

# Other Peoples' Problems

BY SAM GOLOB

**D**id you ever wonder how it's possible to keep up with the MVS field, especially with the advent of OS/390? This situation is further compounded if you happen to be a systems programmer in a backlevel shop — say a place that runs MVS/XA 2.2.3, MVS/370, or another prior version. Do places like that still exist today? You bet, although Y2K may soon eliminate them. Even if you work at a very modern shop on a very modern system, the field is moving fast, making it a requirement for all of us to keep learning new things.

Nobody knows everything, and everyone is limited by finite intelligence and finite time. Nobody can get more done than they actually can. It follows, first, that people have to work with each other, and second, that a smart person should realize that it's good to take advantage of other people's experience. You simply don't have enough time to re-invent all of the wheels in the world. It's also computer-productive. When sharing experiences with others, it's a good idea to strike a balance between helping and being helped. Everyone has a pleasant experience when the sharing goes two ways.

Getting back to the problem of keeping up with MVS, I've discovered some helpful advice: Find out about other people's problems! I know a fellow who worked for many years at a shop with back-level system software. Besides budgetary constraints and having to fend off numerous attempts to outsource the computer operation, this place had to run a computer that wasn't ESA-capable. The systems programmers were faced with not being able to acquire experience with modern equipment. How can one lessen the isolation that this causes? This fellow did it by not being isolated. Those were the days before the

Internet; he used to call other systems programmers in other shops constantly. He used to try and attend SHARE and other user group meetings. He constantly asked his friends about the problems they were having and he shared his problems with them. Often they were able to help him out of some sticky jams — those were the days of the “untrained IBM-SEs” and before IBMlink.

It helped that this fellow was an extrovert who didn't have any trouble talking to people. Nowadays, there's hope for everyone. With the advent of a more electronic age, everyone can participate in this process.

## PROBLEM EXCHANGING FOR INTROVERTS, TOO

I'm new to the Internet. My previous shops didn't provide its employees Internet access, but nowadays you can obtain access inexpensively or, in some cases, for free. The Internet has Newsgroup lists where you exchange your problems by writing or just reading posts, and you don't have to talk to anybody directly. One of the principal lists is called IBM-MAIN from the University of Alabama. IBM-MAIN is an ideal vehicle for exchanging problems among MVS systems programmers, but it has to be managed in order to be fully useful. There are many other lists that run the same way. They're a lot of fun, once you get into them.

IBM-MAIN is the largest list I know of. It is a closed list, meaning that you have to subscribe in order to send email messages to it. Any subscriber who sends a message to the list gets the message circulated to all other subscribers. Once you subscribe to the IBM-MAIN list, your email could be bombarded with about 40 to 80 messages a day. How do you handle that? There's an option on LISTSERV, which is the software

that manages most of these lists, called DIGEST. Instead of getting individual messages you get a digest of all that day's messages every midnight. This digest is only one file, and it doesn't overwhelm your Internet email. I save the digest as a file every day and browse its contents at my leisure with SPF/PC. With DIGEST, I can't answer all the messages from the list on a real-time basis, but I save my sanity and answer the messages the next day.

IBM-MAIN, as well as many other newsgroup lists, is serviced by software called a LISTSERV server. Once you learn to use the LISTSERV software, you can comfortably manage many newsgroup lists and correspond with the people who send email through them. Using the LISTSERV software capabilities, the various newsgroup lists can keep tabs on other lists. For example, once you subscribe to IBM-MAIN, you can ask its list server to send you a list of other newsgroup lists, and you can even ask it to attempt to subscribe to those lists for you.

## HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

To subscribe to IBM-MAIN from your email address send a message to LISTSERV@UA1VM.UA.EDU with the following message text: subscribe ibm-main (optionally followed by your actual name). “Subscribe” is a keyword that the LISTSERV software reads. The computer will send you back a message with a code. You merely have to reply to the computer's message with the word “OK, ” or “OK” followed by the code number you received. The list server will then send you a receipt indicating that you are now a subscriber, and your email id will start getting bombarded with email. Once you are a subscriber, if you would like to send a

broadcast message to the IBM-MAIN list and all its recipients, use this email address: IBM-MAIN@UA1VM.UA.EDU.

Compared to other lists, the IBM-MAIN list usually receives many messages daily. To stem the tide of email messages, you can have the list server customize your subscription. A list of commands is available on a LISTSERV reference card. To obtain one, simply email the LISTSERV address of the list with the message: LISTSERV REFCARD or INFO REFCARD and the computer will email you a reference card of commands. I customized my session by sending the list server a list of SET commands. Following are the commands I used:

- ◆ *set ibm-main repro* — to receive a copy of my own messages
- ◆ *set ibm-main ack* — to receive an acknowledgment that my own message was sent out
- ◆ *set IBM-main digest* — to condense all the incoming messages for each day into one email instead of many emails

With the LISTSERV reference card and a little practice you can customize your subscription parameters. A good piece of advice is to save the email containing the reference card as a file. Then you can print it out and refer to it as needed.

#### **"NETIQUETTE" AND BENEFITS**

Once you have the privilege of becoming a list subscriber, don't abuse it. It's better to keep your messages useful to the public and not to waste their time. Everyone else has to manage all the messages that come in. Ask yourself whether your message will contribute to the general store of knowledge or to the general garbage can. Review other people's messages before sending any, to get a feel for the types of messages being sent. Try not to attach any big files to your messages — I made that mistake once and only once. These files burden the list server (which has to duplicate the file possibly 1,100 times) and also fills the subscribers' mailboxes unnecessarily. Don't use the list to advertise your own commercial services or software, except to mention that it may solve a certain subscriber's problem. Solving people's problems is permitted; commercial advertising for its own sake isn't.

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**Like any addiction, even a "good addiction" needs a limit.**

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Now that I've talked about the preparations, let's start talking about the results. Once you've started looking at the other people's messages you'll start learning. A good rule of thumb for me has always been to look carefully at the things I know about and to also read the things I don't know about is necessary for expanding my horizons. If someone writes about a piece of equipment or software that my shop doesn't have or that I don't have previous experience with, here's a way to get some cheap experience. Then, if I see that equipment or software somewhere else or my shop acquires it later, I already know something about it. Some information about this stuff is already in my general store of knowledge.

What if I have a problem? I can send an email to the public and see if someone will send me a solution. Oftentimes, this proves effective. Of course, the process depends on the willingness of the participants to take the time and help other people. But that's the joy of it — the give and take! I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction when I help someone else out of a jam. And, in turn, I have been similarly helped numerous times by others. There's a big pool of knowledge out there!


Occasionally, a news group has helped me find out about a user group I'd lost track of. Although I'm on the East Coast, I wanted to know what the Los Angeles MVS Users Group was doing. After one or two request emails to the news group, I received several replies along with phone numbers and addresses of relevant people. Anything related to improving our ability to do our jobs is fair game for discussion. The talk can get quite peripheral, but most often it's very specific and to the point.

Once in a while, we can also poke fun at a certain vendor's annoying practices. Besides the laugh we get from the "inside jokes," we can glean practical advice about how to circumvent that vendor's efforts, whatever they might be.

#### **GETTING ADDICTED**

Once you've become accustomed to listening to other people's problems, the benefits will start accruing. You'll be better informed about the MVS (OS/390) field in general. After all, you've been listening to the news! When your own shop gets new equipment, you'll have a "leg up" on how it works, and you can ask the news group any questions you may have; they'll tell you their war stories. You'll learn what your peers are concerned with the most. You won't remain isolated in your own shop any more.

Of course, your shop will benefit when you're better able to do your job. But you will benefit, too. Take, for instance my 50-50, 100-100 rule: "When you do a task well, you split it 50-50 with your employer — both of you benefit. They get the job done, and you get the experience. But it's really not a split, it's 100 percent for both. They get 100 percent of the job, and you get 100 percent of the experience. That's something that nobody can take away from you!" I like this rule, and I live by it.

Talking on the news groups gets to be so much fun after a while that I find I have to limit myself to a certain amount of time each day. Like any addiction, even a "good addiction" needs a limit. However, once you're addicted, you'll know that life with others is better than life by yourself. Good luck. See you next month. 

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