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11 Rules of the Road for DBAs

by Craig S. Mullins

There are many sources that offer technical guidance for database administration, but sometimes the non-technical aspects of DBA are just as challenging. DBAs should be armed with a proper attitude as well as sufficient fortitude and knowledge before attempting to practice database administration. With that in mind, this month's column will offer some "life rules" to guide DBAs as they attempt to keep their companies databases humming along.

Rule #1: Write Down Everything -- DBAs encounter many challenging tasks and time-consuming problems. The wise DBA will always document the processes used to resolve

unavailable your environment will become hectic and frazzled. The best things you can do when problems occur is to remain calm and go about your job using your knowledge and training.

Rule #7: Measure Twice, Cut Once. -- Being prepared means analyzing, documenting, and testing your DBA policies and procedures. Creating simple procedures in a vacuum without testing will do little to help you run an efficient database environment. And it will not prepare you to react rapidly and effectively to problem situations.

Rule #8: Understand the Business -- Remember that being technologically adept is just a part of being a good DBA. Technology is important but understanding your business needs

DBA will always document the processes used to resolve problems and overcome challenges. Such documentation can be very valuable (to you and others) should you encounter a similar problem in the future. It is better to read your notes than to try to re-create a scenario from memory.

Rule #2: Keep Everything -- DBA is just the job for you if you are a pack rat. It is a good practice to keep everything you come across during the course of performing your job. If not, it always seems like you'll need that stuff the day after you threw it out!

Rule #3: Automate -- Why should you do it by hand if you can automate DBA processes? Anything you can do, probably can be done better by the computer – if it is programmed to do it properly. And once it is automated you save yourself valuable time – that probably will be spent tackling other problems.

Rule #4: Share Your Knowledge -- The more you learn the more you should try to share what you know with others. There are many vehicles for sharing your knowledge: local user groups, online forums, web portals, magazines, blogs, Twitter, and so on. Sharing your experiences helps to encourage others to share theirs, so we can all benefit from each other's best practices.

Rule #5: Focus Your Efforts -- The DBA job is complex and spans many diverse technological and functional areas. It is easy for a DBA to get overwhelmed with certain tasks – especially those tasks that are not performed regularly. Understand the purpose for each task you are going to perform and focus on performing the steps that will help you to achieve

Technology is important but understanding your business needs is more important. If you do not understand the business reasons and impact of the databases you manage then you will simply be throwing technology around with no clear purpose.

Rule #9: Don't Be a Hermit – Be accessible; don't be one of those "curmudgeon in the corner" DBAs that developers are afraid to approach. The more you are valued for your expertise and availability, the more valuable you are to your company. By learning what the applications must do you can better adjust and tune the databases to support the business.

Rule #10: Use All of the Resources at Your Disposal -- Remember that you do not have to do everything yourself. Use the resources at your disposal. Many times others have already encountered and solved the problem that vexes you. Use your DBMS vendor's technical support to help with particularly thorny problems. Use internal resources for areas where you have limited experience, such as network specialists for connectivity problems and system administrators for OS and system software problems. Build a network of colleagues that you can contact for assistance. Your network can be an invaluable resource and no one at your company even needs to know that you didn't solve the problem yourself.

Rule #11: Keep Up-To-Date -- Be sure that you are aware of all of the features and functions available in the DBMSs in use at your site – at least at a high level (and preferably in-depth). Read the vendor literature on future releases as it becomes available to prepare for new functionality before you install and migrate to new DBMS releases. The sooner you know about new bells and whistles the better equipped you will be to

that purpose. Do not be persuaded to broaden the scope of work for individual tasks unless it cannot be avoided. Analyze, simplify, and focus. Only then will tasks become measurable and easier to achieve.

Rule #6: Don't Panic! -- Problems will occur. There is nothing you can do to eliminate every possible problem or error. Part of your job is to be able to react to problems calmly and analytically. When a database is down and applications are

prepare new procedures and adopt new policies to support the new features.

Summary

The job of the DBA is a challenging one – from both a technological and political perspective. Follow the rules of thumb presented in this column to increase your likelihood of achieving success as a DBA.

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