

WILL THE REAL VLDB CONFERENCE PLEASE STAND UP?

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Most of us recently received call-for-papers flyers by the Eighth International Conference on Very Large Data Bases which is sponsored by the VLDB Endowment, IFIP and Colegio de Postgraduados and is to be held in the Mexico City on September 8-10, 1982. Some of us also learned that ACM is going to sponsor another International Conference on Very Large Data Bases to be held in San Francisco a few days before the one scheduled for the Mexico City. Since annually there has been one and only one International Conference on Very Large Data Bases, i.e., the VLDB Conference, the questions and confusion that we are now facing may be the following:

- (1) Why do we suddenly have two VLDB Conferences this year?
- (2) What are the differences between these two conferences?
- (3) Are these two VLDB Conferences related to the past VLDB Conferences which were held in the United States, Brussels, Tokyo, West Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, Montreal and Nice in different years?

Since I was involved in all of the prior VLDB Conferences and also asked by Michael Stonebraker, Chairman of the ACM's SIGMOD, to address the sponsorship issue of the present VLDB Conferences, I shall attempt to give you a report regarding the issue and the answers to the aforementioned questions. Please bear with me some of the philosophical comments and background materials because these comments and materials have largely shaped the present course of events.

A Brief History of the Organizational Efforts
of the Early VLDB Conferences

In 1974 as a consultant to the Rand Corporation, I assisted Stockton Gaines of the Rand Corporation and Craig Fields of DARPA to develop a position paper on research directions in very large databases. Through an unincorporated association called the Very Large Data Bases (VLDB), I also helped them to organize two Very Large Data Bases Conferences in the same year. Both of these VLDB Conferences were by invitation only. The first one was held on the East Coast and chaired by Fields; the second one was held on the West Coast and chaired jointly by Gaines and me. Because of the interest generated by the invitees of these two conferences and subsequent inquiries from those who were not invited, Gaines and I, with the encouragement of Fields, decided to go public with the VLDB Conferences. I received some seed money via the Rand Corporation for such organizational efforts. Gaines and I were the Conference Chairmen; Peter Chen of MIT was the Program Committee Chairman and Michael Hammer of MIT and Harold Schwenk of Harvard took the additional duty for the local arrangement. Because of the late start in planning the Conference, we were not able to move the Conference to Boston.

*With my apology to the well-known TV series, What's My Line?

Instead, it was held in Framingham, Massachusetts in 1975. We asked ACM's SIGBDP, SIGIR and SIGMOD for sponsorships. In addition, the Rand Corporation was a co-sponsor of the Conference and Fields delivered the keynote speech. Both the design of the VLDB logo and the printing of the conference proceedings were instigated and completed locally by me in Columbus, Ohio. The Conference was both a financial and a technical success which was reported by Howard Morgan in CACM (18,11; p.670). Morgan also reported that "The huge success of the conference has, as feared, spawned the 2nd Annual International Conference on VLDBs, tentatively planned for Europe late next year." After the conference was over, we turned over the surplus, which amounted to \$7,500, to ACM. Meanwhile, we kept the seed money for planning the 2nd VLDB Conference as announced by Morgan. ACM did not sponsor the Second International Conference on Very Large Data Bases, because at the time ACM was not interested in conferences to be held in foreign countries. Nevertheless, the Second VLDB Conference had the sponsorship of IFIP with North-Holland as the publisher of the conference proceedings and was held in Brussels, Belgium in 1976.

The Relationship of VLDB Conferences with SIGMOD, SIGIR and ACM

The organizers of the VLDB Conferences took pain in avoiding any conflict with the SIGMOD Conferences, since the organizers considered the SIGMOD Conferences the major domestic conferences on database research and development. This explains why every VLDB Conference was placed several months behind the SIGMOD Conference. One of the main reasons that the VLDB Conferences went abroad was to avoid having two database conferences, namely, SIGMOD and VLDB Conferences, each year in the United States. We also discovered that there was no regular conference in databases outside of the United States. Consequently, there has been very little friction and considerable cooperation between the SIGMOD officers and the VLDB Conference organizers. We have had no problem in getting the SIGMOD sponsorship for the past VLDB Conferences.

On the other hand, the relationship between ACM and the VLDB Conferences is a peculiar one. Contrary to the belief of others that the VLDB Conferences needed the ACM sponsorship for ACM mailing labels and CACM ads, the real reason that we needed the ACM sponsorship was rather subtle. From the previous section we learn that the Second VLDB Conference did not have ACM sponsorship and was successful technically and financially, despite the fact that that was the first time that the VLDB Conference went abroad. The real reason we wanted ACM sponsorship for VLDB Conferences was due to ACM Transactions on Database Systems (TODS).

As you know, I founded TODS for ACM in 1975 and became its first Editor-in-Chief. Because the database area was then emerging and TODS was brand new, I was worried about not being able to build up a steady flow of papers for TODS. At the time I did not foresee that we would have a tremendous backlog in submittals. Nor did I estimate closely the difficulties in processing conference papers for TODS publication. What I set out to do then was to use the 'best' papers of SIGMOD, SIGIR and VLDB Conferences as the backbone for TODS publication. Consequently, in the first five years since I made the arrangement with SIG Conferences and VLDB Conferences, TODS accepted 31 best papers from 1 SIGIR Conference and 4 SIGMOD Conferences and 4 VLDB Conferences. However, despite the fact we accepted 6 papers from the first VLDB

Conference for TODS, we received no papers from the Second VLDB Conference. This is because the copyright of the conference proceedings was in the hands of North-Holland. I was alarmed because I did not want to deplete the supply of best papers from TODS. It was for this reason and this reason alone that I urged all of the subsequent VLDB Conference organizers to seek the ACM sponsorship. By the time the Sixth VLDB Conference took place, the necessity of ACM being the sponsor of the VLDB Conference for the sake of TODS was over. This was because unlike CACM where special issues devoted to conference papers can complete the CACM refereeing/revision cycle before the proceedings deadlines, TODS had difficulty in meeting such constraints. For example, for the May SIGMOD Conference, the March issue of TODS would be too early and the June issue would be too late. Furthermore, since 1976, VLDB Conferences have been held abroad. Both SIGMOD and SIGIR went abroad once. It was difficult, if not impossible, to overcome the problem of logistics, since TODS had no say in selecting the time and place of these conferences. Furthermore, TODS had, by then, a long backlog of submittals. TODS has since discontinued the special arrangement with the SIGs' and VLDB Conferences. VLDB Conference organizers, nevertheless, in recent years continued to ask ACM for sponsorship as a matter of tradition rather than as a necessity for TODS.

The VLDB Endowment and Its Creation

From the fourth one on, VLDB Conferences were outlined by a committee with the consent of Gaines and me and with our reserving our rights to the VLDB Conferences and names and the logo which we associate with them. Known as the Planning Committee for VLDB Conferences, it consists of nine members: the current Chairmen of ACM's SIGBDP, SIGIR and SIGMOD, the Chairman of IEEE Computer Society's Technical Committee on Database Engineering, the U.S. Conference and Program Committee Chairmen of the last VLDB Conference, the founders of the VLDB Conferences (namely, Gaines and I) and the Secretary. Guidelines for the outline and planning of VLDB Conferences were formulated and written. The Planning Committee has been chaired by me and was responsible for selecting key officers and conference site of each recent VLDB Conference. However, the members of the Planning Committee were not involved in the day-to-day organizational effort of a VLDB Conference, unless they became the key organizers of the VLDB Conference. For example, I have yet to become a conference or program committee chairman of a VLDB Conference, except for the first one. The idea of having a Planning Committee of nine members from the SIGs, TC and the previous organizers is to allow the instigation of the future VLDB Conferences to be in the hands of database professionals who have worked nicely and voluntarily in the past without frictions.

The Planning Committee did not have any difficulty with ACM during the period when Smith Dorsey was the Chairman of ACM's Committee on Conferences and Symposia. Dorsey assisted the 3-rd and the 4-th VLDB Conferences, and secured for them the ACM sponsorship. He also made no objection to the VLDB Conference organizers when they utilized the seed money that I set aside from the first VLDB Conference. Such amiable relationship between the Planning Committee and ACM continued for the 5-th VLDB Conference during Seymour Wolfson's first year as the Chairman of ACM's Committee on Conferences and Symposia. However, this relationship was interrupted when the Planning Committee was instigating the Sixth VLDB Conference to be held in Montreal, Canada in 1980. In recognition of the founders' role in the Sixth VLDB Conference, the Conference organizers listed the VLDB Foundation as a co-sponsor of the 6-th VLDB Conference in the application for ACM sponsorship. ACM refused to allow the VLDB Foundation to be

a co-sponsor because the Foundation was considered by ACM to be an ad hoc, non-legal organization. Due to this objection from ACM, the seed money advanced to the 6-th VLDB Conference by the founders was also returned by conference organizers. There was considerable unhappiness regarding this incidence. William Armstrong and his organizers were unhappy because they needed some money to get things started. The usual loans from the sponsoring societies such as ACM would not come forth unless the application for the sponsorship had been approved. That would take months. Armstrong and his organizers were also unhappy because they did not anticipate such friction between the Planning Committee and ACM, making any future dialogue with the Planning Committee awkward. I was unhappy because the Planning Committee outlined the Sixth VLDB Conference and invited Armstrong and his colleagues to organize the Conference, only to be deprived from having anything further to do with the Conference. It was at this time we were suggested, particularly by our Canadian colleagues, that we should formalize our efforts and set up a foundation for the seed money to promote VLDB Conferences and activities.

A year later the VLDB Endowment was formed under the laws of the State of Ohio and qualified it pursuant to the Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)(3), as a not-for-profit organization for the promotion of international exchange on database research and development. I became the President and Gaines the Vice President of the VLDB Endowment. We also decided to invite all the previous VLDB Conference and Program Committee Chairmen to become Trustees. So far, 15 of them have become members of the Board of Trustees.

The Intended Sponsors of the Eighth VLDB Conference

The Planning Committee approved Vincent Lum's proposal to have the Eighth International Conference on Very Large Data Bases in Mexico City from September 8-10, 1982. Lum, like the VLDB Conference Chairmen before him, filed an application for sponsorship to ACM and IEEE Computer Society. The main difference between his application and the previous applications was that the VLDB Endowment will also be a co-sponsor of the Conference. Both ACM and the Computer Society reacted strongly. They did not want the VLDB Endowment as a co-sponsor. In the interest of the Eighth VLDB Conference and with the consultation with the VLDB Endowment's trustees, I proposed to ACM and Computer Society that the VLDB Endowment would not become the co-sponsor of the Eighth VLDB Conference, should ACM and Computer Society be willing to discuss with me the VLDB Endowment's role in the future VLDB Conferences. In other words, I tried to avoid confrontations with either ACM or Computer Society at the expenses of the Mexico VLDB Conference. This would also allow us to have more time to work out an amiable solution towards the 9-th, 10-th and all future VLDB Conferences. Both ACM and Computer Society agreed with my proposal in the late October of the last year. I met ACM's Executive Committee members, namely, Peter Denning, Michael Harrison and Kathy Wagner and the ACM's Executive Director, Sidney Weinstein on November 10 in Denning's hotel suite. Our discussions lasted for about 40 minutes. I thought it was a good discussion with me suggesting three different roles that the VLDB Endowment could play in the future VLDB Conferences. Wagner suggested one and Weinstein suggested another. I was particularly happy with Weinstein's proposal where future VLDB Conferences would be run by an independent organization represented by ACM, Computer Society and VLDB Endowment, very much like NCCs are run by the NCC Board. Since Denning and Harrison had another meeting to go to, we terminated the meeting. Nevertheless, I felt good, despite the fact that no conclusion was made regarding the VLDB Endowment's role in the future VLDB Conferences. Two days later at ACM Council

Meeting which I attended as a Council Member, Denning reported a number of action items approved by ACM's Executive Committee the day before. Below, I quote action items #15 and #16 for your reference.

"15 - By vote of 2 for, 1 abstention, with the concurrence of the Treasurer and the Past President, approved the Technical Meeting Request Form for 1982 VLDB Conference subject to the inclusion of Harry Hayman (IEEECS) as Treasurer."

"16 - Unanimously passed a motion stating that it does not, at this time, see any basis for cooperation with the VLDB Endowment in running the VLDB Conferences."

I was surprised by their actions. I could only surmise that by their clever action items and my naive notion of fair play ACM would be able to become the sponsor of the Eighth VLDB Conference and forgo any discussion with the VLDB Endowment. I was also disappointed. This took place on November 12, 1981.

A New Sponsor For the Eighth VLDB Conference

As it turned out, the event took a sharp turn after the action items of the ACM's Executive Committee had been introduced to the ACM Council. Lum found the condition, Hayman of Washington, D.C. as the treasurer of the 8-th VLDB Conference, unacceptable. Hayman is also an Executive Secretary of the Computer Society. Since most of the key organizers are on the West Coast and in Mexico it would be inconvenient, to say the least, to have a treasurer on the East Coast. Furthermore, Lum had already announced the conference treasurer, who happened to be his secretary at IBM Research Lab. Subsequently, Lum withdrew his application for sponsorship from both ACM and Computer Society. Because the ACM's Executive Committee had introduced action item #16, I no longer felt that the VLDB Endowment should forgo the sponsorship of the VLDB Conference. This was how the VLDB Endowment was able to become an official sponsor of the Eighth VLDB Conference which will be held in Mexico City from September 8 through 10.

Another VLDB Conference

ACM's Executive Committee was determined to steal the show from the Mexico VLDB Conference by starting another VLDB Conference in San Francisco a few days before the Mexico one. However, it had some difficulty in getting well-known database professionals to chair the conference. Many database professionals were approached without success. Furthermore, SIGMOD has decided not to endorse the San Francisco VLDB Conference. Nevertheless, ACM's Executive Committee has solicited the ACM's Washington, D.C. Chapter to organize the Conference.

On February 10, Denning asked the ACM Council to discuss the VLDB Endowment and Conference matter. He made a brief introduction and asked me to say a few words and to answer some questions. He also asked me to leave the meeting so that the rest of the Council could go into executive session on the VLDB matters. However, I was not prepared for such discussion. First, there was no backup material prepared for this item of discussion. Second, I was

told by the VLDB Endowment attorney earlier that the ACM attorney had informed him that I should not attend the ACM Council meeting because ACM Council may consider my fiduciary duty as a Council Member in conflict with my activities in the VLDB Endowment, and ask for my resignation from the ACM Council or failing to obtain that, attempt to impeach me. Thus, prior to the Council Meeting I had the impression that the ACM's Executive Committee might instigate some impeachment procedures against me. The executive session lasted almost three hours. Denning told me afterwards that it was the Council's wishes that shortly another VLDB Conference is to be organized and sponsored by ACM.

Principles and Practices

There are principles which set ACM and VLDB Endowment apart on VLDB Conference matters. There are, however, practices which tend to bridge the rift between ACM and VLDB Endowment on the same matters. Let me first indicate the principles then report to you about some of the practices. The principles are that the founders of the VLDB Endowment and the VLDB Conferences do not think that ACM sponsorship of some of the VLDB Conferences entitles the ACM to have the proprietary rights to the VLDB Conference name and logo. The founders of the VLDB Endowment and Conferences would like to have the sponsorship of the ACM and Computer Society, along with sponsorship of the VLDB Endowment, for all future VLDB Conferences. We think this is for the best interest of the database community. We also think that by having VLDB Endowment as a co-sponsor of the future VLDB Conferences, ACM and Computer Society will render their proper recognition of the VLDB Conference veterans in promoting and organizing the past VLDB Conferences. These recognitions were long overdue.

In practice, I was trying to reach an accommodation with ACM and Computer Society. A week before the last ACM Council Meeting, Stonebraker attempted to provide an accommodation. I agreed with Stonebraker's proposal. The proposal consists of the following items:

- (1) All future VLDB Conferences will have ACM and Computer Society as sponsors. VLDB Endowment will not be a sponsor. However, the role of VLDB Endowment in instigating and organizing the VLDB Conferences will be acknowledged in all call-for-papers flyers and program announcements of the VLDB Conferences.
- (2) The VLDB Endowment will give up the copyrights to and the sale of the VLDB conference proceedings.
- (3) The instigation and planning of all the future VLDB Conferences will be in the hands of the Planning Committee.
- (4) The Planning Committee is composed of the same membership as I reported earlier with 3 SIG Chairmen, 1 TC Chairman, 2 last U.S. VLDB Conference and Program Committee Chairmen and 3 VLDB Endowment representatives, consisting of the President, Vice President and Secretary of the Endowment, with the President and Secretary of the Endowment as the Chairman and Secretary of the Planning Committee, respectively.

- (5) Should ACM or Computer Society find me unacceptable as the Chairman of the Planning Committee, I would then resign from the Presidency of the VLDB Endowment. Whoever should replace me as the President of the Endowment could then chair the Planning Committee.

Stonebraker reported to me on February 8, two days before the ACM Council Meeting, that there were new complications about the proposal. First, ACM would like to reserve the right to appoint representatives to the Planning Committee other than the SIG Chairmen. Second, ACM would not want the VLDB logo to be shared by the VLDB Endowment and the VLDB Conference. Nor would ACM like to have a new VLDB Conference logo. By then it was late, since most of the ACM officers were converging onto Indianapolis for the ACM Council Meetings. I was also having some second thoughts because I may not be able to have the above 5 points accepted by the Board of Trustees of the VLDB Endowment. Meanwhile, Stonebraker asked me to write a "brief" note on this matter in SIGMOD Record.

What Should We Do?

The impasse between ACM and the VLDB Endowment cannot be overcome by the principals involved, since they have been with this problem for some time and have hardened their positions. As a reader and a member of the database community, you may have an answer to the above question. Please write to ACM's Executive Committee, Stonebraker, or me about your thoughts. At this writing, Lum is on travel in Asia and Gaines is on travel in Europe. Because of the short lead time, I was not able to circulate this report among all of the individuals whose names that I mention herein. I must thank Stonebraker for inviting me to write this report. If my perception is in error, please excuse me. I mean, by this report, to explain efforts of the VLDB Endowment to the database community rather than to confront others.