

The NT Insider™

The only publication dedicated entirely to
Windows system software development

Peter Pontificates: Asking Questions

When it comes time for me to write my column for each issue of *The NT Insider*, I begin to think about topics that I might want to discuss. Sometimes it's something that's going-on with Windows, sometimes it's something happening in my life, and other times it's things that unduly annoy me. It's at times like these that I discover how very many pet peeves I have: GPS navigation systems that don't know about traffic or road conditions, having to mark an IRP pending *and* return STATUS_PENDING, people that write code without comments... there are many. What particularly makes these things vexing to me is that I can never understand why these things don't annoy everyone on the planet, and therefore why they haven't already just been "fixed."

My cause du jour is engineers who don't properly ask questions in forums. I just can't understand how anybody with sufficient intelligence to write 6 sequential lines of working code can fail to understand how to properly ask a question on a public mailing list or forum.

Now, I *get* that once in a while we all screw up. Sometimes we're too tired to write cogently, so deeply immersed in a problem that we don't explain ourselves clearly, or buried so deep within code and the solution to a problem that the question we post resembles the ramblings of a lunatic. So, no. I'm not talking about those times.

And I don't want to rant today about the posts that people write that look like text messages (" r u able to mak device obj? tu") or posts where the poster thinks they can be like E. E. Cummings and use no upper case letters because they're special or live in West Virginia. Both of these things drive me insane. But they're not the cause of my current vexation.

Today, I'm reserving all my annoyance and ire for engineers who ask how to solve problems they're encountering with a solution that they've latched on to, instead of asking for help with their original, root, underlying problem.

Do you ever read the NTDEV list? If not, you really should check it out (go to <http://www.osronline.com> and click the "ListServer / Forums" link). NTDEV is a list where developers from all over the world ask and answer questions about Windows driver development. There is also a forum specifically for file systems developers (NTFSD) and one for questions related to the kernel debugger (WinDbg). But, I digress. If you haven't done so yet, go check out NTDEV -- you can access the list using the web-based forum interface from OSR Online. Go ahead, check out a few questions right now. I'll wait.

So, when you checked, either it was a particularly good day or you saw at least of couple of questions that were equivalent in form to:

"Please help me. The wings keep falling off my pig. Is it wrong to use super glue to attach the wings?"

We almost never actually get posts about pigs and wings on NTDEV. Maybe the post is about filtering PDOs or getting the path of a process image. But the question suffers from the same problem and has the same form: It asks for help implementing what the questioner presumes is a solution to some problem, instead of asking for help in solving the actual underlying issue. And, often, as in the case of gluing wings to a pig, the right answer probably isn't changing the type of glue. Rather the right answer is not trying to glue wings to the pig in the first place.

As day follows night, just like in any forum, the above query will be inevitably followed by posts of the following form:

"I've never done it, but I've heard that epoxy works great for this."

"Why pig? Pigs don't normally have wings, but you can put wings on aardvark. I have done this with no trouble."

"This is Microsoft's fault. The fact that you need glue to attach wings to a pig is clearly the result of a bad design decision in Windows. If you were using Linux, you wouldn't have any trouble putting wings on your pig."

"I think pigs are dirty animals and they're not kosher."

"Contact me off line if you're interested in paying me to glue on those wings the right way."

"You can't."

Then, finally, somebody tries to bring some sanity to the mess:

"Why are you trying to glue wings on your pig? Please tell us what problem you're trying to solve by gluing wings on a pig, and maybe we can help."

The original poster of the question (OP) usually eventually answers:

"Thanks. I'll try the epoxy."

Then later, the OP again:

"I tried the epoxy and it didn't work. Maybe I didn't mix it in the right proportions. I used 1:1, and it took a long time to harden."

And, of course, this is followed by about a dozen replies discussing the different types of epoxy, mixing ratios, advice to be sure to mix it thoroughly, etc.

What's so freakin' sad about all this is that the OP never gets to fix his problem, and ultimately decides that (a) NTDEV is not helpful, (b) It is impossible to write drivers for Windows.

I kid you not: We see this pattern repeated every week on NTDEV. Sometimes multiple times in one week. It makes me positively nuts.

Now, before you get all up in arms and tell me that I don't know what it's like to be a noob... slow down. I totally *get* that when you don't have a lot of experience in a particular area, it might be difficult for you to separate what's a reasonable solution to a root problem from what's a stupid solution. Believe it or not, I actually *do* things other than write device drivers and I totally get what it's like to be a dumb-ass ignorant as dirt noob at something.

Being a noob excuses stupidity. In fact, being a noob totally *means* asking stupid questions. However, being a noob does not excuse lack of engineering discipline. As an engineer, I simply cannot understand how a fellow engineer can ask a question without at least *attempting* to *put their question in its proper context*.

What do I mean? Well, the question I'd expect from an engineer is something like the following:

"I live on a farm, and my nearest neighbor is 3 miles down the road. My pickup truck broke down, and I want to go to my neighbor's house to play Xbox, get wasted, and ogle his sister. I don't want to walk, so I figured I'd try to glue some wings on my pig, sit on the pig's back, and fly over."

I tried it, and I glued the wings on using super glue. The problem I'm having is that the wings keep falling off the pig.

Is super glue the wrong glue to use? Any help would be appreciated."

In this question, the noob still asks their noob-like question about wings and super glue, but potential readers and helpers understand what the OP is trying to accomplish. This gives anyone reading the question a glimpse into the overall issue.

So, while we'd almost certainly get a long string of replies about Xbox, pigs, pickup trucks, sisters, and the like to the above question, there will almost certainly be *some* semi-useful answers. And *somebody* would likely post *something* that might ultimately be helpful, such as:

"Dude! A winged pig is probably not going to work for you in terms of transportation, even for just 3 miles. Have you considered trying to fix that pickup truck? Asking your neighbor to pick you up? There have got to be other options, but I'm telling you: Trying to glue wings on your pig and fly it over to your neighbor's just won't work.

Maybe you should tell us what happened to the truck, so we can decide if *that* can be fixed?"

Not terribly promising, but at least now somebody's discussing the actual issue with the OP. The root problem that needs to be solved here is how the OP gets to his neighbor's house, not how to put wings on his pig. There's a wider universe of potential answers to the root problem, than there are to the solution the OP latched onto.

By asking the *right* question, the question about how to solve the root problem, there's at least a prayer of a chance that the collective wisdom of the engineers who read NTDEV can come up with some sort of reasonable answer. But there's no way to help if the question posed doesn't provide the necessary information in the first place.

Peter Pontificates is a regular opinion column by OSR consulting partner, Peter Viscarola. Peter doesn't care if you agree or disagree, but you do have the opportunity to see your comments, or a rebuttal in a future issue. Send your own comments, rants, or distortions of fact to: PeterPont@osr.com.