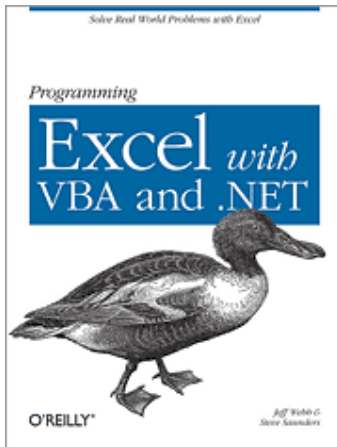


Programming Excel with VBA & .NET



Author: Jeff Webb & Steve Saunders
Author URL: <http://excelworkshop.com>

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Review: Adelaide .NET User Group
Chris Tsilomanis

This book primarily deals with the latest version of Excel (excel 2003) and the features new to this version, despite the lack of reference to this fact on the cover of the book. However, much of the basics in the book apply back as far as excel 2000. Topics that vary between versions are clearly referenced as to their applicability across versions. .NET developers should target excel 2003 as a starting version.

Jeff shares considerable excel experience with the reader. He worked at Microsoft when Visual Basic was added to excel. He obviously knows many nuts and bolts features of excel that elude even experienced excel gurus and MVP's.

There are so many books about Excel (I have a number in my library), some of which deal with the latest version and wondered how an author could fill over a thousand pages in yet another book without losing a reader's attention. Well, Jeff Webb (who is the principal author) has managed to fill those pages with informative facts, hints and examples. Credit for chapters 9 and 12 go to Steve Saunders.

Whenever I come across a new book, I first read the back cover to get a feel of what one can expect to find in the book. If what I read arouses my interest I browse through the table of contents and then the preface. If I manage to get through these two sections, I am invariably hooked and get the book, as was the case with this book

The author makes the statement that this book is for advanced users, but beginners should not despair because if one works through the book from beginning much can be learned. Experienced developers need only delve into those topics of interest. Because Excel has so much functionality, I have yet to come across anyone who uses most of this functionality. However, some of the chapters on advanced topics such as lists, XML and Part III (extending excel) may be fairly hard going for a novice. I was most surprised to find that the sections covering excel basics (which I was tempted to skip because I thought I knew all there was to know) taught me new and different ways of dealing with the topic. The following thoughts kept running through my mind as I read even the basics - "is that how that is done", "that is a

better way of addressing that issue”, “why didn’t I try this alternative approach”, “wow! I didn’t think you could do that”. “What an easier way to deal with that code”, “I didn’t know you could do that”. I now find myself reading sections of the book again to refresh those topics I may not deal with regularly. Whenever I read such a book and pick up tips I kid myself that I will remember most of those tips, but alas I don’t. That’s why this book is certainly ideal as a reference manual because of the ease at which one can track down any subject from the comprehensive index but also the structured presentation of the Table of Contents.

The code in the book targets VBA (visual basic for applications) and .NET for the features in the latest version of excel (excel 2003 at time of print), Sample code for VBA and .NET (written as visual studio .NET projects) is provided online (see author’s URL at top of this review). The samples are organised by chapter. Each chapter use one main workbook as a starting point to provide instructions and navigation.

This book is made up of four parts:

1. Learning VBA

- Becoming an Excel Programmer
- Knowing the Basics
- Tasks in Visual Basic
- Using Excel Objects
- Creating your own Object
- Writing Code for Use by Others

2. Excel Objects

- Controlling Excel
- Opening, Saving and Sharing Workbooks
- Working with Worksheets and Ranges
- Linking and Embedding
- Printing and Publishing
- Loading and Manipulating Data
- Analysing Data with Pivot Tables
- Sharing Data using Lists
- Working with XML
- Charting
- Formatting Charts
- Drawing Graphics
- Adding Menus and toolbars
- Building Dialog boxes
- Sending and Receiving Workbooks

3. Extending Excel

- Building Add-ins
- Integrating DLLs and COM
- Getting Data from the Web
- Programming Excel with .NET
- Exploring Security in Depth

4. Appendices

- References Tables
- Version compatibility

Jeff has a novel approach by organising the chapters by programming task. He covers the most common tasks for each subject within a chapter. Subjects usually correspond to one or more Excel objects. It is refreshing to see important reference information relating to the objects included within the chapter rather than having it dealt with in a separate reference section at the back of the book. Nevertheless, there is a comprehensive index, which takes the reader to each specific segment of the book where the topic can be found.

One would think that with over a thousand pages the author would have covered every aspect of excel. But not so, Jeff is conscious not to duplicate resources available in the online help and has many cross references to other resources in the book as well as hyperlinks to resources in the sample workbooks. Most of these extra resources deal with much more specific issues related to the topic. There are also links to toolkits and other software you may need to make life easier in developing applications in VBA or .NET

Jeff makes mention of two valuable online resources (in addition to his URL and that of this book – see top of this review), these are <http://www.microsoft.com/msdn> and <http://groups.google.com/groups>. The preface has a narrative section which gives a brief overview of each chapter, although much of the chapter contents are adequately described in the table of contents. At the end of each chapter there is a summary of that chapter's contents. For those who prefer electronic versions of publications, O'Reilly offer a solution that is better than e-books called "safari". See the features at <http://safari.oreilly.com>

Part one, whilst primarily dealing with excel, covers programming concepts in any Microsoft Office Applications that expose object to Visual Basic

Part two is the biggest section of the book as it goes into considerable detail on the various objects in excel

Part three is certainly for advanced users and also makes the reader aware of the rich functionality delivered in excel 2003

The reader will quickly understand that programming with excel is mainly combining existing excel features to automate processes so that they are much easier and more reliable. This automation reaches a new plateau with the rich functionality that is delivered in excel 2003 such as getting data from the web with web queries and web services.

The approach Jeff takes with this book is to learn by doing. As he walks through the topics (step by step), the book is illustrated with figures that are primarily screen prints of actual data in worksheets or windows that a user is presented with in real life when doing the exercises or examples. He also shows the code in the book (even though the full code is available online) where it is required to make it much clearer to the reader to understand the points being made.

What is most refreshing (must remember to adopt his good practice) are the comments/notations within the code to describe just what each step does. I assume that Jeff enters these notations as he writes the code and not after the event. I can recall how frustrating it is to have code with not many comments/notations only to find that trying to add comments at a later date wastes so much time (it invariably takes twice as long to do it after the event because you need to walk through the code to see what it is doing)

Jeff also uses graphic icons to designate a note for the reader, one that is an important aside to the nearby text and another that designates a warning relating to nearby text. The only criticism I have is that one of the icons was used in the preface before an explanation was given as to the purpose of the icons.

Jeff's web site appears to use some of the advanced topics in his book, I wish he gave a brief overview of just what features were used in his web site. It certainly would have saved me thinking, "how did he do that".

I would rate this book 4 out of 5