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Interview: Sean O'Driscoll – Senior Director for CSS Community and MVP Worldwide, Microsoft Corporation
Interview by Stephen Ibaraki, FCIPS, I.S.P., MVP, DF/NPA, CNP

This week, Stephen Ibaraki, FCIPS, I.S.P. has an exclusive interview with noted Senior Director, Sean O'Driscoll.

Profile:



Sean O'Driscoll is the Global Senior Director for the MVP Award Program at Microsoft Corporation. The Microsoft Most Valuable Professional award recognizes exceptional technical community leaders who foster the free and objective exchange of knowledge by actively sharing their real world expertise with users and Microsoft. The MVP award is the way that Microsoft formally acknowledges the accomplishments of these individuals for their contributions to community. As the Global Director, Sean is responsible for the worldwide team that identifies, awards, and engages over 3500 MVPs spanning over 90 Microsoft technologies and in over 80 countries.

O'Driscoll began his career at Microsoft in 1992 as a customer service and sales professional responsible for business development and client relationships. Most recently, he was responsible for Premier and Professional Services sales and delivery to Independent Software Vendors in the US. Prior to that, Sean served as a business development manager working with ISV's on joint development, co-marketing and channel development with Microsoft.

Before joining Microsoft, O'Driscoll graduated from Pacific University in Forest Grove, OR (1992) with degrees in Business and Philosophy. He and his wife Kari, have two daughters, Erin and Lauren.

Discussion:

Q: Sean, with your many significant contributions to the industry and ICT professionals over a sustained and successful career, we thank you for taking the time to share your deep insights, experiences, and wisdom with our audience.

A: It's my pleasure. I'm really not sure how significant any of my contributions are (beyond my daughters), but I certainly appreciate having this opportunity to talk to the community through this forum.

Q: Can you describe your current role?

A: I think I have the best job at Microsoft, if not in the industry. My title is Global Director for the MVP Award Program. But let me describe the role a little differently.

Every day, we all do a lot of things...we buy services, we buy consumer devices, computers, software, game consoles, we eat at restaurants, we attend events and shows, we choose schools – it's an infinite list. Ignoring computing for a moment, how do we choose amongst all the diversity of choice available to us? We do what most of us have always done; we ask our friends, family members, neighbors, colleagues, etc – our personal "network." We trust our personal networks – they are a different kind of expert... peer experts. But, there is a challenge with most personal networks...they are finite in size, expertise and experiences. What if no one in my network has experience with what I'm interested in? Then what?

Well, if you are reading this, you already know the answer – communities. I like the analogy of buying a camera as most of us have or can relate to the process historically. It used to be that the biggest influencer of what I bought was the retailer...the expert trained behind the counter at my local camera shop. But today, I bet many of your readers (if they enter a physical store at all) know as much, if not more than the salesperson before they enter. Let's face it, our "networks" have exploded in breadth of topics, ease of access, and value of information. On nearly any topic, I can find an online community of other users. I'm no longer bound by my personal network, but only by what I can search and find online.

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One thing is true of every community, what makes it powerful and valuable to all of us, are its experts, the gurus who answer the questions and share their knowledge and expertise with those of us asking the questions. Without them, the community really can't thrive. They are the recognized, exceptional and accessible community leaders. And it's the independent, real world experiences they have that make them such a trusted source of information.

I'm often asked to define communities and I think it's common to want to describe their scope in specific ways, i.e. communities are Newsgroup discussions, or Forums, or Blogs or some combination of the above. Many people have quite strong views according to their personal preferences. I have sort of the opposite opinion and in fact rigorously avoid defining communities in terms of the venues or technologies employed to host them. To me, community is anywhere users go to interact and learn with other users and fortunately, in my role, I get to be (in fact I have to be), venue agnostic.

So, my job is actually pretty simple and pretty gratifying. My team has responsibility for looking across the worldwide Microsoft Technical communities (Blogs, Forums, User Groups, Newsgroups, etc) in order to identify their most outstanding technical contributors to those communities and quite simply say "Thank you."

We call these exceptional individuals Microsoft Most Valuable Professionals. This year, we have awarded just over 3500 elite community leaders in over 90 countries spanning over 90 Microsoft technologies.

Q: What leadership lessons can you share that would be of value to business and IT decision makers?

A: This is a great question and monumental in terms of topics – there's probably a wall of books written on this topic. That said, I think I can keep my answer very simple – it's about getting the absolute best people. Smart people, creative people, diverse people, experienced people, new people – but universally motivated and passionate people who believe in what they are doing and want to interact personally with those affected by what they do – the users. It's also about great business and management fundamentals. Great leaders need to hire great managers, and great managers need to find great leaders. I heard someone say once that managers are outstanding at answering the questions of what, when, where, who, etc... and it's the leaders' job to answer the questions of "why." That really stuck with me and made me think about the "chemistry" of high performance teams and organizations. I love the topic and I guess that is the lesson – you need to spend as much time thinking about your people as you do every other part of your business.

Q: You have valuable expertise about the power of communities. What are the kinds of communities that exist and their purpose? What are the trends? Why should businesses care?

A: I think today there is a community for nearly everything. No matter what you're an enthusiast for (photography, cooking, travel, music, etc), you will find corresponding communities. I think a good starting point on this question is to examine the motivation for utilizing communities. One myth I often deal with is that it is just about support...technical support. Sure, people often go to communities for help/support assistance, but it is hardly the only motivation. I like to summarize with the following motivational "map":

1. Learning – My favorite example of this is about home networking. For anyone interested in setting up a media center to "digitize" their home, communities are a must-use resource. Read what experts have to say. Hear what other users encountered and discover scenarios you may not have thought of.
2. Social &/or business networking – Let's face it, the biggest and fastest growing communities on the net are social networks. Beyond that, communities are a great equalizer. People love finding like minded peers anywhere in the world on any topic with whom they can share and explore ideas (social or business). I've seen this countless times.
3. Helping others – At its core, this is what an MVP is: those who quite simply enjoy sharing and helping others altruistically. The ROI for them? Satisfaction in a reply back that says: "thanks, you really helped me."
4. Support – A great source. Now, personally, if something isn't functioning, I will tend to pick up the phone and call for support, but there are countless scenarios for "how to" or "why does it" or "has anyone ever seen" type questions. Communities are 24x7, 365 days a year and are in countless languages around the world – incredible.
5. Validation – Input from others who have gone there first. I call this the case study example. Virtually no one is ever doing something for the first time – the challenge is finding others who have walked that same ground. – I find online communities are great for this.
6. Information – Like learning above, but for me, more general purpose. Unlimited "consumer reports" if you will.

The next layer of this is to think about the actual characteristics of the participants in the communities. In any community you have a diverse set of participants who can be characterized in a lot of different ways. I like to think of the following populations:

1. Lurkers – Only read what others contribute
2. Questioners – Primarily ask questions and read others' contributions
3. Question/answerers – Ask questions and occasionally answer questions
4. Answer/questioners – Answer questions and occasionally ask questions
5. Answerers – Almost exclusively answer questions

Some will read this and think this is too simplistic and they are right, but for those just learning and thinking about communities, I think it's a good place to start. Much has been written on this topic and by more creative people than me. For example, another population/segment written about are called "flame warriors" – you'll know them when you see them. The sole purpose of the "flame warrior" seems to be to create chaos in the community, change course on conversations, add controversy and generally speaking, create havoc. What to do about them? My advice, ignore them. Don't engage (no matter how tempted you may be) – that is their objective. Ignored, they tend to go away.

Each of the 5 segments above could then be examined against the characteristics of the participant. For example, some participants are just plain economical – they are "takers." They possess the skills, experience, and knowledge to answer, but lack the interest, time, or energy to do so. So, take "questioners" as a starting point on this. Some questioners are inexperienced and are in the community to learn while others just come when they need something. This is not a criticism, it's just reality. Often times, a person (I fall into this camp) is a questioner in one community, an answerer in another, and a lurker in another. It's in this area that there are some clear differences between what I would call pure social networks and technical communities. What I think you would see is the population distribution (% lurkers/questioners/answers) changes as communities become more social. This isn't inherently good or bad, just a by-product of what is motivating participation.

There also different community "venues" – Newsgroups, online forums, Blogs, Wikis, etc. and an endless list of emerging "features" like RSS, pod casting, reputation systems and tagging. I won't go into those here (at least not this time around), but most people do develop venue preferences and over time want to subscribe to certain experts and/or content sources that they find repeated value in or trust. This can be a very important issue to help you become more efficient in how you utilize the community according to your unique interest is.

The last part of this question was "why should business care?" In the end, communities are a virtually limitless source of knowledge, expertise, experience and content in addition to providing a very powerful method for peer interaction – I think businesses have to care. Businesses, and more importantly the people that run them, succeed based on the quality of the decisions they make. To me, communities are a breakthrough in terms of broadening and deepening that source of inputs for decision making. Beyond that, communities are more than a fad; they are changing how people make decisions and who influences those decisions. No matter what business you are in, there is or will be a community of users – you have three options and only one real choice: Resist it, ignore it or embrace it.

Q: How can ICT professionals get involved in communities and how can they make contributions?

A: I'd actually give two simple suggestions here. First of all, give a visit to www.microsoft.com/communities. You might even want to bookmark it! This is the central page on Microsoft.com which leads the user to technical communities about Microsoft products – blogs, chats, webcasts, user groups, forums, newsgroups, etc. You can read a description in more detail about these communities at: http://www.microsoft.com/communities/bkst_column_43.mspx. Let's say you were interested in Microsoft Exchange Server. A click into the page above will take you to the Exchange community portal at <http://www.microsoft.com/exchange/community/default.mspx> where you can find Exchange blogs authored by Microsoft employees and external experts, information about Exchange user groups, meet Exchange Server MVPs and/or connect directly into community discussions about the product.

My second suggestion is to tap into <http://search.msn.com> and search for "<insert your hobby> community". You could use that other search engine too, but I like this one. You might check out <http://groups.msn.com> which is a destination that has organized social communities hosted on MSN. To really understand the power of communities, I think it is really useful to go explore a community on a topic you are personally passionate about – and who knows, you just might find something really cool and interesting. Oddly enough, what really got me into communities wasn't technology, but cooking – specifically BBQing, around which I have found many great communities I regularly participate in.

Q: What are the rewards for ICT professionals for community involvement?

A: The rewards simply go back to the motivations. It could be economical for you – the reward is the answers. It could be risk mitigation on decision making. It could be personal satisfaction from helping others. It could just be a quick answer to a practical question you are working on right now. With most things, you get out of it what you put in...with communities, that might not be true – a fairly small investment of time can get you exponential value back. It just so happens that most community experts start as lurkers and questioners and over time and in other communities begin to transform into answerers. I hope some of your readers become answers in some community, but in the end, the first step is to go tap in.

I'm also sometimes asked, 'how can I become an MVP'? I wouldn't recommend getting involved in Communities for the purpose of becoming an MVP. In my mind, awards aren't things to be manufactured in terms of status. It happens as a by-product of a predominant trait coming to the surface – a sincere desire for helping others. It should be fairly natural. I don't have a great formula to propose on this, but I think this is the right starting point – sharing your knowledge, skills and experiences with others.

Q: You talked earlier about the MVP award program. As its director, can you expand on what the program means to ICT professionals and to communities?

A: As I said earlier, what makes communities valuable are the experts within them that so willingly share their knowledge, experience and insights. Communities (and their experts) would exist without the MVP award – but the award certainly makes it easier to identify many of the outstanding technical leaders in the industry. Your readers can have a look at <http://mvp.support.microsoft.com/> to see a directory of MVPs. There's also a great site managed by the MVPs themselves at <http://www.mvps.org/> with links to 3rd party web sites and blogs maintained by MVPs. I hope that after reading this interview, your readers might take more note when they see the MVP logo and recognize that the person on the other end has been recognized by Microsoft for their outstanding technical contributions to the communities.

Q: What traits do MVPs generally have in common?

A: I think I can boil this down to three things.

1. They are independent experts in one or more Microsoft technologies.
2. They have a passion for actively sharing that knowledge and expertise with others in communities.
3. The community participation motivation for them is the process of learning, sharing and helping others.

Q: What do you hope to accomplish with the program in the future?

A: It starts with continuing to run a great program that is true to its roots and history. There are some core principals for the Award that are part of this.

1. Preserve the independent voice of the MVPs in the community.
2. Preserve the fundamental principals of an award program – awarded for past contributions for actively sharing technical expertise in online and offline communities.
3. Ensure we are identifying and awarding the most deserving global contributors to protect the quality of the brand and its awardees.
4. Continue to globalize the program and broaden its award competencies to ensure its awardees represent the diversity of Microsoft technology and the worldwide presence and impact of communities.
5. Enhance opportunities for MVPs to network with one another and people throughout Microsoft in the areas they are recognized.
6. And most critically, to preserve the award's fundamental purpose of saying "Thank You" to these amazing individuals.
7. Continue exploring and learning new community spaces to award outstanding contributors

Q: Which are your top recommended resources?

A: #1 is Communities...communities...and communities. Seriously, I use an online community for some purpose literally every day. I hope your readers will start with some of the links I included earlier to start their exploring.

Additionally, I'd recommend:

Technet: <http://technet.microsoft.com/en-us/default.aspx>

MSDN: <http://msdn2.microsoft.com/en-us/default.aspx>

Q: Provide your predictions of future trends and their implications/opportunities?

A:

Trend 1) Communities

Implication/opportunities:

In some ways, the implications are the other 3 trends below. As I said before, I think the first key concept to accept is that this is not a "fad" – it is not going to disappear. The web didn't create the concept of communities or the need for them, but it has accelerated them dramatically and made them infinitely more discoverable and accessible. This topic of accessibility is interesting. The relative anonymity of communities enables people to participate in ways they wouldn't within physical communities. On the whole, I think this is good. There is a problem side of this too ("trolls" and "flame warriors"), but on the whole I think the more even playing field for thought leadership is good for everyone. These communities will become ever more global in scope and for companies that are successful in tuning their listening systems to these communities, they will realize significant efficiencies. Ultimately, the opportunity here is in the "listening." Your users are going to talk about you, your products, your policies, your decisions, your licensing, etc. with or without you. You really don't get to decide this. More importantly, you don't get to control it – in fact I think there would be an inverse relationship between your level of control and the effort you put in trying to control communities. To be successful, as a manufacturer or service provider or whatever your business, you have to become a participant in your own communities – not a controller. This is counter intuitive for many organizations, but in my mind a clear requirement.

Trend 2) Social Networking blends online/offline

Implication/opportunities:

This is already happening and happening faster every day. What will be fascinating to see is what sticks and which have successful business models. There are those who historically thought of community in very traditional sociological ways – ways that had some physical/offline construct. Over the past decade, this notion has been challenged by the emergence of online communities and the ability for people to develop very personal relationships online. I'm not talking about dating services here, but about real person to person, many to many connections about issues and topics that are very "personal" to people. The anonymity contributed to this and without question there are some dangers in this area we must be extremely vigilant about. The arrival of mobile devices, location based services and omnipresent broadband/wireless really change the game for how people interact with each other. Howard Rheingold has done some great work in this area I think are worth reading for those interested: "Smart Mobs" and "The Virtual Community." Online communities can quickly transcend to offline connections through these devices and services that enable people to find and connect very quickly with others they "know" or who have been "tagged" by people they know.

Trend 3) Corporate transparency

Implication/opportunities:

The implications are huge, but again, the trend is pretty clear. This is another really tough area. I'm sure many employers are nervous about employee blogging. At Microsoft, we've really embraced blogging... hundreds (if not thousands) of Microsoft employees are blogging. They are talking about their work, about the company, about the technology, etc. Employers will be nervous about this openness. They will worry about legal, liability, privacy, intellectual property, competitor intelligence, etc. But in the end, I think a choice has to be made and I'd like to see the choice made from the statement: "Why not be more transparent?" vs. "Why be

transparent?" Again, the fundamental truth is that users will talk about you no matter what you do, so go engage – join the discussion. Along these lines, one of the most interesting things we've done is Channel 9 (<http://channel9.msdn.com/>). Check out the readme.txt on channel 9 at <http://channel9.msdn.com/about.aspx> and I think your readers will get an idea of what I mean about this corporate transparency. The other element of this that I really like is the opportunity to humanize your company. What most people know about you is learned from formal communication (web site, documentation, PR, etc, etc). This isn't bad, it's just a very singular and structured way to communicate that embodies certain norms. Transparency gives a company a new avenue to personalize and transmit something different about its people. Again, take Microsoft as an example. Think about the kind of communication you expect from Microsoft, and then go read the Channel 9 readme.txt. I'd love to hear initial reactions.

Trend 4) Consumer empowerment

Implication/opportunities: We will continue to see a proliferation and democratization of information and access to peer expertise. Across every topic, language, culture, product, service, opinion... In the end, I think this is the critical change when it comes to businesses today. The consumer will have more knowledge as part of their decision process than ever before. They will be in the driver's seat. This is a very different supply chain than the traditional one most of us are used to and it has big implications for how companies organize and go to market. Personally, I think this will impact almost every industry in dramatic ways and it's an exciting time to be part of that evolution.

These trends will also put a lot more "noise" into the system and we will ebb and flow in and out of information overload, but I am more of an economist than a technologist and the economist in me believes the overall value equation will go up dramatically and the "noise," while always present, will get managed to the fringes.

Q: Sean, how can we further connect with you and your ideas?

A: That's a great question... how would you like me to? I'm happy to participate here in your community if your readers are interested. Perhaps a podcast or chat? You're also welcome to share my contact info with your readers – it would be fun to read their thoughts on this interview. I know I learn more about communities every day, so I certainly welcome any new insights.

Q: Sean, we thank you for sharing your time with us and we wish you continued success for the future.

A: My pleasure, I love to talk to people about this topic and I'm particularly interested in the social dynamics and behaviors of communities, so perhaps this was a little different take on the topic than usual.

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