

developer.***A Web Magazine for Software Developers**

The *.ORG Interview Series

Installment 1: The Programmer's Guild

Interview by Daniel Read

Answers by Paul Hanrahan of the Programmer's Guild

Welcome to the first in a series of interviews that will appear in the **developer.*** web magazine. This series will be devoted to interviews with representatives from various organizations that software developers could join, support, or otherwise become involved with. There are many software- or programmer-oriented organizations out there, and many (most) software developers don't know anything about them. The purpose of these interviews is two-fold: first, to discuss a variety of issues of interest to software developers, and second, to give each organization an opportunity to explain why they exist, what they do, and why software developers might want to become involved.

The organizations chosen for interviews will be of different types. Some may be issue advocacy or lobbying organizations, others might be social clubs or professional societies. Neither **developer.*** nor its editor and authors are necessarily endorsing any organization that appears in this series. The point is not to advocate for these organizations. Rather, we merely want to create a forum for ideas. If a **developer.*** reader decides to get involved, all the better. If you know of an organization that should be included in this series, please let us know. Enjoy!

The following interview was conducted during the last week of July via e-mail between Daniel Read of **developer.*** and Paul Hanrahan of the Programmer's Guild. Paul is a founding member of the Guild and a member of its board. The Programmer's Guild web address is www.programmersguildusa.com.

Daniel Read: *What is the difference between a guild and a union, and is one better than the other for programmers in particular?*

Paul Hanrahan: Historically unions may have emerged from the medieval Guild system. Guild's in their current incarnation can be hard to distinguish from unions, as in the case of the Screen Actor's Guild. The Programmer's Guild is a not-for-profit organization. The Programmer's Guild doesn't engage in collective bargaining on behalf of its members which is a significant difference from a union. I wouldn't call a Guild better than a Union but more appropriate to the character of programmers at this point in the development of our profession and at this stage in the PG's development.

DR: *When you say a guild is "more appropriate" at this point, do you mean because U.S.-based programmer's as a group do not perceive themselves as needing a "union"? That appears to be the general sentiment in many categories of white collar workers. Do you anticipate a day when white collar workers start to see unions as relevant for them?*

PH: I think it's because we're white collar. However, other white collar workers, such as teachers, have unionized. I think the programming profession is in worse shape now than teachers were when many of them unionized. Programmers are reportedly flocking to techsunate.org to view what it says but they aren't becoming union members in droves. I'm not sure why programmers are more hesitant to unionize than other white collar professionals. I've speculated that the lack of unionization has to do with the type of person who is initially attracted to programming and then decides to stay a couple of years instead of moving quickly into management if they have the opportunity.

DR: *Why do software developers need an organization like the Programmer's Guild?*

PH: Currently the programming profession in the United States is in deep trouble because of 1) Importation of labor meant to drive down the wage; 2) Legislative efforts to govern how much programmers can make and where they can and can't work; 3) Unfair performance improvement practices by H.R. departments in large corporations that discredit competent programmers; 4) Lack of standards and certification which leads to poor product and tarnishes our profession; and 5) Powerful anti-American-worker lobbying efforts by India's lobbying organizations and groups like the ITAA.

DR: *Can you elaborate on these human resources practices that discredit competent programmers? What are these practices, and what motivation do corporations have for using them?*

PH: I think the "permanent" employee concept is a thing of the past, yet corporations pretend that concept still exists in I.T. To the best of my ability to determine the average time in service for a person in I.T. is two years or less, yet when I started at IBM in 1979 anyone who had any status as a programmer had a minimum of ten years with the company. Despite the shift in the meaning of "permanent," the mechanisms for treating employees like they have a long term commitment to a company and *visa versa*, are still in place in terms of performance improvement plans (PIPs) and evaluation processes that happen only once a year, or perhaps at a six month interval if you are new.

The PIP in today's world is nothing more than an H.R. contrivance to allow corporations to terminate employees with cause and have signed documents on file that state the employee admits to incompetence. This entire thing started with a the downsizing craze of the 80's and 90's. The downsizing craze can be traced back to business philosophies and trends preached and analyzed in our more prestigious MBA schools here in the United States. The PG has been publishing a series of articles on the downsizing craze, how it got started, and what many of the misconceptions about it are and were.

DR: *Does your membership currently include people with a range of specialties other than "programming" in the traditional sense? Is there a mixture of practitioners and research-oriented developers?*

PH: We have quite a mix. Recently our under 30 age group started to grow. We have those who've experienced only the technologies indigenous to the "information highway," and those who are still died-in-the-wool mainframe legacy programmers. We have those who were practicing programmers and are now owners of small consulting firms and those who've always been "in the trenches." I spent many years in R&D at IBM and know many in the PG who've spent their careers doing business applications. We have PhD's and those who have high school degrees but years of programming experience of a practical nature.

DR: *How many members does the Programmer's Guild have?*

PH: There are about 1600 subscribers but only a fraction are paying members.

DR: *When was the Guild first formed, and what were the circumstances?*

PH: The Programmer's Guild was formed in 1999 by John Miano. We were concerned about the declining prestige of the programming profession. A programmer is becoming regarded a interchangeable body rather than a skilled individual. We were concerned about the public's perception of the software industry and the rampant hucksterism going on, from Y2K to Internet IPOs. We were concerned about the declining quality of software, both commercial and custom.

We were concerned about the lack of minority and older workers in the profession.

We were concerned about legislative issues, such as tax laws, non-compete clauses, software patents, and immigration, while the programming profession has no voice in government.

We were concerned with improving productivity among programmers.

We were concerned with the difficulty in connecting programmers to jobs.

We were concerned that the growth in technology jobs is not being used to benefit the population at large.

DR: *I too have been concerned by the market's recent efforts to transform the programmer into a commodity. However, I wonder to what degree this vision of a rationalized software development fueled by cheap, largely interchangeable labor is wishful thinking on the part of business executives and strategists. Just because someone declares that one programmer is like any other does not make it true. I wonder if we'll be looking back on this in five years laughing at how silly all these companies were to think they could, by sheer force of will, create a cheap, predictable, and orderly software development process while still producing high quality software that meets the requirements, scales up, and maintains well? Or do all craftsmen, pre-commoditization, entertain this kind of illusion? "They just *think* they can turn us into commodities!"*

PH: I think it's an illusion that we can be turned into commodities. However, an entire philosophy and paradigm has sprung up for producing software and certifications for those who preach and adhere to the "manage the process and not the programmer" mentality. Those who adhere to the commoditization strategy are often in positions of authority as soon as they take their first job after getting a degree or certification. We programmers, on the other hand, don't have the same fraternal instincts as the management ranks who want to de-skill our profession and send the work elsewhere.

The question is how affordable is the "manage the risk of less skilled labor" approach to things. More than even the commoditization issue, I think one has to question if there hasn't been a real shift in "corporate culture" in general in the United States that makes unethical behavior more acceptable and puts those of us who are less organized as professionals increasingly at risk of being devoured by the more predatory people in the corporate world.

DR: *Can you elaborate on what you meant when you said that the population at large is not benefiting from the growth in technology jobs?*

PH: That statement has a couple of meanings for me. First, it means that our profession is narrowly defined so that industries related to programming aren't recognized and taken advantage of by other workers so that programmers are seen as a boon to society.

Second, I don't think that products produced by programmers often empower the lives of the average person and improve their lives. There are management courses on I.T. that demonstrate that intranets empower workers and give them an edge, through knowledge, that makes them more competitive and productive than non users. I haven't seen much that's clearly demonstrated the value-add for the average citizen of using software or at least I haven't seen programmers given credit for producing the products that improve lives and uplift people. We are mostly perceived as purveyors of automation that gets rid of jobs. Also, there aren't any programs in place to "share the wealth" of the technology boom with others who could use a lift in terms of earning power.

DR: *What are the primary issues that the Guild focuses on? Does the Guild have an "official position" on these issues? Is it difficult to reach consensus on these issues within the membership, or are your members mostly unified in opinion?*

PH: We focus on:

- Promote the profession of programming
- Conduct lobbying on issues that affect members of the programming profession
- Set Professional Standards
- Certification
- Job Placement

Some of the items we focus on are still in the formative stages and are done on a best-effort basis.

DR: *What inspires you personally to give your free time to working on behalf of the Guild?*

PH: When I was laid off by IBM in a purge of tens of thousands of workers in 1994 my family and I felt alone. The PG helped me to understand I'm not alone and allows me to reach out to other individuals and families who've gone through the same experiences my family and I have.

DR: *There has been of late a lot of words published in newspapers, magazines, and blogs about the controversy of H-1b/L-1 visas and the "offshoring" trend. For example, Salon magazine (salon.com) recently ran two articles about the offshoring controversy. I was fascinated by the range of letters from readers that Salon published a few days later (and they received a lot of letters).*

Frankly I have not yet figured out my own position on this. I have worked with dozens of people who came here through the H-1b program. I have worked with many who are quite skilled, in a few cases well beyond my own skills and knowledge. My own great grandparents emigrated here from another country, so who am I to begrudge anyone else that right? On the other hand, I see the negative sides of too many H-1bs and too much offshoring.

I've seen many of the people I've worked with exploited by the agencies that bring them here, all within plain sight of the corporations who hire them. I have American programmer friends with great credentials who have been out of work for months at time. I worry about the commoditization of the programmer, which offshoring helps fuel. I worry about the what the hopes are for a recovery of the US economy if tens of thousands of jobs are being sent to other countries.

My underlying point, Paul, is that this seems to me to be a complicated issue? Do you agree? Is there some middle ground, or are these trends inherently negative?

PH: I think the intent of the visa programs were good, but the numbers were inflated by powerful lobbying groups who 1) wanted to drive down the wage, or 2) found a low wage here better than what was available at home. I don't blame any individual who comes here to improve their lives. Some of my great grandparents came here from Ireland and competed for jobs in the U.S. I think America is more saturated than it was 100 years ago. We're not a frontier anymore. I don't think my great grandparents should have been taken advantage of when they came here and neither should the H-1b's. There is always an opportunity for exploitation of immigrants. As long as there are those exploiting a situation like H-1b, etc. there will be those who oppose it.

I think in the current situation our representatives aren't listening to us despite the extenuating circumstances of 9/11 and other indications that we've been too liberal in recent decades with our immigration policies.

DR: *So the main problem with the H-1b program is that the caps are too high? Is there an appropriate cap that the Guild advocates?*

PH: I think the program should be abolished.

DR: *Do people here on H-1b visas pay income and social security taxes?*

PH: Yes.

DR: *What, if anything, can or should be done legislatively at the federal or state level to stem the tide of programming and other jobs going offshore?*

PH: Locally states should refuse to have H-1b's work on government contracts. That goes back to the issue of "benefiting the population at large." Instead of an H-1b program we should be training people here who need a career boost to step into technology jobs.

DR: *Is there any clear division along Democratic/Republican party lines on the legislative issues?*

PH: There's a lot of grousing about Democrat vs. Republican, but I've stopped trying to figure out the partisan politics of this situation. A big thing yesterday was Bush reportedly saying tech jobs are leaving because US worker's have out-dated skills. Well, then lets benefit the population at large by training Americans first in the technology arena.

DR: *Who is behind the lobbying groups that advocate for upping the H-1b cap?*

PH: First, management looking for cheap labor and adhering to the belief that improving the programming profession is a waste of time when programmers can be de-skilled and risk-managed. One organization is the ITAA. Often lobbyists are from foreign nations which, by the way, I believe is illegal though I'm not sure why I think this.

DR: *There appears to be an interesting intersection between the H-1b controversy and the offshoring controversy. Apparently Microsoft, GE, and other large companies are setting up development centers in India and elsewhere, which allows them to hire their own developers in those countries that they can bring to the U.S. through the L-1 visa. Can you elaborate on this phenomenon? Is it happening a lot? What exactly is an L-1 visa? How many L-1 visas are used in this way compared to H-1b visas?*

PH: The PG's V.P. or Research and some interested parties had provided us with figures on L-1. I'm not concerned with the figures so much as the overall picture with large corporations and trends in their behavior. To me L-1 and the offshore development centers are one more way to avoid the intent of the law. I'm not going to take the time right now to look back at the figures I've been quoted. L-1 simply allows transfer within a corporation. So a person hired in a foreign R&D facility doesn't have to go the H-1b route to make their way to the U.S., and they aren't counted against the H-1B cap.

I oppose L-1 simply as a matter of principle. The H-1b program is a sham, and from our perspective L-1 should be counted against H-1b caps and isn't. H-1b was founded on bad numbers and lies brought forth by lobbyists and L-1 is an extension of the same program based on the explanation of why L-1 should be allowed. The premise for both programs is that there's a lack of skilled and/or qualified American workers, which is grossly inaccurate.

DR: *Does the Guild have a position on the issue of licensing? Some people think it is inevitable that some or all states in the US will someday require programmers, or at least certain programmers, to be licensed.*

PH: We're split on this issue right now. Texas has licensing, but there's a kind of hole in the Texas licensing. For the Texas licensing you must also have a Bachelor's degree and 4 years of experience. And you must be a resident of Texas. John Miano's assessment is that the Texas licensing would not stand up to a court challenge. I think licensing like that of civil engineers would be a good thing, but others in the PG leadership disagree. Perhaps we'll come up with a position paper sometime in the future.

DR: *Does the Guild have a position on drug testing?*

PH: We oppose drug testing by employers not so much because of a civil rights issue as much as because it's part of a larger trend toward invading the privacy of employees. Take a quick look at *The Naked Employee* by Frederick S. Lane. Web surfing? Workers are being watched. E-mail? That, too. From video cameras to ID cards to background checks, employees' lives are basically open books to whomever is paying their salary. Lane's style is more clinical than impassioned, laying out the hard facts instead of editorializing.

DR: *What kind of work specifically does the Guild do to advocate for issues? What strategies do you employ?*

PH: We do a lot of fax and e-mail campaigns. When we find out employees are about to be "right sized" in favor of offshoring or lower paid foreign labor we inform the workers as soon as possible so that they can make informed decisions about their own futures. We challenge in court blatant advertising that looks for foreign workers to the exclusion of American workers. We on occasion defend members who are submitted to grossly biased PIP processes that have taken the place of an old fashioned lay off and admission that poor business conditions make the layoff necessary.

DR: *Are there other organizations with which the Guild collaborates or shares solidarity?*

PH: Yes, we're part of a larger loose coalition of organizations, some of which are other professional societies, some concerned with American workers in general and some purely concerned with immigration issues.

DR: *Could you name some of these organizations?*

PH: The associations are pretty loose-knit. We don't have any legally binding agreements with anyone or even letters of intention to cooperate. We cooperate on activism items that seem to be of mutual benefit and don't always agree on over all policy, strategy or tactics. In the last year we have drawn closer to the CWA and AFL/CIO. We've taken a real interest in The Screen Actors Guild, but our V.P. of Coalition Building hasn't contacted them yet to the best of my knowledge. We've partnered with The American Worker's Coalition on occasion, and with The Organization for the Rights of American Workers. We have in our membership those who also belong the WashTech, the IEEE and the ACM.

DR: *If someone wants to get involved with or assist your organization, what should they do?*

PH: Go to our web page (www.programmersguildusa.com) and join. We need the most assistance in forming local chapters and getting local membership to visit their representatives offices in their districts, and to show support for us.

DR: *Thanks for your time, Paul.*

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