



Social Networks

Index

Introduction

Postings:

September 24, 2007	“What did you have in mind, eh?”
December 4, 2007.....	“An ‘anniversary’ of sorts ... ”
January 9, 2008.....	“I got my new horizons!”
April1, 2008	“Social Networking!”
April 21, 2009.....	“We all have opinions!”

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Read more at his blog – <http://itug-connection.blogspot.com/>.

Introduction

When I first suggested to the ITUG Board that I would volunteer to write a blog about topics I thought may interest the ITUG community, I had no real idea what the world of social networking entailed. And the first columns I wrote were anything but memorable and it was a difficult learning process to determine what content would attract a readership. But in the weeks that followed, and from the comments that were posted, it became very clear what the community valued – opinions and information about the HP NonStop community at large.

There are many places to turn to for product reviews and technology analysis, but in the world of “immediacy” that is the blog world, readership is anxious to hear the opinions of others. While the community is rife with opinions and opinion leaders, it’s not always easy to find a place where they can be read. The blog became one such place and there are now several more blogs being produced or in the early stages of development. Much of this is as a direct result of the changes in the community itself, and the creation of a new body representing a number of former user groups, and as acceptance of social networking increases then many other columns will appear and the “buzz” around the NonStop platform will only increase.

In the September 24, 2007, posting, “What did you have in mind, eh?” I comment on the early exchanges I had with the community as the amount of blog postings began to grow. I took this growing interaction with the community as an opportunity to outline, in fairly broad terms, the topics I would cover, the style of writing I would attempt to produce, and the type of readership I would most likely attract. I also explained that I considered the blog to be an additional communication channel and “not to be in competition with any other exchanges that exists with the ITUG community.” The blog would also be an attempt to reach out to a non-traditional audience who may prefer to find commentary through such postings on the Internet.

In the subsequent posting on December 4, 2007, “An ‘anniversary’ of sorts ...” I told of how encouraged I had become by the engagement with the community. At the time, the “comments to posting” ratio was slightly more than 2:1, a ratio that continues to this day and is rather remarkable in the world of blogging. Apart from specialty sports blogs, it has been my observation that comments from other readerships aren’t all that frequent. By including a couple of quotes out of the comments posted by the community, I explored the value of the immediacy the blog provided and how the middleman was being cut out. I also expressed some frustration as well as impatience over how little media and industry analyst commentary about NonStop was being provided – and how we really cannot blame HP for “keeping NonStop a secret” - and saw the development of a social network around the NonStop platform as a very positive development.

In the blog posting of January 9, 2007, “I got my new horizons!” I talked about my own need to develop the “habit” of checking blogs – particularly those emerging from the HP user groups. I commented that just “then knowledge that there is a place to go and read about NonStop, and to catch up on topics of interest and issues facing the community, helps develop a growing readership.” I then added “we are seeing the number of social networks growing rapidly and we know that many of the are providing value – but where the journey leads and how dynamic these communities become, we will all just have to wait and see.

In the blog postings of April 1, 2008, “Social Networking!” and April 21, 2008, “We all have opinions!” I talk about the HP User Group Community networking Site, and the ACI Forum. The ACI Forum may not be so much a “social network, as a tool at the business level”, as ACI acknowledges that with a managed set of users, it is very focused on providing support for their customers but it’s an exchange with the ACI community all the same. And I close the last posting with the observation that there are many places to turn for analysis but “social networks have ... eliminated any middleman and given us direct contact with all of those contributing opinions.”

But can there be too many blogs – can the social networking spawn so many exchanges that it becomes difficult to find the time? I asked Nina Buik, President of Encompass and a very active blogger about this. She responded “personally, I don’t think so! The ubiquitous nature of a presence in the ‘social-net’ sphere says to the world, you want to be seen and noticed...and not missed by only being in one place! It’s key that you keep them current and I plan on doing just that on my sites...today!” And I agree as the really is no rules about how you find your way to a site. Maintaining readership, once a blog site has been found, will always be the challenge for any writer engaged in providing content to a social network.

I recently returned from a user event in Europe and while there, I was approached by a senior HP NonStop sales executive, Jeff Wilson who thanked me for the blog. He told me “I am now well informed about where you are and what restaurant’s you eat at, as I am informed about the cars you drive. I am even now well informed about the type of car your eldest daughter may be buying. Do I want to know all of this? No! But along the way, I have developed in interest in the stories and so I am now finding I drift to the web site every couple of days!” And this is the nature of blogging and of the emergence of social networking. There will always be an interest in the opinions of those prepared to express them in today’s public forums. Whether they all succeed will be totally dependent on their ability to maintain an interested readership!

Monday, September 24, 2007

What did you have in mind, eh?



With a dozen postings already up on the blog, I am beginning to enjoy the exchange that's begun. However, among the postings and emails that have arrived, are some questions about the scope of my topics, the style of commentary I am providing, as well as some concerns about who exactly my audience is. So, I thought it is probably the right time to take this on and provide some feedback as to my views on all three of these issues. The picture I have included here is of me relaxed, looking out to sea, and I can't think of a better way to introduce the topic!

When it comes to the scope of topics I will cover, it was clearly outlined in my first Connection magazine column, the Real Time View, back in the July – August 2006 issue – when I said “I plan to focus exclusively on the data center, and to cover the many combinations of server platforms and infrastructure we all rely upon to support our business. This is not to dismiss other important areas within IT - but just reflects the area of interest that I am most passionate about”.

I recently had an exchange with a couple of folks in Cupertino on this topic, and I think it's worthwhile to repeat it here in my blog. But since putting it together for them, I have had a little more time to think it through, and now believe that the scope of my topics will center on three themes:

1. The platform,
2. System attributes (or fundamentals), together with a recent addition,
3. Data Bases and Business Intelligence.

Within these three themes, I will cover a fair amount of territory, as follows:

1. Platform

Blades: I foresee dramatic changes on the horizon (2008?) as Blades first make an appearance in support of NonStop – this to me, bundled in potentially hybrid packages, will put NonStop directly in the cross-hairs of IBM and its System z. I say this not because there's anything wrong, or bad with this eventuality, but to think of such a positioning in terms of having a choice.

Open Systems: I really liked what Wendy Bartlett said in a recent blog comment to the "Got Security?" posting I made a few weeks back. In her comment she said "while OSS is POSIX compliant, OSS is not POSIX, UNIX, or LINUX. OSS does use the high-level interface code from the OSF/1 implementation (<http://www.osf.org/>)." Wendy then went on to add "however, the low-level kernel code was implemented by HP on HP's NonStop Operating System to our own software engineering standards and therefore inherits the NonStop Operating System fundamentals." This is huge, and something we should all remain cognizant of, and actively promote within our corporations!

Service-Oriented Architecture (SOA) Journey: I continue to follow this topic as I see us transition to a services model and my previous blog served as an introduction to this topic (Service? I'll give you service ... Sept 21, 07). From the early days of Web services, on to SOA, and potentially, to an Event-Driven Architecture (EDA), I have been an active participant, and I see great potential here, not only with the product-set from HP, but from the vendor community as well. I have borrowed the phrase SOA Journey from another user group but really I do believe the deployment of an SOA suite is but the first big step on a journey that will continue for many years to come.

2. System Attributes

Availability: I am pretty passionate about this topic and truly believe it is the most important product differentiator. I see this as fundamental to the question of "why NonStop"? I see every need to have systems that have no downtime due to unplanned outages. I am also actively involved with the Business Continuity SIG as the SIG leader where concerns over availability are front-and-center of the discussions within this SIG.

Scalability: I am equally as passionate about this topic and view it as an attribute that is often skipped and/or glossed over. There are three great lies in this world –

"The check is in the mail!"

"I checked, and your meal will be right out!"

"This system will be as big as you need!"

Many of us sat through a great presentation at the ITUG event in 2006 I believe, when the ANZ bank (Australia) talked about their migration from NonStop, to a cluster of Intel servers running NT. The work they did to address availability moved them close to NonStop, with a couple of exceptions – but just as they were about to go into full production, the ANZ bank bought another bank and they found they could not quickly scale-up to meet the new demands. The return to NonStop, for them, was purely based on the scalability of NonStop.

Security: And, winding it's way through all of this will be Security – something I have become extremely sensitive to lately – and not just because my wife who joined XYPRO last year, talks to me about it over coffee (not the specifics of her products, mind you, but in general terms), and not because at GoldenGate, data integration and business continuity is bumping into security as well, but because it's right at the top of the list of concerns with every CIO I have talked to recently.

3. Data Base and Business Intelligence

Real-Time: I don't think we can escape this subject anymore, as the term-real time is becoming more important as discussions turn to Business Intelligence (BI). I view the definition of real-time along the lines of the IEEE Standard Dictionary, Sixth Edition (John Wiley, 1996), when it states "the actual time in the real world during which an event takes place ... an event or data transfer in

which, unless accomplished within an allotted amount of time, the accomplishment of the action has either no value or diminishing value ...” Again, this is an attribute of the data base that runs on NonStop that puts a lot of distance between it and what some other platforms can provide. In a real-time world, there’s increased pressure to remove the downtime due to planned outages.

Software / Data Integration: I foresee we will all be playing in a world of “busses” as we interconnect our servers. Will the catching the bus be worth the price of a ticket? Part of this I see tied to the emergence of data virtualization or, the data base backplane, as I put it, while another part is tied to the growing trend in look-to-book configuration optimization. In other words, while we have sorted out the communications / network pieces and no longer think about how to assemble networks and access data, there is a heck of a lot of issues around ensuring the data we do end up seeing is the right data for our purposes.

As for the style of writing you will find in this blog – consider it as lying somewhere between Peter Egan’s columns in Road and Track (Side Glances) and Cycle World (Leanings), and the fictional Carrie Bradshaw and her Sex in the City column. I am a huge fan of the anecdotal style of Peter Egan, but I also like the questioning style of Carrie. While I have a passion for user groups I am also just as passionate about cars and motorcycles! And while I like technology in general, this blog will stay focused on Computer technology.

In my very first Connection magazine column (Real Time View July – August 2006) I said that "I am writing (the column) with the expectation of presenting a slightly different view of NonStop than might be presented elsewhere and I am writing it to generate further discussion. I am openly soliciting your feedback and I can assure you I will be reading all correspondence that I receive."

Following an anecdotal style gives me the freedom to entertain as much as inform. I don’t want to become repetitive or boring. As I run across topics that interest me or become engaged in conversations that I find enjoying, I will work out ways to include them here. Availability touches all of our lives today and has an influence over many of the decisions we take on technology so I can’t believe I will ever run out of subject matter for this column.

With respect to the audience for this column – this is still a work-in- progress. For those of you who have stayed close to this blog and have been reading my postings, you will see that I have thrown together a mix of topics for a very broad audience. Right now, it’s a bit of a dilemma for me, and it could go either way. Whether I engage in a dialogue at the bits and bytes level, or approach from a business perspective still has to be worked out. However, what is obvious to me following the comments of the past few weeks, is that I will be heavily influenced by the comments I receive. What triggers an active exchange will have an impact on the direction I head and on the column-inches I put together on the subject.

To wrap up this posting, I would like to address one final point. The creation of this blog is not in competition to any other exchanges that exists within the ITUG community, it is being undertaken to complement other programs. The thought behind the production of this blog is that across today’s community there are different generations of users. Some of us are more comfortable reading a trade publication while we are on a plane, some of us prefer to email our friends, while others like to get information from a number of online sources, including blogs. It would be a miss on the part of ITUG not to have such a channel as this operating.

As just another volunteer, I will try to maintain “the separation between Church and State”, between my day job and my hobby, and between the different user groups I support - so, please remain open and blunt with your comments and let’s see if we can build something we all can enjoy.

Tuesday, December 4, 2007

An "anniversary," of sorts ...



I have been blogging for a little over three months and I am very encouraged by the engagement that has developed with the ITUG community. There's very few postings that haven't generated additional comments and this is a very pleasing result so early in the lifecycle of this blog. I am including a photo here of me working on this posting from my neighborhood Simi Valley Starbucks coffee shop, where the staff are no longer surprised by the hours I keep. And yes, this is early December in Southern California.

A number of you have asked me how I find the time to write these postings and it's rather straightforward. These days, and with the time I am loosing to travel, I end up spending most of my days in airport lounges drafting potential topics. One of the dreadful byproducts of this pattern is that I have a minor case of insomnia and even now, as I write this, it's well before dawn. A few years back I used to joke that I had my body clock removed at a tender age but now I fear that I may have just broken it!

For as long as I can recall I was just as impatient as many of you about the minimal coverage of NonStop by industry analysts. I was always pressuring HP and before HP, Compaq, to see better coverage of NonStop. But the longer I waited for coverage to improve, the more my frustration grew. It has only been recently that I came to realize that perhaps the problem was really with us, the ITUG community, and that the time had come for us to develop our own analysis and commentary!

In the posting of September 1st, "Blog Launch", I made the point that "The content, in the end, will only be as exciting and as meaningful as you dictate". I went on to add in the posting of September 24th, "What did you have in mind?", that "I am writing to generate further discussion"! And this is a very important element that keeps me motivated – this two-way dialogue is now well

established and I look forward to reading every comment posted.

Over the past few months I have also received a number of supportive emails about the blog. And one of the emails that I received was from Bill Highleyman, a former ITUG Chairman and widely published himself, really hit home. He said:

“It’s been a long time since the NonStop community had such an insight from an outsider into things NonStop (outsider in that Richard is not an HP employee). Ever since the sad passing of Terry Shannon and the end to user-wide posting of advocacy issues, we in the NonStop community who were not able to go to the ITUG events had little insight into what was happening in the NonStop marketplace. Richard not only understands the NonStop market inside-out, but is fortunate enough to travel around the world and keep up with users and third-party vendors. His candid views and insights are invaluable to all of us in the NonStop community. Keep it up, Richard.”

Another email along similar lines from Graeme Phillipson, an Australian friend of mine and a much better journalist than I ever will be, built on Bill’s thoughts here when he emailed me this week with:

“The web has vastly changed the way people communicate. It has disintermediated publishers, market researchers, agents and many other information gatekeeper functions - including user groups. As you are showing, blogs and social networking sites, and google searches and various Web 2.0 functionality is altering the whole dynamic of cooperation. No user is an island, entire of itself.”

I have to admit I didn’t know what “disintermediate” was – but Graeme pointed me at Wikipedia where I found that it was an economic expression simply meaning, cutting out the middleman. And with the web connecting everyone these days, disintermediation is flourishing! From the very posting I wrote, I wanted to make sure everyone knew that, with this blog, I was opening another, complementary, communications channel geared towards those within our ITUG community who favored on-line dialogues.

Another email that really hit home was from Pam Taylor, the Vice President of the SHARE User Group, when she said:

“I think the key point that Richard is making - and everything I'm learning and observing in my day job indicates that he is right on target - is that we must, sooner rather than later, pay attention to what's happening in the on-line world of communities.”

The readership is not only growing, and for this I am extremely thankful, but it is reaching a wider audience. Computerworld now carries a link to this site from its Tech Dispenser page – a separate web site accessible from the front page of Computerworld, listed on the left side of the Computerworld home page. If you take a look at the bottom right of the Tech Dispenser page you will see a label “Full List of Blogs”. Click on the link, and you will go the Contributing Blogs page, where ITUG-Connection Real Time View is listed:

<http://www.techdispenser.com/pages/blogroll>

And Computerworld is not alone here – the Business Intelligence site, B-eye-Network also includes a link accessible from the front page under the tab BeyeBLOGS. Check out the link here to see the full list of blogs with links provided and again, you will see the reference to ITUG-Connection Real Time View:

<http://www.beyeblogs.com/blogs.php>

One last observation I would like to make is that I have been encouraged by Nina Buik as well. Nina is the President of Encompass, and the first observation she made was:

"I enjoyed reading your blog entries. You provide well-informed insight with a nice blend of humor and wit."

Nina has now included a link to our blog on her home page, under Helpful Links you will find a link to "Richard Buckle's ITUG Blog". In case you missed it, the ITUG web site has been updated and under the tab OnLine Resources you will find an entry for Blogs – and on this page you will find links to both this blog as well as to Nina's.

I am pretty sure that this is what many within the ITUG community has been looking to see for quite some time now – more "buzz" around the NonStop platform. From the very first exchange I had with Randy Meyer, the head of HP NonStop Product Management, I was encouraged to do as much as I could to generate such a buzz and we all have been surprised by how quickly this ITUG blog has been linked to key pages across the IT industry. It usually takes a while for blogs to gain traction outside of their immediate target audience, and to see these links forming, as quickly as they have, has come as a pleasant surprise to me.

None of this would have happened, of course, if it wasn't for the fact that NonStop is now part of HP. In my very first blog on August 20th, "Introduction", I noted that "Tandem has found a great home within HP". It is this elevation of the NonStop platform's position within HP that has made this possible, and I can only ask HP to maintain its focus on the platform, to encourage more applications be made available (adding Neoview as a NonStop application is a huge win for NonStop), and to support its broad base of ISV partners.

There is still a huge "wow!" factor with NonStop, and users that I talk to are still amazed NonStop has little real competition after all these years. There are other great platforms out there, and enterprise users have a number of options, but when it comes to "best in class: for availability then the NonStop platform is hard to beat.

And so I can only reflect on my earlier comment – we cannot keep blaming HP for "keeping NonStop a secret", when the solution is so obvious. It's all about us, and collectively, we have the means for lifting the visibility of NonStop even higher. I look forward to your comments as much as I look forward to doing my part in generating more buzz!

Wednesday, January 9, 2008

I got my new horizons!



I have really enjoyed the break from blogging and, I have to admit, spending the New Year in Southern California wasn't all that bad! I had left Boulder on New Years' eve and had seen 0 degrees Fahrenheit show up on the car's thermometer, but the next day I was having pizza in Santa Barbara and enjoying a balmy 70 degrees Fahrenheit! The drive back home down the coastline in the early evening, with the views of the sea under cloudless skies, is a drive I never get tired of doing.

That night I pulled out a Moody Blue's concert DVD that was recorded back in 1992 at the Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado. And I thought it was pretty appropriate to start off the New Year seeing them sing "I have my hopes to comfort me, I got my new horizons out to sea" from the song New Horizons. I have the feeling that 2008 will see a lot of new products and solutions coming from HP even if, for the moment, they are just over the horizon out of sight. But I do take comfort knowing that HP's support for NonStop shows no signs of easing up!

New Year also brings with it New Years' resolutions, and one news report did catch my attention. Not long after New Years' eve's celebrations had wound down, experts were reporting that most resolutions would be broken within a few days. It appears that it takes about 21 days to develop a new habit or routine and then another 6 months to integrate that routine with other routines already wired into our behavior. For me, the interest arose as one routine I am working on is to regularly visit a number of social networks that I like.

While I was at ACI in Omaha a few weeks back, I was asked if I would be interested in participating in a new social network they were just rolling out. While I have concerns over the change in direction ACI has taken recently and wonder about their future support of the HP NonStop platform, I am always interested in working with a user community and so I agreed to

provide opinions and commentary. It's still very early days with only minimal content – mostly from moderators as they set up different topic forums – but I will be very interested in the kind of network that develops around the site.

It came as no surprise then when Nina Buik, President of Encompass, emailed me to inform me that Encompass was investigating technology that would best meet their needs as they too introduced a new social network into the Encompass community. Check out her latest posting “Fishing for friends or customers? Social networking communities provide a feeding frenzy for all” that can be found at <http://president.blogs.encompassus.org/> Nina does a great job of explaining the value that social networks provide, as well as giving some good tips about the software needed to support such a communications vehicle.

I will be definitely watching how this develops and will be looking for any and all tie-ins to the ITUG community. I just have to believe that, with time, this will have a positive impact on all HP user communities, and I could easily see it expanding to embrace NonStop topics as well. Whether it's using something pretty basic, such as the business-oriented Linked-In site, or the more feature-rich offerings like MySpace and Facebook, there are many options out there and their number is increasing rapidly. Social networking and web dialogues, that encourage individuals to get together around a common interest, are becoming an increasingly important way to share information.

As an Australian living in the US, there would be no way for me to stay on top of my cricket and rugby without access to such sites, and if you wonder onto some of them, you will see me posting comments - particularly about the cricket! As you begin to develop the social networking habit, you will see that the number, and variety, of networks you access grows considerably and that it's not uncommon to find that four or five networks draw you back on a regular basis. Provided, of course, you suffer from insomnia or bouts of loneliness, on your weekends as keeping your need for information under control will always be a challenge.

I am not yet convinced that there will ever be a substitute for face-to-face networking, particularly for my generation, where participation in events, conferences, and seminars is how we stay current with IT. Talking to participants is where I usually first hear about a new technology or solution, and where I can first see real enthusiasm about a product directly from those actively engaged in deploying them. But more often these days, I am finding that with time and budget constraints I can't always attend them all and I don't get to listen to everyone I should. Social networking helps me stay connected when otherwise I wouldn't have the opportunity.

Not every social network is effective nor do they always attract return visits. There's never any guarantee that they will attract a following. It takes effort and time to narrow your focus and to target just the sites where the value is clearly tangible. It's not easy – not just for those providing content but for those who have to find the time to read. But the knowledge that there is a place to go and read about NonStop, and to catch up on topics of interest and issues facing the community, helps develop a growing readership.

I do believe there is real value from social networks, and I hope that this blog develops into such a place. I see how they can effectively complement other forms of networking and may sometimes offer the only way we can comment on a subject that interests us. And I do believe the sense of community that develops around them will only get better with time and with greater awareness of their existence. The Moody Blues song New Horizons goes on to ask “Where is this

place that we have found? Nobody knows where we are bound?" and then later "I'm beginning to see! Out of mind, far from view!"

Yes, we are seeing the number of social networks growing rapidly and we know that many of them are providing value – but where the journey leads and how dynamic these communities become, we will all just have to all wait and see. It's the start of a new year, resolutions have been made (and many already broken), but as far as integrating my interest for social networking into my daily routine, I am anxious to see how it all goes. Just by reading this blog posting you have become a participant in this explosion of information sharing. And for this, I thank you and wish you a happy New Year!

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Social Networking!



Last week I posted an entry into a new community blog on the recently launched HP user group community networking site. Check it out at <http://hpusercommunity.org/>

The site has just opened, and most of the sections have limited content - but I will be very interested to see how it fairs. I am taking an interest in this site, and in the community that develops around it, as the new user group is created from the platform-specific communities in place today. As readers can tell by now, I am very supportive of social networks and any place I can go to for current information on HP's platforms and solutions is of particular interest to me.

In the blog entry I posted last week, I made a comment about the green hills of Southern California, and so I have included a picture here of the view from the front of where I live, just so that you could see what it looked like. It lasts for less than a month, and it's very different from what I am used to back in Colorado. But it's not really the color, or the temporary nature of it's presence, that I was interested in but rather its message of change!

As the new community blog went live, I had an email exchange with Nina Buik, the Encompass President, as I was interested to know some of the background. "The social networking initiative was based on the results of a member survey Encompass held in early 2007 ... and it was the highest priority," Nina explained. The Encompass board decided to pursue such a change and selected software from Leverage Software. But Nina quickly added "with the efforts under way across the user groups, this effort is now inclusive of all participating communities." It is hoped that members of Encompass, ITUG and HP Interext EMEA will be able to connect with like minded technologists and as Nina told me that "to accelerate growth, visibility, and awareness, the new 'project Endeavour' social networking site has been launched in conjuncture with HPTF&E and be a means for conference attendees to not only connect on or before the conference, but to then turn to year round as well!"

As you look at the stakeholders in any community - the primary vendor, the competing third-party

vendors or ISVs, and the end users - then there's no question that much of the commentary appears to be coming from the ISVs. It's not that the end-users are not fully engaged, but the individuals attracted into the ISV community tend to be a lot more vocal than their colleagues in the end-user community. For many end-users, it is strictly forbidden to identify their company affiliation and be visible in something as public as a blog. For others, there will always be the concern that their observations may be at odds with the rest of the community and perceive the risk in responding as outweighing any value they may otherwise obtain. And this is to be expected across any communications vehicle within any community. There will always be a vocal minority!

But are we seeing the presence of vendors in public communication vehicles becoming too prevalent? Are we running the risk of seeing real user dialogue being stifled? As readers of this blog know full-well, I too am a vendor and often reflect a vendor's perspective. While I do have a day job at GoldenGate, I am conscious of over-referencing GoldenGate solutions. I do try to keep references to GoldenGate products and GoldenGate executives to a minimum, and to limit references to related topics where the product features or executive viewpoints contribute to the overall dialogue. But I am aware that a lot of contributions are coming from ISVs and that they are never shy about expressing an opinion.

In the email exchange with Nina, she did point out that the new Community Networking Site "will also be an excellent marketing venue for HP's partners to market their 'wares' (and that) social networking sites are the fastest growing advertising mediums." I asked Nina to explain this last point, and she added "because advertisers can reach their target audience without their message being lost on a general webpage!" While I am the first to admit that I really dislike the current fad of pop-ups and the over-use of flash presentations, I can see her point. We do present a good target for many ISVs. But without the support of vendors, much of what we want to have supported within the user community, just wouldn't happen. The business model for user groups depends on financial support coming from a broad base of partners and the vendor community is incredibly important to the functioning of the community.

But is this turning off users? Is this even impacting our more traditional communication vehicles – are all of our community stakeholders comfortable with the increased visibility of vendors at regional user group meetings (RUGs), within SIGs, and even the main events themselves? Have we seen the scales tip too far in favor of vendor participation and is the increased visibility of vendors turning traditional events into marketing shows? I have written recently how as users of technology, we need to find the right balance when it comes to deploying applications on NonStop. We need to be sensitive to what really should be deployed on the platform. And the same appreciation for balance should apply when we look at the balance of stakeholders within the community.

In a recent exchange with the Advocacy team, Sam Ayres outlined the role of Advocacy and strongly reinforced its future position in the new unified community. Sam is slated to lead the new Advocacy group and has proved a strong champion of this group over the past couple of years. However, one advocacy committee member wrote how he was "hearing that one of the main issues to the user group community as a whole is the lack of actual HP users (and that) the feelings I get are that the vendor community has been turning the user groups into marketing venues and this is why attendance and memberships are down." To which Sam turned the discussion onto a path I hadn't considered, saying "I would like to add that many of the 'partner / vendors' have assumed that role (within the user groups) because they were among the most successful 'end users'!" Adding, "we need to maintain balance of true end-users versus partners, we must be careful not to bash those users who were so successful as to start their own companies and become partners!"

I find this gets to the heart of the issue – there really is no firm line between the different stakeholders, nor should we try and establish one. On the one hand a successful user may indeed license their software to another user, or share a back-up site with other users in their city.

ISVs may be users in their own right and share the same issues with other users in terms of migration planning and business continuity. Larger ISVs may offer outsourcing and perhaps even Software as a Service (SaaS) offerings. Even the primary vendor may be a user, for a number of ISVs, plugging gaps in their product offerings. In other words, there is a growing fuzzy, blurred, dotted-line between all the stakeholders and each of them has a need to participate in all user community communications vehicles. We may not always be aware of their business goals, but we should never try to peg them down or slot them into just one category. Sam added "we must always keep a balance of end users and HP partner / vendors within the user group organization (as) both serve vital roles in the dynamics of our user group. We just need to make sure we don't tip the scale too far in either direction."

I closed my most recent posting on the new HP User Group Community Networking Site with an observation about how seasons change and how in business we live with constant change. Adapting to change and growing is the challenge for all businesses. The challenge for user groups is just the same as it is for business – no one at ITUG would have predicted Tandem would be sold to Compaq or that later, Compaq would be acquired by HP – change of this magnitude was not on any ITUG board member's radarscope. Building a new community and adapting to popular social networking are very important for the future of all stakeholders. We may not like some of the decisions taken, or like the larger visibility of partners. But if the new board gets the balance right, I think all sides will benefit and see that a future within a bigger more dynamic community has so much more to offer.

The green hills here in Southern California will soon be gone and the traditional golden tones so familiar to us all will dominate. I enjoy the cyclical nature of it all and frankly, I like the Colorado's season changes even better as they are much more pronounced. And I am really looking forward to the next cycle in the life of the user community and to a lively social network!

Monday, April 21, 2008

We all have opinions!



This morning I have woken to a mild spring morning in Vienna, Austria. The picture I have included here is of me watching chocolate tortes being made at the Demel coffee house, where I had a late morning breakfast of coffee and tortes. Joining me for breakfast was Ron Beauchamp of ACI Worldwide. I had caught up with Ron the night before, immediately after arriving in Vienna, and we had gone to the old town surrounding St Stephan's Cathedral, for Vienna Schnitzel at a local café, the Figlmuller. Vienna has some great cafes and coffee shops, so we wanted to try them as soon as we could, as we knew we would have little spare time for the rest of the week.

Ron and I are in Vienna for the European BASE24 User Group (EBUG) event. This year's agenda has taken a completely new look, and I will be very interested in how it proceeds, and in the general mood of the community now that ACI has moved away from HP and aligned itself strategically with IBM. There's no escaping the fact that this holds enormous repercussions for all of us as ACI has been the largest ISV in the NonStop marketplace and any shift away from the platform will have lasting impact on all of us. While sources tell me that even though ACI and HP have sold a couple of new systems here, in EMEA, after the announcement, IBM will prove to be formidable presence in what has been traditionally a NonStop marketplace.

I have participated in a number of user group meetings this year – from SATUG early in the year, to RMTUG in Denver, and most recently, DUST in Phoenix. And I have had a number of email exchanges with BASE24 users as well as with HP. And the message I am getting is not all that bad, certainly not a tale of doom and gloom with skilled NonStop managers looking for the exit signs. The old BASE24 product may have been heading for the scrap heap for some time – ACI's decision to sunset it shouldn't surprise anyone. The small detail hidden in the fine print, and

missed by many, is that BASE24eps, the main cross-platform product from ACI, will be fully supported on NonStop. Migration to the new product will not be easy, and I have concerns about the strategy ACI is pursuing, but they do have a plan and they have a group – the Migration Factory – that is tasked with helping customers through any transition problems. When you put all the posturing to one side, there's no question in my mind that ACI was not about to kill off their golden goose and do want to continue working with HP.

It's perhaps a coincidence, but while these announcements by ACI were going on, and grabbing the headlines, ACI was also quietly introducing a new online network – the ACI Forum. I briefly touched on this in my blog of January 9, 2008 "I got my new horizons!" While I noted back then that it was very early days, I have to say that it is beginning to attract a readership, and while it's a place ACI users will be able to ask questions and to seek input from their peers, I expect it will also become a place where these users will express their opinions.

Among my readers, it's widely known of how valuable I view social networks, and blogs like this one are just one example of social networking. ACI themselves see the ACI Forum not so much as a social network, but a tool at the business level. By this, ACI acknowledge that with a managed set of users, it is very focused on providing support for their customers. It is not open to everyone, and all postings will be monitored. But even with this, I have been reading comments and have provided a couple of postings.

Whether open or closed, social networking has made enormous inroads to the way most of us maintain our awareness of what's happening across the industry. There's no shortage of writers willing to express their opinion on a wide variety of topics. The ACI Forum, I am hoping, could become a place where the ACI community engages ACI product and business managers on all aspects of their strategy, and where all of their users can go for the latest insight into what their peers are thinking. This interaction is typical of the way our society is adjusting to new communications channels.

In the past we would rely on our Church newsletters for information about what's going on within our neighborhood and the social life that developed in parallel was where many of us went to develop personal relationships. Numbers scribbled on the back of matchbook covers, in the local bar, also helped us make new friendships. The message boards littered with hand-written "for sale" notices and news about upcoming training camps for all manner of sports that were prominently displayed at the corner dinner and in our coffee shops! They were all important vehicles for keeping in touch with our local community.

Newsletters, scribbled notes on coasters, and tear-off strips on tattered notices, are all still with us but for most of us, we have moved on. Whether we keep our family aware of our activities on Facebook, or network with current and former business associates on LinkedIn, or check the reviews of a book or movie on Amazon.com, we are all very much living in an on-line world where information is only a few keystrokes away. And this is not even talking about the changes that have come through our increased dependence on Google, Mapquest, or eBay! Or about the numerous wiki's that support many of our clubs and associations.

In fact, some of the practices of the past now look a little foolish. Seldom does any single person just walk into a bar as the primary way to meet another single – it's only done today after a number of exchanges online with a little background checking already undertaken. Giving out too much information on a Starbucks message board now bothers many of us. And the comments box that used to be an integral part of our business life, never attracted too many honest suggestions.

While sitting in an airline lounge in Denver, waiting for my flight to Europe, I ran into a senior Gartner executive. As we waited for our plane to open for boarding, we talked about Gartner and the roles of senior analysts. I posed the question to him that social networks could make an

impact on companies like Gartner in that it allows users to talk directly to other users and hear their opinions without having to rely on an analyst. "And that's the point," he suggested "companies like Gartner are not really in the opinion business as much as they are in the analysis business." Essentially, what he went on to explain is that there will always be a need for companies like Gartner when we need to see more detail analysis of a market segment or a developing technology. And I have to agree with him on this point – opinions can be pretty easy to provide but good analysis is always a premium commodity. Just the process of vetting everything produced within Gartner is a major process and pretty much stands in the way of the style and immediacy we associate with social networking.

Over the past couple of months, I have written about reasons why I started this blog and how I thought of it as a complementary communication channel, aimed at those within our community who just feel more comfortable going to the web for their information. I have developed a level of impatience over the coverage of NonStop by the industry and believe blogging does contribute to generating more "buzz" around the NonStop platform. I have written about the work Nina Buik, the President of Encompass, is doing with her blog, and how the Encompass board has been instrumental in bringing to market the new HP user community social networking site and where I am now contributing content alongside Nina. And of course, we have the ACI Forum site as well.

Social networking will not ever take the place of face-to-face meetings – and that is the main reason why I traveled to Vienna this week. I just want to catch up with many colleagues I have known for many years and to participate in discussions I am certain will develop. And I still engage in email exchanges with a number of you who have concerns over the balance and mix of opinions being expressed via this medium where it's volunteers from the vendor communities that appear to be the most vocal right now. What I believe ACI is hoping to achieve with the ACI Forum is to see a open and highly informal dialogue open up with their users at this time of major change – and to have a vehicle where they can make sure their message is correctly presented. Unfiltered and undiluted!

Social networking has now made its presence felt on us all - whether we check comments on Amazon.com, look at the latest news from our family on Facebook, or even T-times and groupings provided on the local golf-club's wiki. Will these communication and networking vehicles survive over time, and will we always turn to them for information? Or will this be viewed as just a fad, popular with a younger generation of users? It's like everything that's gone before whether simple newsletters, major newspapers or trade magazines, it's all about the content and as long as what is being provided is worth the time reading, then social networking will continue to thrive. After all, while there is a legitimate place for analysis, it is the opinions of our peers and colleagues that still influence many of our actions, and social networks have, for the most part, eliminated any middleman and given us direct contact with all those contributing opinions. For better or worse, we can read it all!

About The Author



I am Richard Buckle and I have enjoyed a long association with User Groups dating back to the late 70s. I am particularly passionate about the grass-roots activities of communities and have enjoyed working with regional groups in many countries.

I spent 7 years as a Director on the board of ITUG and served as its Chairman for 2 years (2004 - 2005). I have worked in the Tandem / NonStop marketplace for more than two decades, initially as a Tandem Computers employee before it was acquired by Compaq, and then for Infrastructure ISVs supporting the NonStop platform. Before joining Tandem, I had spent the previous two decades in the IBM community as an end-user as well as a vendor. I am currently the Senior Director, Business Development, for GoldenGate Software out of San Francisco.

I am active in a number of social networks as well as a frequent visitor of virtual communities. Most recently, I have begun blogging on a new social network "The HP User Group Community Social Networking Site" that can be found at:

<http://hpusercommunity.org/mypage.aspx>

Finally, I am very grateful for the continued support of the senior management of GoldenGate – without their support I would not be able to undertake this task. On several occasions I have solicited commentary and each time they have been extremely cooperative and timely, and for this I want to thank everyone involved at GoldenGate.