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Database Performance Management

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Evaluating DBA Tool Vendors

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Advanced organizations augment their DBA staff with advanced software tools that help to automate the task of database administration. This is a smart move because offloading complex tasks to the computer can reduce the amount of time, effort, and human error involved in database administration.

There are multiple categories of database tools that can help organizations improve the efficiency of database administration. However, for simplicity's sake, every DBA tool provides functionality in at least one of the following six categories:

- **Application Development** — tools to help you design, implement, test, and tune application programs that access relational databases.

- **Database Change and Migration** — tools to assist in database modification and the movement of database changes to multiple environments (e.g. test, quality assurance, production, etc.).
- **Database Design** — tools to create logical data models and migrate them to physical database structures.
- **Performance Management and Analysis** — tools to monitor, tune, analyze, and manage the performance of the DBMS, the data structure, and the applications accessing the database.
- **Database Utilities** — tools to help manage database content and integrity (e.g. load, unload, reorganization, etc.).
- **Database Backup and Recovery** — tools to backup or copy data to external media and restore or recover it in the event of a system, data, or programming error.

Although the most important aspect of database tool selection is the functionality of the tool and the way it satisfies the needs of your organization, the nature and stability of the vendor that provides the product is important also. This section provides suggested questions to ask when you are selecting a database tool vendor.

1. How long has the vendor been in business? How long has the vendor been supplying tools for the particular DBMS(es) you wish to manage?

2. Does your company have other tools from this vendor? How satisfied are the users of those tools?
3. Are other organizations satisfied with the tool you are selecting? Obtain a list of other organizations who use the same tool, and contact several of them.
4. Does the vendor provide a 24-hour support number? If not, what are its hours of operation? Does the vendor have a toll-free number? If not, how far away is the company from your site? You want to avoid accumulating long distance charges when you are requesting customer support from a vendor. (If an 800 number is not shown in the vendor list, that does not mean that the vendor does not have a toll-free customer support line.)
5. Does the vendor provide online technical support? Can you access it before establishing a relationship with the vendor to evaluate its usefulness? If so, scan some of the questions and reported problems for the tools before committing to the vendor's product.
6. Evaluate the response of the technical support number. Call the number with technical questions at least four times throughout the day: before 8:00 a.m., around Noon, just before 5:00 p.m., and again after 9:00 p.m. These are the times when you could find problems with the level of support provided by the vendor. Was the phone busy? Were you put on hold? For how long? When you got a response, was it accurate and friendly? Did the person who answered the phone have to find

someone with more technical knowledge? (This can indicate potential problems.) If you really want to test the vendor call them after midnight to gauge the response to an after-hours support request.

7. Does the vendor provide a newsletter? How technical is it? Does it provide information on the database industry and the vendor's tools, or just on the vendor's tools?
8. Does this vendor supply other tools that your organization might need later? If so, are they functionally integrated with this one? Does the vendor supply a full suite of products or just a few? Does the vendor provide solutions in each of the six categories listed above, or in just a few? It is wise to work with a vendor that can satisfy all of your database administration needs, not just a few of them.
9. Does the vendor integrate its tools with other tools? For example, a product that analyzes databases to determine whether a reorganization is required should integrate the reorganization job with your shop's job scheduler?
10. Does the vendor provide training? Is it on-site training? Does the vendor supply DBMS training as well as training for its tools? Are installation, technical, and user manuals provided free of charge? If so, how many copies? If not, what is the charge? Is computer based training available for the vendor's tools?
11. Will the vendor answer database questions free of charge in addition to questions about its

product? For example, if the vendor provides Oracle tools, are its support personnel skilled enough to answer a question about Oracle database administration? Sometimes vendors will do this, but they do not typically advertise the fact. Try it out by calling the technical support number.

12. Does the vendor have a local office? If not, are technicians readily available for on-site error resolution if needed? If so, at what price?
13. Will the vendor deliver additional documentation or error-resolution information by overnight mail? Does it publish a fax number? an e-mail address?
14. How are software fixes provided? Electronically? By tape? Over the web? Via FTP? Is a complete reinstallation required? Are fixes typically accomplished using zaps?
15. How many man hours, on a short notice, is the vendor willing to spend to solve problems? Is there a guaranteed time limit to resolve severe product problems?
16. Is the vendor willing to send a sales representative to your site to do a presentation of the product tailored to your needs? Or is it a "phone sales only" organization? If the vendor will not send someone on-site it can indicate that you are dealing with a small vendor or a vendor that could be difficult to deal with later.
17. Is the vendor a business partner of the DBMS vendors such as Microsoft, IBM, Oracle, and Sybase? How soon will the vendor's tools be modified to support new releases and versions of the DBMS?

18. Have the vendor's tools been reviewed or highlighted in any industry publications recently? If so, obtain the publications and read the articles. Sometimes the articles will be available on the web.
19. Will the vendor assist in developing a cost justification? Most tool vendors are eager for your business and will be more than willing to provide cost justification to help you sell upper management on the need for DBA tools.
20. Does the vendor provide sample scripts (or JCL for the mainframe) to run its product? Is an easy-to-use "Getting Started" manual available?
21. Does the vendor charge an upgrade fee when the processor is upgraded? How flexible are the terms and conditions for the contract?
22. If the vendor is sold or goes out of business, will the vendor supply the source code of the tool? If not, are the terms and conditions of the contract flexible in the event of an acquisition? Given the state of the industry today with mass vendor consolidation, this is an important item to consider or you may be stuck with unsupported products or a "difficult" vendor post-acquisition.
23. Is the vendor willing to set a ceiling for increases in the annual maintenance charge?
24. Does the vendor supply database administration tools for all of the DBMSs used at your shop? Can the same tool, using the same interface, be used to manage multiple databases across multiple operating systems?

25. How does the vendor rank enhancement requests?

These 25 questions provide a basis for evaluating database tool vendors. Judge for yourself which criteria are most important to your organization.

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