Microsoft to Online Volunteers: We Don't Need You Anymore
(So what do you do now?)
Whil Hentzen

Lots of news this month – and seeing as this is December, 1999, you'll be surprised to find out that none of it has to do with hoarding food or stocking up on guns.

MVP Program Cancelled
The big news these days is that Microsoft has cancelled the MVP program for online volunteers. As you probably know, Microsoft has had a program that recognized and rewarded volunteers for their contributions to the online community. A primary factor in getting this started was Calvin Hsia's "FoxForum Most Talkative" list that he compiled while an independent in Hawaii back in 1992 or so, but the MVP program has been expanded to include non-Compuserve media like the Universal Thread, and covers all of the major offerings from Redmond, including all of the development tools, Office, and the various operating systems. As of the middle of 1999, there were between 700 and 1000 MVPs worldwide.

Late on Thursday, October 21, I received an email from a fellow named Joseph Lindstrom. It said, in it's entirety:

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Thank you for your past participation in Microsoft technical newsgroups.
Your participation and contributions have been greatly appreciated.  In
light of your participation, we would like to let you know about certain
changes that will soon be taking place in the technical newsgroups,
including the elimination of the MVP Program.  Each year, Microsoft customer
participation in the newsgroups has grown and we expect this to continue.
Due to customer feedback and requests for more direct Microsoft involvement,
we are changing our newsgroups strategy.  Effective 12/1/99, we will be
moving to a program in which technical newsgroups are staffed by Microsoft
support professionals.  The MVP program will no longer be in operation
effective 12/1/99.

This shift in focus in the newsgroups will allow us to respond to customer
requests for more contact with Microsoft support professionals and
guaranteed response times.  Microsoft will redirect their investments
previously made in the MVP Program to the newsgroups overall and driving
customer awareness of this valuable resource.

MVPs should be aware of the following:

*    The MVP buddy position will no longer exist and
these Microsoft support professionals will be focused on assisting customers
on line in a broader arena.  We recommend you take advantage of Microsoft
Webcasts, our online training modules focused on Microsoft products and
technologies in order to obtain technical and product information.
<http://support.microsoft.com/servicedesks/msdn/webcasts/msdn_webcasts.htm>
We also recommend you take advantage of our extensive online support
offerings.  www.microsoft.com/support <http://www.microsoft.com/support>.

*    We will no longer be granting MVP Bucks.  Please feel
free to use the MVP bucks you currently have before 12/1/99.

*    MSDN and Tech Net subscriptions created in connection
with the MVP Program will not be renewed.  You will be able to continue to
use existing accounts until the expiration date (most likely 12/31/99).

*    Your MSN account will no longer be operational after 11/30/99.
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*    MVP Programs at Microsoft subsidiaries around the world may still be
in existence.  Each program is run separately.

*    Those individuals who participate in our newsgroups by posting and
answering customer questions will have a connection with Microsoft.  We will
maintain a forum attended by Microsoft support professionals.  In this
forum, those who participate heavily in the newsgroups will be able to ask
support professionals questions and obtain guidance on technical and product
issues.  Please visit this site for updated information.
<http://support.microsoft.com/support/mvp/

*    You will be hearing more about Microsoft community programs for the
newsgroups and other forums.

We believe that this new approach to newsgroups and community will be
beneficial for all Microsoft customers.  If you have any questions or
suggestions relating to the changes in the technical newsgroups, we would
appreciate hearing from you.  Please contact me at support1@microsoft.com.
Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Joseph Lindstrom
Director Business Development
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Pretty interesting, isn't it? I don't want to spend a lot of time dissecting this; anyone who has been online has seen huge threads already. But a couple of points should be made:

1. Except for a bland "Thank you for your past participation", there's no acknowledgement of the contributions that the MVPs made to the support of the product. Some MVPs spend several hours a day on the forum of their choice, answering questions, helping out and generally evangelizing the product.

2. I went to the MVP site mentioned in the email, and found Figure 1. Handy, eh?
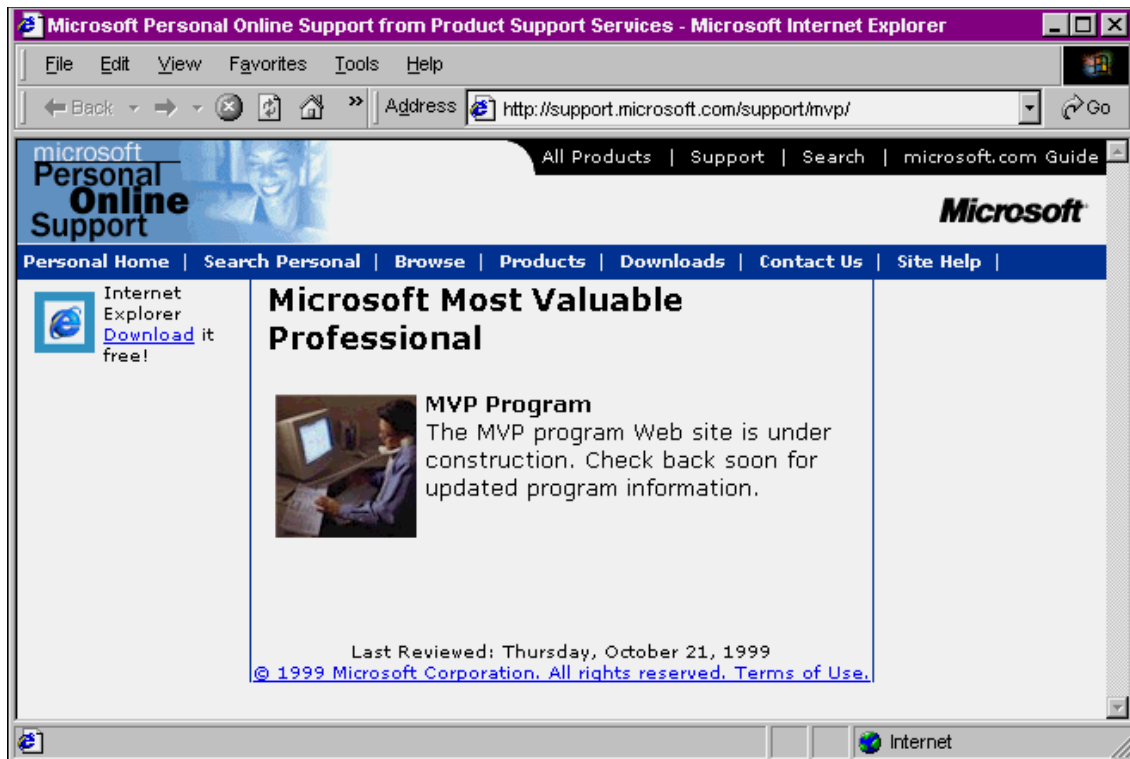

Figure 1. The new Microsoft "MVP" site.

production: 12fred_mvpprogramgone.tif

3. Mr. Lindstrom didn't have the courage to include his own email alias. Do you have any confidence that emails to the black hole, support1@microsoft.com, are going to be answered, or even seen by anyone other than a staffer from a temp agency? I sure don't.

But the bigger question, really, is why? While some people think the communists are behind this, or perhaps Hillary Clinton, I can come up with two plausible explanations.

However, before I get into those two, I should stress that the entire MVP program is being canned – not just for Fox. So, you conspiracy theorist idiots, this is not evidence that "They're going to kill Fox." They're killing the spirit of nearly a thousand diehard evangelists instead. So give it a rest, willya?

First, it could be a reaction to the AOL volunteer mess. In case you haven't heard, the New York Times reported on October 20 that at least seven former AOL volunteers have asked the Labor Department to investigate whether the use of non-compensated labor by AOL violates the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act. You can see the details yourself on ZDNET at

`http://www.zdnet.com/zdnn/stories/news/0,4586,2241961,00.html`

This, combined with the problems that Microsoft has had with contract workers over the past couple of years, could very well have made them gun-shy. And I don't blame them. If these events are what prompted the abandonment of the MVP program, it's a shame. They may not even be able to admit this for fear of sparking lawsuits. After all, who do you sue? Companies with lots of money!

The other possibility is that Microsoft, faced with the specter of competing with free operating systems and free office suites, has decided to beef up the profits of the company by turning support into a profit center. Now suppose you were going to do such a thing. Wouldn't you want to terminate a competing service that didn't cost customers anything – such as a cadre of volunteers that often provided better support than your own technical support staff? Of course you would! And it would make sense to disincentivize those volunteers from continuing their efforts on their own – by, say, snubbing them with an impersonal email that simply told them they weren't needed anymore.

Of course, we'll never know why. Hidden behind the PR-babble of "will allow us to respond to customer requests for more contact with Microsoft support professionals" and other non-sequiters is the message that we're not as smart as Microsoft, and if we know what's good for us, we'll just tuck our tails in between our legs and follow along meekly.

I really feel bad for the Fox team, as well as the other product groups, because they end up taking abuse from folks who are frustrated with this type of behavior. No one seems to understand that we each love our products – Visual FoxPro, Visual Basic, Access, HTML Help, or whatever – and we love our development teams, our product teams, our PSS folk - but we all hate the Microsoft company for their arrogant, heavy-handed, "we're smarter than you" attitude and corporate culture that forces the product teams to ship stuff before it's ready. This latest incident is just another example of that pervasive attitude.

Finally, now that Microsoft has thrown down the gauntlet, you can expect support from volunteers to subside somewhat – not because "I'm not an MVP anymore" but because of the implicit message from Microsoft that "you're not wanted anymore." I bet a number of former MVPs turn to alternate products and platforms where they *will* be wanted.

So what do you do for support and help? Well, there's some good news on the horizon as well.

Conferences
First of all, as of the end of October, 1999, there are five Fox-specific conferences scheduled for 2000.

TCI DevCon. A brand new show run by the people who manned the registration booths at prior DevCons will be in New Orleans in May. Among many attractions are, ahem, a week of drinking and partying in the Big Easy and the charm of a small (200-300 people?) conference, but with all of the great goodies that come with a $1000 registration fee. Back in the FoxPro/Windows hey-day, there were a half-dozen or more regional conferences, each with 200 – 400 people, but we've never had one in the Texas/Louisiana region. The TCI conference will be a welcome addition to the lineup. I wouldn't dare miss it, and if you've not been to a VFP 6.0 show yet, or if you want the last sneak-preview at 7.0 before it's released, you should make plans on visiting New Orleans on May 14-17 too.

SDGN Conference to the MAX. The Dutch group, SDGN (Software Developers Group Netherlands), formed in 1990, has been hosting one or two shows each year for as long as I can remember. Last year's event featured over 400 people in an amazing facility – the national training camp for their Olympic athletes - an hour outside of Amsterdam. I don't have a date for the 2000 show yet, but it should be right around the end of May again.

Advisor DevCon. The grand-daddy of them all, this is the event announced at last year's Decade of DevCons event in Palm Desert. The 2000 event will be held in Miami on September 24-28 (yes, right in the middle of hurricane season) and will feature all new sessions on Visual FoxPro 7.0. You'll have to suffer through the crowd of 2000 people, of course, but it's going to be the first time you'll see Visual FoxPro 7.0 in depth. I know I'll be there.

Great Lakes Great Database Workshop. Yes, it's returned after a three year hiatus – the 4th (semi) annual GLGDW in Milwaukee. Back in its original time slot of the first weekend of November (4th through 8th), GLGDW will feature many of the same speakers and VFP 7.0 sessions that were at the Advisor DevCon, plus a few new stars doing brand new presentations. Another cozy, regional conference, GLGDW historically attracts 300-400 people and is perfect for those on a budget – you can get conference registration, hotel and airfare for about $950. Sure, it's Milwaukee in November, but considering you never have to leave the Hyatt, who cares?

Visual FoxPro Konferenz. As I write this, Rainer Becker of Germany's dFPUG is busy preparing for his 1999 Fox conference in Frankfurt, but he's already let me know he's working on securing next year's date in mid-to-late November. This show packs in more sessions per minute than any other I've seen, and features speakers from all over both sides of the Atlantic. If you're in Europe, you don't want to miss it, and if you're not, you might still consider combining a trip to the Continent with a visit to Frankfurt – more than half the sessions are given in English. Much like GLGDW, this show takes over the entire hotel and is right in the heart of town, so you can take short (or long) walks on breaks between sessions or after hours.

Electronic Forums

Shows aren't the only means for learning more about the product, although they are a great way to meet people that you can later correspond with. Although traffic on CompuServe has declined since it's big days in the mid 90's, many people still rely on CIS as their primary mechanism for technical support. Sure, Microsoft pretends it doesn't exist, but what do they know? <s>

There's also a host of public Microsoft newsgroups. I tend not to visit them much because they've had recurring bad problems with spam in the past; life was too short to wade through hundreds of Make Money Fast and Girls Girls Girls messages. But they're much better now.

There's also the Universal Thread (www.universalthread.com) that's been around for nearly five years now – a tremendous resource for Visual FoxPro users – many who used to hang out on CompuServe have switched allegiance to the UT. If you haven't been there yet, check it out.

I've saved for last the coolest news - the "Wiki" (rhymes with "mickey.") Well, it's not really new, but it's been gaining critical mass over the last couple of months – so I gotta make a formal mention of it. Hosted by Steven Black, the Wiki is a collaboration of information from hundreds of people on a single web site that is hyperlinked and cross references six ways from Sunday. Information in the Wiki is organized into topics and categories. A topic is information about a single idea and is stored in a single page; categories are collections of related topics.

Find the Wiki at www.fox.wikis.com. Leave yourself a few hours – once you get in, you won't ever want to leave!

The coolest thing about the Wiki is that everyone can contribute – and it's incredibly easy to do so. Click on the Edit link in the colored bar at the top or bottom of a Wiki page, and you'll automatically know how to do the rest. You can make automatic links, automatically format URLs, FTP sites, email addresses, ISBN numbers, and knowledgebase article numbers. You can also look for things through the Find option which is right next to the Edit link. You can search for titles or do a full text search.

Go to your machine and do this right now!

Books and Stuff

Last but not least, there is a new raft of books coming out. Due out after the first of the year (well, next spring sometime) are **Client/Server Applications with Visual FoxPro and SQL Server 7.0**, by Gary DeWitt and Mike Levy, tech edited by Chaim Caron, **1001 Things You Wanted to Know About Visual FoxPro (But Were Afraid to Ask)**, by Andy Kramek and Marcia Akins, tech edited by John Hosier, **Microsoft Office Automation with Visual FoxPro**, by Tamar E. Granor and Della Martin, tech edited by Ted Roche, and **Building Visual FoxPro Frameworks**, by Kristyne McDaniels, tech edited by Bill Anderson.

But there's more! Even though 7.0 is still merely a gleam in our eyes, Rod Paddock and John Petersen have already inked a deal on an all new **Visual FoxPro 7.0 Enterprise Development** tome, due out, well, when 7.0 is released, right? Way to go!