Secret to cutting backlog? Write less code

By Naomi Lee Bloom
Special to OBO

One almost universal, but only moderately successful approach to reducing application backlogs has been to improve the productivity of scarce technical resources. A more promising approach to meeting user application needs may be to reduce substantially the amount of new code needed to satisfy these needs. Such application-enabling techniques, to use a phrase that seems to have originated within IBM, are intended to reduce the amount of new code written, rather than merely expedite the production of new code.

Other things being equal, the less code written to achieve a specific level of systems support, the less risk, cost, elapsed time and staff frustration. It is important to note, however, that other things are rarely equal.

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The purchase and use of contemporary or adaptive application packages generally reduce the costs, risks, elapsed time and personal frustrations of meeting systems support needs. However, there is always a price for flexibility. Sophisticated reference tables can require considerable loading and maintenance effort. But this approach is far less risky than modifying source code, and users can often be encouraged to take responsibility for loading and maintaining most of the tables.

From the perspective of cost, risk and the containment of elapsed time, the availability of options means someone must analyze, document, recommend, evaluate and decide upon each desired option. Contemporary application packages go a long way toward meeting organization-specific requirements without developing new code.

There are two general approaches to multiplying the value of any code you do write. Extension software uses your simple code written in the tool's own command language as the input from which it creates (by translation, compilation, assembly or one of several other extension techniques) very substantial functionality. Report writers are a common extension technique.

Conservation techniques are a formal set of design techniques that look for the common functional elements in an application in order to develop a single implementation of these common functions for use across the application. Reusing date routines is a very simple case of conservation.

The universe of extension software ranges from the old and familiar to the new and still developing, including:

- Utility programs that provide system or housekeeping functions.
- Report writers and inquiry languages, including graphics packages.
- Data base management systems with which you can add and modify commands in the application programs to invoke powerful data handling, editing, storage and access capabilities.
- Screen generators.
- Data management and analysis tools.
- Application generators.
- High-level languages.

However, there is a significant problem currently associated with the use of extension techniques. Until considerable standardization occurs, taking advantage of even a small set of these tools may still impose a serious training burden on your organization. Many professional programmers and users will resist using these tools because they quite reasonably perceive that the cost of mastering them is too high.

Perceptive analysts and designers have always recognized common functions in their application specifications, but the process of doing so has been largely informal. Many business applications contain a rather large set of common functions that lend themselves to a common software approach.

The decision to build an application around a base of common software modules must be made explicit quite early in the design process so that further effort can be efficiently directed.

End-user computing is not a new idea, so why do we not treat it as a state-of-the-art development? One reason is that, until now, whoever approached the computer was forced to learn computerese — at great personal sacrifice. If we believe the advertisements for various end-user computing tools, the professional programmer may soon focus solely on core production systems and tool development, leaving to the user the development of most data extraction and analysis systems. Clearly, if the user can directly translate his unspoken information requirements into a working system, he won't have the DP staff to kick around any more.

If only to sell more computers, hardware vendors would welcome any approach to program development that used more computer resources to leverage scarce personnel to develop new applications that used more computing resources. Since they develop many of the packages and tools and generally corner the market on really superb professional programmers, software vendors certainly favor the techniques described here. Corporate users and DP managers are also on board the write-less-code bandwagon.

Time is clearly on the side of the approaches described here, but I would not yet discharge my Cobol programmers nor declare that all user needs can be satisfied by a new data base management system. As in all things, a balanced mix of these techniques with more traditional application development strategies will produce the best results.

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