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Microsoft's 'MVPs' say they're often its sharpest critics

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March 12, 2007 (Computerworld) If you happen to be wandering around downtown Seattle this week with a malfunctioning PC, you're in luck: Help will be near. Lots of it, in fact.

Almost 2,000 of Microsoft Corp.'s [Most Valuable Professionals](#), the elite members of its massive army of unpaid technical helpers, are expected to descend upon Seattle for the software vendor's [2007 MVP Global Summit](#).

The summit will officially kick off Tuesday with a keynote speech by Bill Gates, Microsoft's co-founder and chairman, and then run through Thursday. It is expected to be the best-attended MVP event ever, with attendance up 40% from the last summit in the fall of 2005.

Since 1993, when Microsoft chose 38 inaugural MVPs, the MVP program has grown to the point where it now counts [more than 3,600 people as members](#), 60% of whom are located outside of North America, said Sean O'Driscoll, the company's general manager for community support and MVPs.

MVPs dispense free technical advice on everything from back-end IT products such as SQL Server or Visual Studio to consumer fare like MSN Money or the Xbox. And although many, if not most, MVPs work as consultants, programmers or systems integrators, an increasing number come from backgrounds more in line with consumer hobbyists. For example, the MVP membership includes students, politicians and people who hold jobs such as mechanic, tow-truck driver, roofer and even cardiologist.



At this week's summit, MVPs will get to see Microsoft product developers lay out early road maps for future software offerings. In return, they will get a chance to deliver early reports from the field to Microsoft on how users of Exchange 2007, Office 2007 and Windows Vista are faring.

Far from being apologists or cheerleaders for Microsoft products, MVPs say that they routinely provide highly critical feedback to the company's developers.

"It works both ways," said Bharat Suneja, who has been an Exchange MVP since 2005 and works as a principal software architect at Zenprise Inc., a Microsoft business partner. "Naturally, I'm slightly biased toward Microsoft. But I also give very ruthless feedback, because I want the best for the product."

Suneja, who has posted nearly 7,000 help messages on Exchange newsgroups in the past year and a half in addition to writing the popular [Exchangepedia](#) blog, has never worried about being the bearer of bad tidings. "Microsoft places no restrictions on MVPs criticizing its products," he said. "If it did, I would already be out of the program by now."

Paul DeGroot, an analyst at [Directions on Microsoft](#), a research firm in Kirkland, Wash., agreed that MVPs are both "in Microsoft's camp" and its "best critics" at the same time.

"They criticize from a position of deep knowledge about the products and how customers use them," DeGroot said. "So when they say something, they know what they're talking about, and they're not inclined to take cheap

shots. They'd rather fix things than lay blame."

When Microsoft started the MVP program, its goals were humble. In June 1992, the company had acquired the [FoxPro](#) database, a product with which it had little history or technical expertise.

But for nearly a decade, there already had existed a very active online community of FoxPro users who provided advice to one another on a CompuServe forum.

One of those members was Calvin Hsia, an MIT computer science graduate who was running a software company in Honolulu. Hsia recalls spending an average of three to four hours per day reading messages and answering questions about FoxPro on the CompuServe forum.

"In Hawaii, you could go to the beach, but there wasn't that much to do that was intellectually stimulating," Hsia said. "I really enjoyed talking to people and helping solve their problems. The thank-you's I would get were really gratifying."

Out of his own curiosity, Hsia began compiling a spreadsheet that ranked the most prolific posters on the FoxPro forum. (He himself consistently ranked second behind a woman who later became a Microsoft MVP). Hsia would occasionally post his rankings, which others dubbed "Calvin's List," on the forum, with the subtle intent of motivating people to help more.

Hsia also sent the data to people on request, including Microsoft executives who used the list to help select the first crop of MVPs. Not surprisingly, 30 out of the 38 MVPs chosen in the program's first year were FoxPro experts.

Among those was Hsia, who said the award helped open the door for him at Microsoft, where he has worked full time since 1994 and became lead developer for the still-chugging FoxPro software in 2000. And although Hsia stopped maintaining Calvin's List more than a decade ago and is much less active on newsgroups than he used to be, he still writes [a blog](#) offering help to FoxPro users.

Microsoft almost shut down the MVP program eight years ago. After several hundred former America Online "community leaders" -- who really were unpaid chatroom moderators -- began making noises in 1999 about [suing](#) AOL LLC for back pay and benefits, Microsoft executives began worrying that the MVPs would do the same. One Friday that October, the software vendor sent out an e-mail announcing its plans to end the MVP program by the end of that year. But Microsoft reversed itself the following Monday, after receiving [a deluge of protests](#) from both MVPs and customers over the weekend.

At the time, Microsoft had just 600 MVPs, most of them in the U.S. Now the company is adding about 400 MVPs annually, most of them in regions other than North America and Europe.

Over the past four years, Microsoft has made a conscious effort to broaden its MVP selection criteria. In addition to choosing people who post heavily on its 2,000 or so [newsgroups](#), the company now selects bloggers, active user group members and posters who participate in third-party forums, such as Experts Exchange.

Potential new members can also be nominated by other MVPs, said Paul Robichaux, a partner at Exchange systems integrator [3Sharp](#), the author of more than a dozen books on Exchange and an MVP since 2003.

Garnering MVP status isn't like becoming a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer, which is a more conventional, test-based certification.

"If you have someone who shows up and tears it up, giving good, meaty technical answers for three to four months, it's a good foundation" for becoming an MVP, Robichaux said. But someone with "a steady, long-term output" is still more likely to be nominated, he added. "It's more of a marathon than a sprint," he said.

That is intentional, because Microsoft wants to find people who, as O'Driscoll put it, share "the same DNA as a church or school volunteer" -- not those who view an MVP award simply as a way to build their resumes. "When someone asks me, 'What does it take to become an MVP?' I hesitate, because that's not what it's about," O'Driscoll said.

And MVPs must continue to contribute in order to have their status renewed. Once elected to an initial one-year term, they do tend to stay: About 80% of them are renewed every year, according to Microsoft.

From the beginning, MVPs have enjoyed small stipends that they can use to buy discounted software from Microsoft. But the biggest benefits have always been early access to information about new products.

For instance, Oliver Nguyen, a .Net MVP who works as a San Francisco Bay area software consultant and is president of the 4,000-member Bay.Net developer group, routinely watches webcasts or participates in online chats with Microsoft product managers. That gives him access, under nondisclosure agreements, to technical data and product plans many weeks or even months before products are announced publicly. "There's almost too much information," he said.

MVPs also get the chance to interact directly with Microsoft product developers. "It used to be a little difficult to figure out who to talk to at Microsoft," Nguyen said. "Now there seem to be a lot more avenues for providing feedback."

That constructive criticism is so valued that most MVPs are on a first-name basis with at least several product developers at Microsoft. And many can cite a litany of examples of features and fixes that they say Microsoft

has introduced as a result of suggestions or lobbying efforts by MVP.

"Our voice is very well heard," Robichaux said. As an example of the influence that MVPs can wield, he cited Microsoft's decision two years ago to increase [the maximum database size](#) in the standard edition of Exchange 2003 to 75GB, up from the previous limit of 16GB.

Being an MVP can also lead to job opportunities at Microsoft. Robichaux personally knows seven former Exchange MVPs who have joined the software vendor. "The biggest cause of MVP dropouts is being hired by Microsoft," he said.