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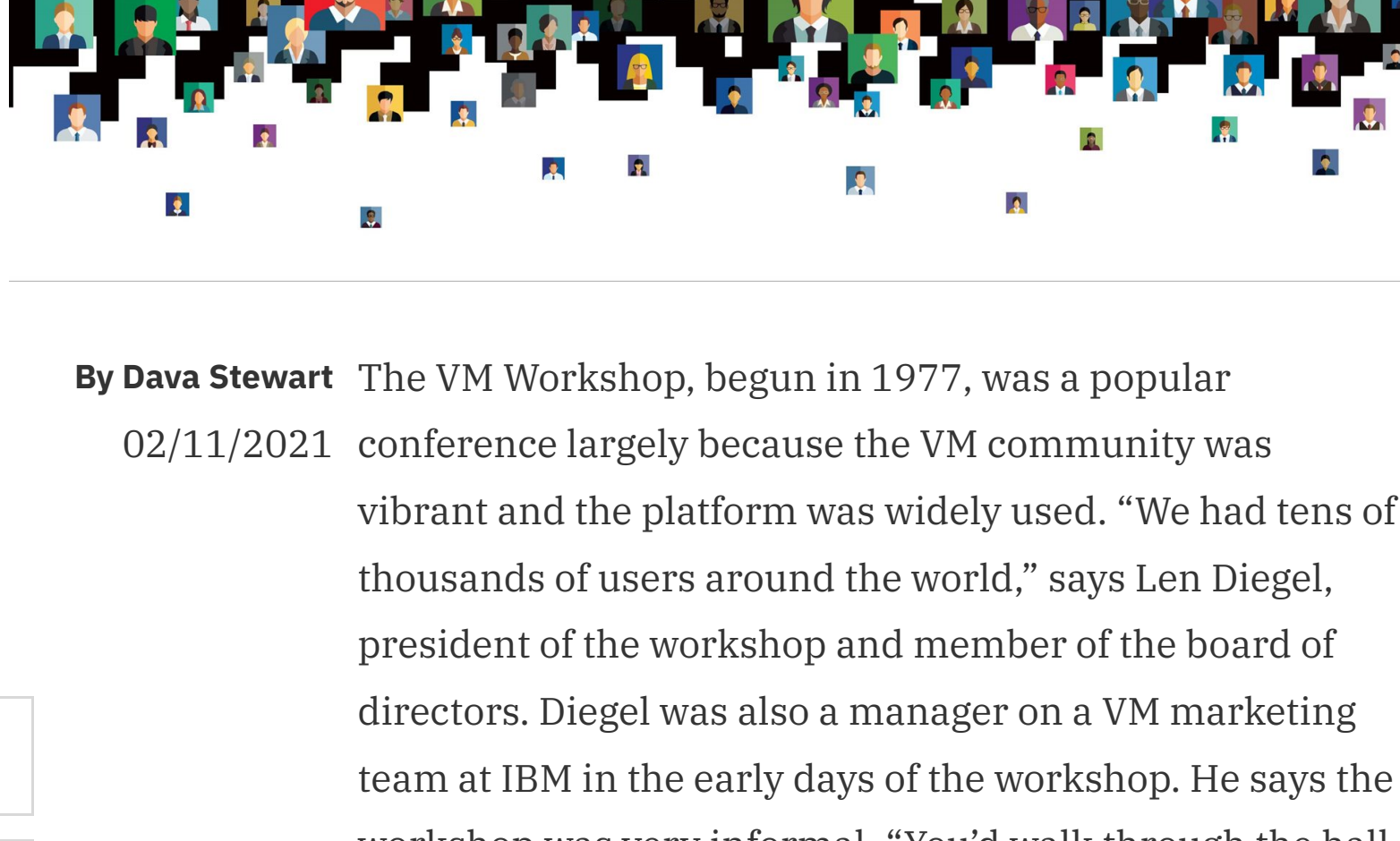
The History and Evolution of the VM Workshop

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VM Workshop Founders Len Diegel, Len Santalucia and Barton Robinson reflect on the history of the conference, the importance of financial accessibility and the pivot to virtual

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By **Dava Stewart**

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The VM Workshop, begun in 1977, was a popular conference largely because the VM community was vibrant and the platform was widely used. “We had tens of thousands of users around the world,” says Len Diegel, president of the workshop and member of the board of directors. Diegel was also a manager on a VM marketing team at IBM in the early days of the workshop. He says the workshop was very informal. “You’d walk through the hall and people would be sitting on the floor of some classroom, talking. It was a chance for folks on the platform to share ideas, bring up issues and pass those issues on to IBM for resolution,” he says.

The conference was always held on a college campus, which helped foster the informal atmosphere and kept costs low. “VM Workshop was an option where there was a place to go that didn’t cost a lot, and sometimes attendees got to give presentations, and they had the chance to chat with people who had the same problems and issues,” says Diegel.

By the late 1990s the times and technology were changing. Fewer people were attending the workshop and companies were moving from the mainframe. The once-popular conference languished. No VM Workshops were held between 1999 and 2010.

Then in 2010, Diegel, and his long-time friend Barton Robinson were drinking wine at a PF Chang’s in San Jose, talking about the conference, and how much they missed it. Diegel and Robinson had been co-workers at IBM, though by this time they had both moved on to different positions. Robinson started a company called Velocity Software, where he currently serves as CTO, and Diegel went on to a vice president position at Cornerstone Systems, then later to Velocity. He’s currently a consultant.

The two friends lamented the high cost and more constrained atmosphere of modern conferences. Between the fee to attend and the cost of travel and lodging, often in an expensive city, conferences are out of reach of many people. “We should do something like the VM Workshop,” Robinson said, according to Diegel’s recollection of that conversation in 2010.

Robinson was the main funding source for the 2011 VM Workshop. He says that the entire conference cost less than presenting at a larger, more well-known industry conference would have.

Although the description is funny, the fact is hosting the workshop on college campuses keeps the price tag very low. The early bird price is just \$100 for most attendees. It’s even lower for students and faculty members. Attendees get a polo shirt, meals and lodging in addition to all of the educational value of the workshop.

One of the reasons for the low cost is another difference: the VM Workshop is a non-profit. “It’s only \$100 per person,” says Len Santalucia, CTO at Vicom Infinity and sponsoring member of the board of directors for the VM Workshop. “It’s the way it’s designed. All the money comes in from the sponsors and it’s all put back in for food and the venue and it covers everything. We start with \$0 and end with \$0 pretty much every time.”

Robinson says that removing the profit motive means that the content is what attendees need rather than what a company seeking a profit wants them to hear. “The information that the customers are getting is going to be more open and more thorough than at most other conferences,” says Robinson.

The VM Workshop does have sponsors, but the number of sponsors allowed to present each year is limited. Additionally, the presentations must be approved by the board of directors, who work to make sure that the information benefits the attendees. “Customers, people from IBM, and other vendors have a nice, inexpensive way to get in front of audiences like this that would normally cost them a lot more,” says Santalucia. “Other conferences that try to do the same thing are extremely more expensive, and they’re not non-profit,” he says.

Santalucia says that being a board member means he gets to help shape the message and agenda of the workshop. Santalucia is a sponsoring member, which means his company is a sponsor of the workshop in addition to his serving on the board. He says one of the reasons he enjoys serving on the board is because he can help make sure “it’s kept in check so that it’s not too vendor-favored.” Along with shaping the direction of the workshop, Santalucia feels like serving on the board is an important way to give back to the community. “It’s the right thing, being a board member, both personally, for business reasons, technical reasons and just good human reasons,” he says.

Both Diegel and Santalucia agree the VM Workshop is better in person, for a variety of reasons. Whether attendees are students, people early in their careers or they have been attending the workshop since the early days, networking is one of the most important benefits of the conference. People from widely varying industries have the chance to meet up, discuss things, and either catch up or get to know one another. “You lose all of that interaction with Webex,” says Diegel.

Looking Forward

For now, all of the decisions about in-person or virtual workshops in the future are up in the air. The 2021 VM Workshop is currently scheduled to take place at Ohio State University in June, but no one is sure if the pandemic will be controlled enough for in-person conferences to resume. Whatever happens, Robinson thinks the VM Workshop will continue. “As long as the platform is being maintained by IBM I think this conference will exist. The format is great, it’s easy, it’s cost effective, word has gotten out, especially with virtual.”

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About the author Dava Stewart is a writer interested in the intersection of healthcare and technology based in Chattanooga, Tennessee. [See more](#) by Dava Stewart

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