The Expert’s Opinion

Is the Webmaster Position Becoming Obsolete?

An interview with
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Interview by
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JDM: What are the typical responsibilities of a Webmaster?

Scheirer: The role and responsibilities of a Webmaster are continually changing as new technologies emerge and as the business needs of organizations evolve. Typically, a Webmaster’s responsibilities would include: creating a website that serves to meet the goals of the business, maintaining and administering the systems, generating HTML and scripts, developing the graphic design and layout of the user interface, developing the architecture of the information throughout the site, finding tools to help in the development and maintenance of the website, and helping the organization define its strategy for use of web-based technology.

As new tools and technologies become available, there are opportunities for Webmaster involvement in collaborative development, decision support systems (DSS), and distance training, among others.

JDM: What Webmaster skills are needed to support an organization’s goals?

Scheirer: The expertise required for a Webmaster position varies by type and size of the organization. Typically, Webmaster’s skills include internet and intranet technologies, standards and protocols, UNIX systems administration, HTML, script generation (PERL, CGI), and audio/video capabilities. It is also important to have an understanding of database design, development, and administration.

I would suggest that in addition to the technical expertise that is necessary, it is also important to have managerial or organizational experience. Many Webmasters provide support within and across the information layers in the organization. Therefore, the Webmaster really needs to understand how the organizational components fit together in a synergistic fashion. In addition, the Webmaster must have effective communication skills, analytical capabilities, and quality writing skills.

JDM: Why is the position of Webmaster so important to many organizations?

Scheirer: In the last few years, organizations have discovered how the use of the internet and intranet technologies can improve the ways in which business is conducted. The bottom line is that a well-defined web strategy has become a critical success factor in supporting an organization’s goals. Internet and intranet technologies have opened the door for an organization to set new goals, explore new business opportunities, improve its customer base, and change its infrastructure.

JDM: Is the position of Webmaster becoming obsolete because of emerging technology?

Scheirer: My answer is an emphatic “no.” New tools and technology may assist a Webmaster by automating what used to be manual development and maintenance tasks. But, it is difficult to automate the human aspect of web management including troubleshooting, decision support, training, and answering frequently asked questions. Most importantly, a Webmaster is still needed to manage the system and to be the driving force behind an organization’s web strategy.

JDM: How does database technology impact web development?

Scheirer: The demand for information is continuously increasing, and as such databases have become integral parts of most web-based systems. This requires a Webmaster to be knowledgeable about integrating databases into web-based systems, and to be experienced with database design, development, and administration.

JDM: What about commercial claims that “anybody can develop a web page”?

Scheirer: This is a valid statement in that many tools are available to assist in developing a simple web page. To meet the needs of an organization, however, a Webmaster has to understand the hardware, software, and other technologies...
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