Donuts for DBAs III – An Interview with Redmond
By Redmond Bim.

Our local interviewer feeling game and very confident decided to do an online interview of Redmond Bim and get a frank view of Redmond's thoughts on a number of database topics.

I:Redmond, I'm just reading a synopsis of your recent work and was interested in your thoughts on downtime and performance tuning.

R: My views have always been very candid. Experience has shown that the greatest cause of downtime in any environment is that caused by the database administrator, be it deliberate when doing maintenance or accidental because they are working at 2am in the morning and are very tired. Whilst the biggest cause of performance issues in an environment can invariably be attributed to poor management.

I: That's a very harsh statement to make, especially the one about management.

R: It might be harsh but its one most database administrators would agree with, albeit silently. In all the articles I have written I have tried to avoid shifting the cause of performance issues to management, but it was just an obvious and inescapable conclusion. I'll highlight this point with a simple example. At site X, a manager knows how to get a good deal on a hardware box. That manager thinks all hardware is the same and ends up buying a Unix server running a flavour of Unix that is barely supported by Oracle. The manager asks the DBA if it's supported. The administrator responds with yes, and everyone is happy- right? The DBA is very unhappy because they know how limiting that Unix version is, that the hardware doesn't scale well and it is very hard to monitor. But because management made the decision on cost the DBA could not argue with them. Now when there are performance problems it's the role of the DBA to fix them. The DBA is required to achieve miracles with a brick of a computer. And so when it comes to performance and tuning what should the DBA do? The damage is done, the DBA can only do band-aid reactive tuning. And who gets the blame when things go wrong ? – It will not be management that is for sure. Oracle stresses that with tuning you should fix the problem at the design level first when it's simpler and cheaper to do. I agree with this but extend this concept to go back even further to the initial phase. Get the right management in place with the right skills and you will avoid a lot of potential problems.

I ask you - in your experience how many performance problems can be attributed to management making bad decisions based on politics (that is, keeping some users happy); cost (this solution is cheapest) or ambition (I'll go with IBM not because its better but because it's the safest decision to make – no one gets sacked if they go with IBM. Or is that Microsoft now)?

I: You have been very vocal in your views on certification, why is this?

R: I was wondering when this would get raised. I have always been a strong dissenter when it comes to certification because it is fundamentally flawed. I look at the questions that are asked in the exam and I see trivia questions as well as many irrelevant questions. I also see missing some very important questions that should be asked. Case in point, the most important question to be asked in the whole exam is, how

quick can the administrator access key documentation in time of need? The administrator can not and should not be expected to have memorised everything about the database, yet the exam demands that the administrator has done this by insisting that the exam be closed book. That to me, that one issue, is a serious flaw in the whole certification process. I would like to get some of these certification experts in a room and make them recite the syntax for *create table* off by heart, complete, without any syntax errors. Or better yet, name every single V$ table and each column in them and explain their purpose. All it shows if they could do it is that they have a good memory, it by no means shows that they are even competent as a DBA.

I: Aren't you just bitter because you never got certified?

R: Oh I got certified, only for the reason that I could identify and expose the flaws in it.

Certification is full of trivia questions which to me appear to have been put together to show off the knowledge of the questioner and not to test the knowledge of the person doing the exam. There are a lot of questions where my response is "Who Cares!". Its not relevant to me now or in the future, and the odds are that the next release of Oracle will change it. I can find what I need by looking in the manual.

I can show you what I mean just by looking at Jan/Feb edition of Oracle Magazine. Page 7, titled Errata are corrections to questions raised in the previous magazine. They can't even raise simple questions without getting them wrong. The exams are closed book and assume you have memorised

syntax and data dictionary tables. Realistically who knows all the syntax of every combination of SQL statement? Not me that's for sure, and I have been using Oracle since V5. The questions assume you know the syntax. Flawed is all I can say.

Let's go to 102 of the edition and look at some of the typical questions asked. Most of the questions are on Dynamic Service Registration and most are trivia questions. "What two init.ora file parameters must be set to support dynamic service registration?" Its a trivia question. It's a great question to throw around an oak table one late night amongst a bunch of old timer DBAs playing a game of Oracle Trivia Pursuit, but for the real administrators doing the hard yards its just not important. The real question that should be asked is, "What fundamental flaw is there in Dynamic Registration that stops most DBAs from even considering using it?" Any DBA that attempts to use it will give up very quickly when they experience the flaw. And no clues as to what that flaw is.

I: But surely certification has very honourable goals in attempting to improve the standard and skill level of Oracle Database Administrators? Isn't it also there to ensure there is consistency in skill sets?

R: I was involved with certification since its early inception and valiantly tried to steer it in a useful direction only to see its true purpose thwarted by short sighted management intent on using certification as a means of increasing revenue. I realised that the goals you mention came after the original concept as part of a marketing campaign to sell it.

When you have seen the questions asked then seen the skill sets of

administrators who pass and realise they are still not truly skilled, only then can you become a true cynic and outspoken critic of the whole process.

I: So what should happen with certification?

R: The whole certification process should be abandoned. I am sure with all the great minds Oracle has in the organisation they can come up with a process that is better. The Masters program they are starting to offer has potential, but they are pitching it at the elite. It's what you do when you complete certification. From what I see, it should be the first test in determining the skill set of a database administrator.

I: I have also been led to believe that you have very strong views on RMAN.

R: Don't get me going on RMAN. I could talk endlessly about why a site should not use RMAN. I am still wondering why Oracle is even supporting it. There are only a couple of good features in RMAN and I wish they would strip them out and make them generally available.

I: Do you try and tell Oracle your views so they can be included in the next release?

R: Well maybe I should take your advice and do it, or maybe I just represent the majority of users out there that assume that Oracle would notice the obvious and not wait to be told.

I: The marketing on RMAN given by Oracle shows it is a well used and received product.

R: Well maybe you should try and use it. As I said, there are a couple of nice features about it, one in particular is incremental backups. I though want to use this feature without being lumbered by the RMAN beast. I also want to attend a training course and do a certification exam without being inundated by RMAN trivia questions.

I: So what don't you like about RMAN?

R: I'll give you a list. The fact you need a scripting language to set it up and recover from it – as if in time of recovery you would want to write a script to recover your environment, when it should be command line driven. The fact the savesets are proprietary in their format - why can't they be saved using Zip, Tar or Compress? I don't want my backups in a format that makes me dependent on Oracle. You can only backup Oracle databases with it. What if I want to backup my SQLServer database or DB2 one as well? Which tool do I use then? And when I do find another backup tool I might as well use it to backup my whole environment as RMAN can't even backup the Oracle kernel, my application files or operating system files. RMAN can't even be used to back itself up! Its complicated to use, needs another database to use it – ideally on another box. I can write a ten line script in Unix or DOS that can do the same as RMAN without all the hassles of it. Give me incremental backups, but don't give me RMAN.

I: Redmond, as is usual you are very vocal on your opinions. Can I assume that you use a false name because you work for Oracle?

R: I didn't say that, you did.

I: So, you use a false name so you will not be recognised.

R: No comment, this interview is over.

Redmond is bitter at the world. Is it because of Openworld not being held in Australia anymore? Is it because Australia is neglected in the Oracle community. Or is it because the talents of those down under are not recognised?

Redmond says the things that most of us are thinking.

If you want to contact Redmond and either congratulate him on this article or want to know where he lives so you can frail him alive for writing such nonsense, then you are more than welcome to send an email to the publishers of this magazine. Under careful supervision these emails will be forwarded to Redmond's private email address. Suitable versed articles might appear in the next column.