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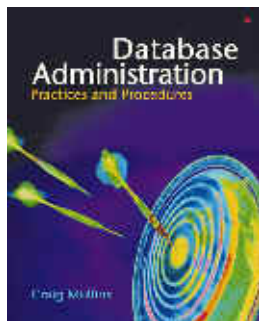
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June 2004



## The DBA Corner

*by Craig S. Mullins*



### **So You Want to Become a DBA?**

One of the most common questions I am asked by readers is “How can I become a DBA?” The question is actually not as simple as it seems and there are many different aspects to the question. Sometimes a DBA for one DBMS wants to support a different DBMS; for example, a SQL Server DBA wants to move to become an Oracle DBA. Sometimes it is an application programmer who wants to become a DBA. And other times someone with no IT background at all asks the question. The answer is different for all of these folks.

First of all, let's address the switcher. Of the three questioners described above, this person is in the best position. Already possessing knowledge of one DBMS, and the roles and responsibilities of a DBA, moving to support another DBMS requires gaining knowledge of that platform. Of course, the move is made simpler if other parameters remain constant. For example, a DBA who supports SQL Server will be able to more quickly support Oracle or DB2 on a Windows platform, than on Unix or OS/390.

The best course of action for the switcher is to find a company that uses both the DBMS you know and the DBMS you want to know. Apply for a position as a DBA for the DBMS you know and use the job as an introductory approach to get experience on the other DBMS. Once you have established yourself as a knowledgeable and effective DBA in the new shop, work your way over to help out on the other databases, perhaps as the backup DBA on the other DBMS when the primary DBA goes on vacation. This way, you gain experience over time and do not have to abandon your current area of expertise.

If your current company uses both DBMSs, then your task is easier. I bet your manager would be very happy to work with you and train you on the other DBMS as a backup. It will make his job easier: your current expertise remains and he gets help for another platform. It is usually a win-win situation.

OK, but what about the application programmer who wants to become a DBA? This is a bit trickier. The upside is that the best DBAs were once application programmers earlier in their careers – and most DBA managers know this. But you will need additional skills and a can-do attitude. First of all, make sure that you are developing programs that access databases. Knowing how to write SQL and code programs to access data are valuable skills for a DBA to possess. Next, take some initiative on your own. Buy some books on the database technology used by your company. If you can, buy a PC and a single-user version of the database software. Practice by installing the DBMS, creating databases, and running backup, recovery, and reorganization jobs on the PC. Study and practice and then think about getting DBA certification; all of the major DBMS vendors offer a certification program. Being certified alone will not get you that new job, but in combination with everything else it can help.

Finally, communicate your desires. Talk to your manager about your career goals. After doing that, talk to the DBA manager about your interest and his needs. When a new DBA position opens up, the DBA manager is likely to remember that you were interested – and if he doesn't, you can remind him when you apply for the job.

Another tactic that can work is to volunteer your time with a charity that needs DBA help. Working as a volunteer can put valuable experience on your resume that will help when you

are applying for that “real” job.

Finally, let’s address the guy with no IT background at all. DBA is not an entry-level position. A good DBA is a jack-of-all-trades possessing in-depth technical expertise. The DBA is at the center of the development life cycle and therefore needs to interact with many different software and hardware components to ensure that database programs have efficient, accurate access to the corporation's data. A novice with no experience is not likely to become a successful DBA. Instead, get a job as an application programmer; learn database development skills, and then work to transfer into the DBA group. Other potential “gateway” jobs to pursue before DBA include Windows system administrator, help desk technician, and technical support specialist. After getting some experience in any of these roles transferring into the DBA group is achievable (though not always easy).

To conclude, every DBA-in-waiting would do well to take every opportunity available to learn about database management systems, database administration, and IT in general. Reading the latest information in industry journals and books, attending and participating in local user groups, and sharing your experiences with others are all good techniques to add to your database knowledge – and therefore, are useful tactics to deploy in your quest to become a DBA.

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