

July, 1995

Editor's View

Support is a Big Job

Microsoft's FoxPro Support facility is an impressive place.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

I visited Microsoft's main campus in Redmond recently, always an interesting experience. For me, though, the highlight of this trip was a tour of the Product Support center for FoxPro. This facility is one of several where FoxPro support people work. (The other main facility is in Charlotte, North Carolina.)

Our tour included meeting many of the support personnel (including a number of sysops from FoxForum), plus demonstrations of various software used to handle support, both on CompuServe and by phone. We also got to see the on-site testing facility, where a support engineer can find equipment to match that of a customer, so he or she can try to reproduce the customer's problem. I hadn't seen some of the machines in there for years, but of course, there are still people using them who need to be supported.

I've always been aware the Product Support folks were there and, over the years, I've gotten to know some of the FoxForum sysops personally. But my visit gave me a real sense of the magnitude of Microsoft's support operation and the effort that goes into it. This facility was much larger than what I'd imagined. I was also impressed to look at the bookshelves over each desk. In addition to lots of manuals, the support engineers all seemed to have an excellent collection of FoxPro books. It's nice to know that they turn to the experts (including some of our writers) as well.

Learning Experiences

As I write this, my family is absorbed in planning my older son's Bar Mitzvah. Of course, I'm using FoxPro to track the guest list. In fact, I've built a little application in Visual FoxPro to enter and modify guest records. I could have done it much more quickly in FoxPro 2.6, but this was a low-risk opportunity to work with the new version. (The result is pretty neat, too. It includes a set of checkboxes that are added to the form at runtime to represent the various events we're inviting people to.)

Thinking back, I realize I've done this a lot over the years. Whenever a new version comes along, I find some personal project and use it as a test bed. I've been maintaining a database for one organization I belong to for about six years now, through at least three versions of FoxPro. I have yet to write a complete application for this group - instead I have a collection of screens, reports, little programs and the like, which represent my efforts to learn many of the new techniques which have come along.

Of course, not having an application means I'm destined to maintain this database forever. Fortunately, I've learned my lesson. Now, when I start a project of this sort that could possibly be handed off to somebody else, I make sure it ends up as an a project I can build into an EXE and install on someone else's machine.

Pro Bono

Thinking about projects like the ones above led me to musing about all the volunteer programming I've done over the years—three applications for the elementary school alone.

I suspect a lot of you are spending your "spare" time in front of the computer, too, maintaining data or producing applications for organizations and projects you care about.

Although there can be some real frustrations with this kind of work (one application I wrote isn't in use because no one with a computer was willing to do the data entry involved), there's something really special about being able to use my professional skills to support the causes I believe in. Sure, I could stuff envelopes or staff the bake sale, but it's a lot more rewarding to do something that puts my brain to work and provides services other people can't.

The flip side, of course, is trying not to volunteer to write an application every time I see a place where a computer could do a better job. It wouldn't be hard to fill all my time with volunteer work. And, of course, there's the old "if all you have is a hammer, every job looks like a nail" syndrome. Some tasks really don't call for a database application, but are better done by hand or with another tool.

Why should you attend the FPA Conference?

We're working hard on planning for the first FoxPro Advisor Conference, to be held October 22-25 in Phoenix. The speaker list includes many familiar faces from FoxPro Advisor, as well as other leading FoxPro developers. If you're ready to leap forward in your knowledge and understanding of FoxPro, plan to be there.

In addition to the formal sessions, conferences provide a special learning opportunity. At meals, in coffee breaks, sitting around in the evening, the conversation zig-zags from music to FoxPro to sports to FoxPro to families to FoxPro to current events to FoxPro. You get the idea. We talk about everything under the sun, but there's always a healthy dose of FoxPro mixed in. In addition, getting to know other developers personally gives you a whole collection of people you can call on when you need to bounce ideas off someone else. The old saying is "Don't be a stranger;" once you've been to a FoxPro conference, you won't be.