

Midrange.com's David Gibbs: A Geek Who Gives

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One of these titles best describes David Gibbs, founder of the Midrange.com online resource for iSeries users and developers:

- A. Speaker
- B. Writer
- C. Geek



"Ask me a technical question, and I can answer it pretty well. Ask me to put together a presentation on that particular topic, and I am stymied," Gibbs confesses. (Scratch "A.") "I write code well, but that's about it," he notes. (Forget "B.")

That leaves... "Geek"? Well...he does share his basement with seven computers, two routers, a gigabyte switch, two DSL modems, six UPSs, the parts for two or three other processors, and his only employee — a cat named Riley. He never goes anywhere without his laptop. If you picked "C" — well, it takes one to recognize one. Give yourself a star.

Give one to David Gibbs, too, although he'll likely forward it to the subscribers on Midrange's 27 mailing lists (including MIDRANGE-L, RPG400-L, and WDSCI-L). "There are a lot of really sharp people on the lists," Gibbs says. "If we run into a problem, we have a good pool of resources to tap. Thanks to those people, we have solved a number of

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stumpers. Within an hour we can have an answer or at least a plan of attack."

How did the Geek get going? While working for a small consulting firm about 15 years ago, Gibbs got hooked on NEWS/34/38's free NewsLink service and developed "The Midrange System BBS" when NewsLink began charging subscription fees. He registered the Midrange.com domain through an inexpensive ISP account during the initial Internet boom, dumped BBS after a disastrous hardware failure, and switched to a mailing-list operation featuring a new Linux system.

Today the online service offers discussion groups, iSeries-related archives, a directory of resources, a bookstore, the opportunity to chat with other iSeries professionals, FAQs and answers about the iSeries, and a community-maintained wiki. It has evolved into a user-friendly conglomerate with 586 links to categories ranging from publications to languages to software. The main Web site (www.midrange.com) runs on an iSeries model 170.

Gibbs says the mailing lists are the most valuable service offered by Midrange.com. "They provide the ability for people to ask questions and receive useful responses in almost realtime," he notes. He's partial to the archives, too. "People can look at information posted today, yesterday, or five years ago. They search for RPG and Java and Domino information -- it runs the whole gamut." Through the use of open-source software, Midrange automatically checks messages for spam and viruses, tweaks the formats of the postings, sends them to subscribers and to the Web site, archives everything, and runs a search index every hour to update the exchanges.

Gibbs is big on "free," and that happens to be the price of a subscription to Midrange.com. "My goal is to create community resources built by the community," he says. Early on, Gibbs spent his own money to maintain the enterprise. Now the operational costs are shouldered by income from Google ads and a small Amazon.com bookstore.

Although he pays heed to feedback and makes occasional improvements, Gibbs says most users seem to like the system the way it is. "I am a strong believer in 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it,'" he says. A small group of volunteer beta testers help shake out any proposed new features.

When Gibbs does escape from his basement, he heads to his day job as a senior software engineer at MKS, a company that provides enterprise technology-management solutions. As part of his work, he interfaces native RPG programs with Java code and serves as an intermediary between iSeries

and Java development groups in Chicago and Waterloo, Ontario.

He's a diehard Chicago guy, complete with the expected accent. He earned an associate's degree in data processing in his home state and has learned the rest by just doing it, and doing it for a long time. Gibbs says he enjoys traveling, an interest aided by his marriage to a travel agent. He's a shutterbug who focuses on mountains, nature, and animals.

Reluctant to describe himself, Gibbs does admit to being a pragmatist. "I'm definitely a problem solver," he says. "I do have a sense of humor (see Midrange.com for his "Geeky Ramblings," "Rants and Raves," and "In My Humble Opinion" musings) and a fair amount of patience. I tend to be very liberal and forgiving." His dander appears only "when people cross some of the established guidelines," such as the user who grew a little bit crazy and had to be kicked off the mailing list.

Has he created a monster with Midrange.com? "Absolutely not." Is the resource a success? "Absolutely, positively, and that's because of the community that supports it," Gibbs proclaims. "We're building a house — I provided a foundation, and the participants are constructing the contents. They help because they want to help. Someone posts a question, and everybody chimes in. It brings out the best in people when you have a whole bunch of professionals trying to understand new things together. That's what makes it so valuable."

He adds, "I'm really pleased with what Midrange has become. It's my contribution to the community and to friends who are geeky like me."
