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Best Future Advice, from Michael Vax: Industry Leading Vice-President of Product Development at Blackboard

This is the next interview in the [continuing series](#) of Computing Canada's (CC) [Blogged Down](#) (BD) feature which is highlighted here in the [Canadian IT Managers \(CIM\) forum](#).

This week we talk with industry leading development authority, Michael Vax, Vice-President of Product Development at Blackboard. In the first blog, we began the interview and profiled Michael's extensive background in development and leadership.

Today I put these questions to Michael:

Stephen: This is becoming a requested staple in my interviews. Provide your top prediction of a future trend, its implications and business opportunities?

Michael) The world economy is becoming more and more integrated.

Implication: This means that more and more companies are finding out that their customers are located in different countries and regions. For example, WebCT has customers in more than 70 countries and is translated into many languages. In order to serve those customers well you need to localize your software.

Business Opportunity: To be successful internationally, make sure that s/w is designed from the bottom up to be localizable. It is much more efficient to do it from the very beginning than to refactor later on when you need to deliver the Spanish version of your product the next month. While localization is much more than simply translation, let's cover the basics first.

To be able to translate your s/w you need to make sure that all text and graphics are stored in separate resource files. Your application as well as your database also should know how to work with double byte characters (support the Unicode standard). To do translations you need to engage one of the translation companies such as SimulTrans or Translation.com. When selecting a translation vendor, make sure to evaluate their testing and project management processes in addition to the quality of their translators.

Don't forget to make sure that display formats of dates, numbers, and currencies in your application are localizable. You also need to support multiple time zones and time saving rules. If you are planning to sell in Arabic countries, right to left support is a must. Localization is not limited to simple text translation. For example, other countries and regions have different taxation and regulations.

When an application's text, help, and documentation are getting bigger, translation costs may skyrocket and even make it cost prohibitive to enter smaller international markets. There are several ways to control cost. You may be able to reduce the size of materials that need to be translated by using single source publishing where online and printed materials are generated from the same source. You can also reduce the word count by using consistent terminology and cross reference help topics to avoid duplication. If this is not enough, the next step is to develop tools that will allow your customers and regional partners to do translation on their own.

Stephen: Which are your top five recommended resources?

Michael)

1. "Innovation Happens Elsewhere. Open Source as Business Strategy" by Ron Goldman, Richard P. Gabriel <http://dreamsongs.com/IHE/IHE.html>. This is an excellent book written by people responsible for launching and managing open source projects at SUN. It shows how and why for-profit businesses can and should coexist, collaborate, and work together with Open Source Communities.
2. I have mentioned already Mary Poppendieck's books on Lean Software Development.
3. "The World Is Flat - A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century" by Thomas Friedman is a recent bestseller that explains globalization and what it means to individuals, communities, countries, and companies.
4. Better Software magazine and its online companion StickyMinds.com is a good resource for software developers and managers.
5. CIPS web site www.cips.ca

Look for more of Michael's insights in this blog series. In the next blog, Michael will provide great insights into automated testing to increase quality; the best moves for career development and especially into management; and discuss his views on making pragmatic decisions concerning software feature sets (keeping it simple).

I also encourage you to share your thoughts here on these interviews or send me an e-mail at sibaraki@cips.ca.

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Thank you,
Stephen Ibaraki, FCIPS, I.S.P.

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