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Certification Exams for VFP

Microsoft used DevCon to jumpstart the VFP 6 certification exams. Beta versions are on the horizon.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

In last month's column, I gave a round-up of DevCon '99. But the space limit of this column and the incredible amount of material to cover (not to mention the condition of my brain after a week at DevCon) combined to make me omit one of the most interesting activities at this year's DevCon. Several people from Microsoft's Certification and Skills Assessment group were on hand to work with the VFP community to prepare certification exams for Visual FoxPro.

As I told you in the November '98 issue, Microsoft will include two Visual FoxPro exams (*Designing and Implementing Desktop Applications with Microsoft Visual FoxPro 6.0* and *Designing and Implementing Distributed Applications with Microsoft Visual FoxPro 6.0*) as part of the Microsoft Certified Solutions Developer track. Each exam can be used as either a core exam or an elective. For more information on this track, check out http://www.microsoft.com/train_cert/.

The certification group took over a meeting room at La Quinta and ran several activities, most of them simultaneously. Training sessions were held to teach people how to design certification questions; attendance at one of these sessions was required before submitting questions. Unfortunately, due to other responsibilities, I was unable to attend any of these sessions, but a number of FoxPro Advisor contributing editors and writers did so and submitted questions for the exam.

Following the initial training session (held Sunday afternoon), the certification lab was open all day every day to allow people to come in and work on their questions with the help of the certification staff. I came by several times and watched the process of honing an idea into something that could be tested.

Several machines in the room were dedicated to the "blueprint survey," an on-line questionnaire about the exam content and its distribution over the various subject areas. Those who completed the survey, which took about half an hour, received a CD case.

In addition, there was a place to leave business cards asking to be notified when the exams are ready for beta testing. There was a daily drawing from among those cards for a desk clock.

Finally, just in case an extra incentive was needed to get people to come in, large bowls of M&M's sat on every table. Apparently, they worked, since they'd been replaced with other candy by the last day.

I spoke with Barbara Decker, the Microsoft Program Manager who ran the DevCon activities and asked why she brought her team to DevCon. She explained that one of the main goals of her group is to ensure that certification exams reflect what people are really doing with products, rather than what Microsoft thinks they're doing or wants them to do. Coming to DevCon gave them access to exactly the right target audience.

The group's goal at DevCon was to develop the content for 60% of the two exams. They were able to more than meet that goal. Decker says they're quite pleased with the results.

She's also pleased with the number of people who took the blueprint survey. Normally, the survey is conducted on the web, which means that anyone can take it, whether or not they really work seriously with the product. By offering it at DevCon, there was some assurance that those surveyed do VFP development, giving more accurate results.

The next step is for the certification group to complete the beta exams. They expect to have them ready early in the fourth quarter of this year. Then, they need the VFP community's help. To make sure that the exams really reflect appropriate content and that the questions themselves really test what they're meant to test requires lots of beta testers. While many names were collected at DevCon, more are needed. If you're interested, start checking the certification site (www.microsoft.com/mcp) in late September for news of the beta.

Decker commented that her group is really appreciative of the support her team received at DevCon and returns the sentiment, "Certification is committed to the FoxPro community and that's why we made a push to get these done." She pointed out that it's a two-way street. Her team can't get the exams out unless FoxPro developers take the beta exam.

Decker felt that the community really responded at DevCon and showed that we're willing and able to do what's needed to make VFP certification happen. Now she needs us to take the beta test challenge. I'm game. How about you?

Washington's Birthday Revisited

My friend Leslie Koorhan pointed out that my comments about George Washington's birthday in the August Editor's View were a little ambiguous, so I want to clarify. February 22, 1999 was the 267th anniversary of the day that Washington was born. Using the Gregorian calendar, he was born February 22, 1732. However, when Washington was born, the calendar in England and in the colonies that later became the United States read February 11, 1731. (It was 1731 because, at the time, the New Year started in March rather than January. That change also occurred in 1752.) When the change to the Gregorian calendar occurred in 1752, Washington adopted the later (correct) date. Sorry if I confused anyone.