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Interview with Microsoft's S. "Soma" Somasegar

By Stephen Ibaraki.

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Article Description

Stephen Ibaraki interviews Microsoft's S. "Soma" Somasegar, Corporate Vice President of the Developer Division, on software challenges, issues facing IT departments over the next two years, and what Internet technologies will have the greatest impact.

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S. "Soma" Somasegar is Corporate Vice President of the Developer Division at Microsoft. The Developer Division is primarily responsible for all the developer-related languages, tools, and platforms within Microsoft, including Visual Studio, Web Platform and Tools, the .NET Framework, the Common Language Runtime (CLR), and other .NET Developer Platform technologies. In addition, he oversees the India Development Center (IDC) in Hyderabad, India.

Somasegar began his career at Microsoft in 1989 as a software design engineer, where he worked on eight different operating system releases: OS/2 2.0, the NT family of releases, Windows 2000, Windows XP, and Windows Server 2003. Most recently, he served as Corporate Vice President of the Windows Engineering Services and Solutions group within the Windows Division. Prior to that, he was the general manager for the NT releases.

Prior to joining Microsoft, Somasegar was a graduate student in computer engineering at the State University of New York in Buffalo. He holds a master's degree in computer engineering from Louisiana State University (1988) and a Bachelor of Electronics Engineering from Anna University's College of Engineering, Guindy (CEG) in India (1986). Somasegar and his wife, Akila, have two daughters, Sahana and Archana.

Ibaraki: Soma, thank you for taking time out of your demanding schedule to do this interview.

Somasegar: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the community in this forum.

Ibaraki: As a leading executive in software development, can you profile four current challenges, how you're solving them, and the lessons that you want to share?

Somasegar: This is a great question, as I was recently out on the road talking with people like you who speak for our community of customers about the challenges facing us in software development today. I'm happy to share that conversation with you on the challenges. I'll note that these are in no particular order of priority or importance.



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- **Challenge: Collaboration.** *I've been talking to folks recently about complexity in software development and its root cause. Many people think that software has been causing complexity, but it's actually not a software problem—it's a people problem. One of the main issues in software development today is that many of the vendors and software solutions out in the market don't enable collaboration among members of a software development team, and beyond that to the operations team or the project management office.*

- **Solution:** *The solution is that the industry needs to address collaboration more explicitly in the tools they provide to customers. And this collaboration must extend beyond the development team to the operations team, the design team, the project management team, etc. This is the goal behind our Visual Studio Team System family of products, as well as the goal behind our Expression family of tools. The central driving force is to break down the "Great Walls of China" that exist between these groups and get them to collaborate more effectively in the name of helping their businesses succeed through software.*
- **Lesson:** *I think the lesson is simple—we need to focus on enabling people to work together in a collaborative fashion.*

- **Challenge: Managing process.** *Again, software is complex, and another challenge in managing that complexity is managing the myriad processes that go into making great software that helps customers achieve business value. But this is a hard thing to achieve in corporate IT shops because software development isn't their center of excellence. Therefore, they look to systems integrators and software vendors for methodologies. Some of them build their own internal processes, but these processes are hard, and customers can't take two years to build an application, spending most of that time managing the process. What's out there today is hard, and it's on us to make it easier.*

- **Solution:** *The key is to make process invisible yet ever-present. We can't take processes away because there's a great deal of value in them. But we can certainly make it easier for customers to apply those processes, so they'll have a much more efficient and strategic development initiative. We think we have the tools to do this in Visual Studio Team System, as we've taken our approach to productivity that's worked well with individual developers and applied it to organizations in this toolset. Part of applying this notion of productivity is turning heavy process into lightweight process that's more automated and seamless to the corporate developers.*
- **Lesson:** *Integrate process into the tools and make those processes enforceable by the tools, so that the development team doesn't need to deal with processes.*

- **Challenge: Making tools approachable.** *When you're using tools every day, they should be easy to use, natural, and approachable. This isn't true of many development tools on the market today—particularly those in corporate IT shops.*

- **Solution:** *Plain and simple, we need to make our tools approachable, easy to use, and highly productive for our customers. This is why we built the Visual Studio Team System family from the group up, as opposed to leveraging a "buy" strategy, which many observers in the industry questioned us about when we considered entering the enterprise tools space.*
- **Lesson:** *Our history with the developer community is rooted in bringing productivity to individual developers and making them hugely successful through that productivity. We wanted to apply that learning to team and organizational productivity.*

- **Challenge: Integration.** *Now more than ever, customers need integration—tying their solutions together no matter what they are, what they were built with, etc. The key demand from customers is "I just want it to work."*

- **Solution:** *Customers are becoming more and more open to giving up best-of-breed tools in favor of an integrated system that works together. This isn't an amazing concept by and large, but few people are truly doing this today.*
- **Lesson:** *The industry has needed to be more open about ensuring that there are connections between systems. That's why the concept of service-oriented architectures is a big thing today. That's why the .NET versus J2EE race is no longer as controversial as before. Sure, we're ahead in .NET deployments, but a key demand from customers is that they want to see integration. That's why with Team Foundation Server we've focused on making sure that customers can have visibility into projects, no matter what they're using. We've built VSTS and Team Foundation Server as integrated from the ground up.*

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Ibaraki: What are the five biggest issues facing the IT industry in 2006 and 2007? How can they be addressed?

Somasegar:

- **Compliance and regulation.** *With things like Sarbanes-Oxley and so on*

in the U.S., compliance and regulation are hugely important to the success of an IT organization.

- *Solution: Here's where we can help customers manage process complexity and provide them with tools that make process invisible, yet ever-present.*
- *Integration. The need to tie disparate systems and architectures together.*
 - *Solution: Moving from best-of-breed tools to fully integrated systems.*
- *How to deal with distributed development. Managing people across multiple geographies.*
 - *Solution: This goes back to our earlier discussion on collaboration. If we can enable people to collaborate more effectively, we can help customers better manage distributed development scenarios.*
- *Developing customer experiences that improve customer satisfaction, driving business growth.*
 - *Solution: Providing customers with the right platform, tools, and guidance to enable them to place user experience at the forefront of their software development process.*
- *Driving software initiatives that provide tangible ROI.*
 - *Solution: Empowering customers to make software the backbone of their business. By executing on the solutions to all of the above, we can help customers get there.*

Ibaraki: What are the five biggest issues facing corporations today? What are your recommendations for meeting these challenges?

Somasegar:

- *Globalization. Take advantage of talent around the globe. The customer is truly a worldwide customer, and being able to work with talent around the world that is truly representative of the worldwide customer base is critical to business success.*
- *Communities. Customers interact with each other via online communities. Word of mouth can break or make a product. Communities provide instant feedback and can generate a viral effect—both positive and negative.*
- *User experience. It's not about a good box or a pretty appearance. It's about a great end-to-end experience, whether the customer is buying a soda or a car. Think of the entire experience your customers go through from start to end.*
- *Data explosion. With information about customer tastes, usage patterns, and the like, companies need to mine the data and extract business intelligence to make faster and smarter decisions.*
- *Speed. The company that reacts the fastest to customer needs will win. Companies that develop products fast, respond to employee problems fast, respond to changing trends fast will win. Software can help in a big way.*

Ibaraki: What are your five predictions for future trends, their implications, and business opportunities?

Somasegar:

- *Computer science and medical sciences are the two fields that I expect to see a rapid rate of innovation in the coming decades.*
- *Proliferation of mobile phones. In some parts of the world, the mobile phone is the first computing device that people use. In spite of this fact, and the proliferation of other kinds of devices, I expect the PC to be at the center of the digital devices world.*
- *The U.S. economy will continue to grow at a healthy pace for the next 20–30 years and will remain the number one economy. China and India will emerge as the next two world economies in the information world.*
- *User experience will be more and more a key differentiator. Features will become a commodity. For example, all cars will come standard with a GPS, DVD system, anti-lock brakes, and so on, but the [manufacturers] that make it fun, easy, and engaging to buy, use, and service their cars will win.*
- *Global partnerships will continue to increase. Most if not all companies will have global partners, suppliers, and customers.*

Ibaraki: For the future, which specific new Internet technologies do you think will have the greatest impact?

Somasegar: *We're seeing a great deal of excitement around the new generation of technologies that are driving the need for better user experience—particularly in the web application space, but also in client-side applications. AJAX is one of the main technologies that the industry is getting behind, but while it's a great style of development, it's not necessarily easy. So you're seeing many folks thinking about the tools developers can use to harness the power of AJAX. Atlas is one of the tools we're working on, and we're getting great feedback from the*

community. We recently made available a "go live" license for Atlas that helps customers put their beta projects using Atlas into production.

In a related area, I'm really excited about the platform and tooling components that are helping to bridge the gap between software developers and creative design professionals. Ensuring that these communities can work together effectively will be [crucial] to ensuring that the next generation of applications achieves a high level of user experience. And user experience is a key need for customers in order to generate higher levels of customer satisfaction and retention. Windows Presentation Foundation and the Expression family of tools is what Microsoft offers to developers and creative design professionals in this area—we're really excited about them and the reaction they've received thus far from the community.

Ibaraki: What are your top six recommended resources?

Somasegar:

- *MSDN and the MSDN Product Feedback Center. Naturally, I think that these are great resources for developers. Particularly, I'm really excited about the MSDN Product Feedback Center, because it tells me what customers think about our products in real time. In addition, it's an important part of our effort to be more transparent with our customers as we build the products that are right for them.*
- *Blogs, particularly the [MSDN blogs site](#).*
- *Internet search engines—MSN Search, Google, Yahoo!, etc.*
- *Personal networks of smart people and colleagues.*
- *The [Microsoft Forums](#).*
- *Books—check out [Amazon.com](#).*

Ibaraki: Now for some lighter questions. What's your favorite passion?

Somasegar. Apart from "using and enhancing personal computing technology," it's watching movies and reading books.

Ibaraki: What's your favorite gadget?

Somasegar. My Smart Phone—for listening to music, getting directions, checking mail, and sending SMS.

Ibaraki: We'll continue to watch your work and considerable contributions with interest. Thank you for taking the time to do this interview. We wish you continued success for the future.

Somasegar. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you.

Somasegar frequently shares his thoughts with the developer community via his [MSDN blog](#)—check it out.

The latest blog on this interview can be found in the [Canadian IT Manager](#) (CIM) forum, where you can provide your comments in an [interactive dialogue](#).

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