall under the larger heading of database administrator.

Number Two: remember, personality counts! A frequent criticism of the DBA staff is that they can be difficult to deal with. Sometimes viewed as prima donnas, DBAs can be curmudgeons who have vast technical knowledge but limited people skills. Just about every database programmer has their favorite DBA story. You know, those famous anecdotes that begin with, "I have a problem ..." and end with, "... and then he told me to stop bothering him and read the manual." DBAs simply do not have a "warm and fuzzy" image. This probably has more to do with the nature and scope of the job than anything else. The DBMS spans the enterprise, effectively placing the DBA on call for the applications of the entire organization.

The fact that DBAs often must sit down and work things through on their own can be a mitigating factor in this poor reputation. Many database problems require periods of quiet reflection and analysis to resolve. So DBAs do not generally like to be disturbed. But even though many problems will require solitude, there are many other problems that require a whole team to resolve. And due to the vast knowledge most DBAs possess, their quiet time is usually less than quiet; constant interruptions to answer questions and solve problems is a daily fact of life.

DBAs should not be encouraged to be anti-social. In fact, DBAs should be trained to acquire exceptional communication skills. Data is the lifeblood of computerized applications. Application programs are developed to read and write data, analyze data, move data, perform calculations using data, modify data, and so on. Without data there would be nothing for the programs to do. The DBA is at the center of the development life cycle — ensuring that application programs have efficient, accurate access to the corporation's data. As such, DBAs frequently interface with many different types of people: technicians, programmers, end users, customers, and executives. However, many DBAs are so caught up in the minutiae of the inner-workings of the DBMS that they never develop the skills required to relate appropriately with their co-workers and customers.

Bad management exacerbates the anti-social behavior of DBAs. A manager who rises from DBA to DBA manager might not know how to curb the curmudgeon. Worse yet, he might agree with the behavior. DBA management must help to grow the DBA staff in the desired direction through encouragement, opportunity, and incentives. Even more importantly, the DBA manager must lead by example — a curmudgeonly manager will more than likely cultivate curmudgeonly DBAs.

If your DBAs are curmudgeons, or you are a curmudgeonly DBA yourself, make one of your resolutions this year to become more “warm and fuzzy.” A better attitude will translate into a better working environment — and more productivity for your entire organization. Modern DBAs cannot afford to be curmudgeons. In this day and age of inter-connected systems and complex technology, interpersonal relationships and teamwork are required for a DBA to succeed.

Two resolutions should be enough for this year, don't you think? I mean, how many resolutions can a DBA keep anyway?

From [Database Trends and Applications](#), February 2007.

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