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Why Conference on the Web?

As the Internet becomes a common part of daily life, long-held patterns of communication are changing. Whereas meetings or telephone conferences held the monopoly of information distribution points and brainstorming centers, computer software applications reached over the Internet or intranets now offer forums for information sharing and collaboration. In place of meeting minutes or messy printouts from whiteboards, online communication offers a well-organized, searchable record of discussion and announcements. No wonder corporations, educational institutions, and community groups are turning to online conferencing and chat systems such as WebBoard.

Electronic communication addresses another increasingly common phenomenon—those working together don't necessarily do so in the same building, or even the same country. Geographic distance is no longer a barrier to interaction. Maintaining a communication center that is always open and always ready to hear from the community that uses it means that time differences don't get in the way. Your colleague in England wakes up with a bright idea and posts a message online while it's still fresh. Later, over coffee in California, you can learn all about it—and also already see some comments from team members in Chicago.

For groups of people working together, perhaps as product development teams or professors and students, conferencing systems mean no more time wasted (and nerves frayed) by endlessly repeating information or answering the same questions. An exchange initiated by one member is seen by the others, who then don't

need to ask that question. Or instead of calling up your project manager to say you've lost the schedule and could she please send another one, you can go online and get it yourself.

Conferencing systems are no longer in their infancy. Mature products such as WebBoard, evolving within the "information age," work reliably and intuitively. WebBoard's numerous features—which may allow you to do something you don't even know you want—enhance the basic posting, organized storage, and easy retrieval of information without cluttering the interface. These features have developed not only in response to user requests but as innovations of electronic communication visionaries.

WebBoard 5 reflects the expanding use of electronic communication by large corporations and institutions. In addition to ever enhanced performance and reliability, WebBoard 5 includes a new Active Server Pages (ASP) interface that allows you to integrate components into your site. WebBoard 5 now has full-featured, fully-integrated chat using ChatSpace's chat server technology.

Other new features will delight your end users—from being able to receive email alerts when topics they are watching have responses to displaying images in messages. Usability is also improved for users who participate by email: they can now download file attachments from WebBoard via a link included in the email message. Conferences now have home pages that you can customize to provide more information for your users.

This book is dedicated to showing you how to build a dynamic, compelling web conferencing and chat system using WebBoard. This first chapter provides an overview of WebBoard and some ideas for using it. Later sections in this chapter give you the full list of new features. The rest of this book tells you how to install, manage, customize, and use WebBoard.

How Can I Use WebBoard?

WebBoard is a tool for fostering communication, globally or locally, among people with common interests, whether they be professional, civic, or social. WebBoard is extremely flexible and convenient to use and manage. You can use it anywhere, any time, through a browser, email program, or news reader. All your users need is access to the Internet or an intranet. As the administrator, you can manage WebBoard through your browser, making remote administration easy.

Think of WebBoard as a tool for increasing communication, disseminating information, and building community. You may decide to use WebBoard to promote discussion for developing a product, hold virtual office hours, or provide information and support to your customers. An important thing to note about using WebBoard for public boards is that it is designed to bring people to your site and *keep* them there, unlike many web pages that have links sending users out to *other*

sites on the Web. If your boards are well designed and maintained, they can become an essential destination for a variety of people.

This section gives you some standard ideas as well as some you might not have thought of for using WebBoard. Whenever group participation and collaboration are appropriate, WebBoard offers a well-organized framework for managing the discussion and users. As you become more familiar with WebBoard and your online community, you can tailor these ideas accordingly. And, you can always visit WebBoard Central (<http://www.webboard.com/>) for more ideas—and to share your own WebBoard use.

Project collaboration

As businesses have become more flexible in reacting to changing market-places and the increasing pace of technological advancements, much has been said and written about the virtual corporation. Virtual corporations or virtual teams rely heavily on electronic communication, such as email, file transfers, voicemail, pagers, and fax service, to share and track the issues their projects face.

WebBoard's ability to store information by topic and attach files, combined with its fast search engine, makes it an excellent choice for offsite groups collaborating on the same project. Unless you're working on an internal network, you probably want to make project conferences private, limited to the project team members.

For example, your organization sets up a board for the product you're bringing to market, with several conferences: one for marketing information, one for technical discussion, one for production, and others as required. During the course of several months, each team uses the conferences that concern it the most, but also has access to the discussions the other groups are having about the product.

For faster and more universal participation, team members may subscribe to the conferences' mailing lists. Sometimes busy team members find it easier to read and respond to email than to visit the WebBoard site. Others may participate via their news reader.

At the end of the process, your new product goes to market and is a success. Furthermore, your team's use of WebBoard is lauded as a model for the corporation's future information management.

Web conference hosting/ISPs

WebBoard makes it easy for you to host boards for others. Each board is unique, with its own set of conferences, messages, and users. It can also have its own managers and conference moderators. And every board can have its own look and feel with WebBoard's custom schemes. You may want to run separate boards for different departments or locations in your company. If

you're a web consultant or host web pages for others, you can set up boards for your business clients who want conferences to discuss their products and services. Each client's board can have its own pages with the client's own custom look. With WebBoard's Open Scripting, you can customize a board's functionality as well as its appearance, for example, providing a custom authentication scheme for a client that requires extra-tight security.

Community building

People with a common interest benefit from sharing ideas, discussing problems, and negotiating solutions. Interests can range from programmers working with the Perl language to residents of a large town. A town board, for example, might be hosted by the community center or a home-owners association. There, residents share ideas and thoughts about local schools, parks, and what they would like to see in their community. Action committees emerge as needs are clarified.

Teaching tool at educational institution

WebBoard permits courses to have private asynchronous discussions—so participants can read and post messages at whatever hour of the day they're most productive (for students, this is often after midnight!). At a college where discussion is central to the learning process, WebBoard encourages all students to have a voice, even those who shy away from public speaking. Moreover, because it's easy to use, students can begin participating with WebBoard right away. WebBoard can also be used by various campus committees and academic organizations such as Women in Science to post announcements and generate discussion about current issues.

Virtual meetings

We're all familiar with the often impossible task of coordinating schedules for meetings to review and discuss time-critical information with our peers. Scheduling meetings with multiple participants from far-flung locations can often be more time-consuming than the meetings themselves! However, WebBoard gives you an effective alternative by providing a meeting place without regard to time or location.

For example, a project manager can post unresolved issues and invite team members to contribute possible solutions. Later, a list of action items posted to the board specifies who will take responsibility for implementing the chosen solutions. The project writer needs agreement on terminology and feature descriptions. Instead of trying to get five busy people together in a room, the writer can post a sample demonstrating the terminology and descriptions, and the team can critique it online, coming to decisions through the back and forth of posting and commenting.

If the meeting would be more effective with real-time, synchronous discussion, invite all the members to a chat room and conduct the meeting.

Participants can join the meeting from any location and using a variety of clients including Java, HTML, IRC, and WAP clients. The discussion can be saved as a transcript for later review.

Corporate extranets

Extranets are emerging as an ideal way for a company to provide specific information to its customers that is not published or available for the general public. For example, customers may use extranets to check out current inventories, check the status of an order, or collaborate on a project. Some companies sell information, making the research findings or libraries available over the password-protected extranet. WebBoard is well suited as the “welcome” to an extranet, which requires a user account and password to gain entry. Customers can also easily post questions, and the company can distribute news through the conferences.

Information management

We live in the Information Overload Age. Having too much information can be useless or even counterproductive. WebBoard helps you manage information so that it is readily available and logically organized. It also allows you to alert those who most need to read a message by posting it to their attention. Users can isolate messages requiring their immediate attention, or restrict their view to new messages only.

WebBoard's conferences and structured information hierarchy create an ideal medium for managed information. For example, a research facility can arrange conferences in much the same way as one would manage a filing cabinet. The information is made available both logically and chronologically. As you need more room or other topics emerge, you can add more boards, just as you would add more filing cabinets.

In addition, WebBoard's support for file attachments and links to other sites on the Internet lets users extend the message-posting and -reading capability of WebBoard. A research scientist may want to have peers review current findings stored in a spreadsheet file, or point users to images recorded during a recent observation. When scientists are onsite and Internet connections limited, participating in conferences by email or newsreader keeps them up-to-date.

Foreign-language conferences

Whether you want to provide a discussion area for your international customers or simply a place to practice with your local French club, WebBoard makes setting up foreign-language conferences easy. Nearly every element displayed by WebBoard is an HTML document or image that you can translate or replace. For example, you can change the images used for buttons on the menubar to display the same commands in German (or French or Spanish!) and then translate the text on the HTML page. System messages that are hard-

coded can also be translated, too. Individual language files make it possible to have system messages in different languages for different boards.

If your business serves a variety of international locations or you're head of the foreign-language department for a school system, you may want to set up multiple boards based on language. From the conference center home page, users can select the language they want and go directly to the appropriate board. Foreign-language students can benefit by having native speakers from the country also participate in the conferences and chat sessions.

Customer service/technical support

WebBoard is an ideal way to provide customer service or technical support. In conferences set up for specific product activities, a customer can post a question. Other participants can answer from their own experience, or a staff member can provide an official answer. You may choose to moderate some of these conferences to ensure that solutions are proper and won't lead to bigger problems. Once a solution is posted, it is available for other users to read. In fact, rather than repeating the same information over and over, support staff can point users to WebBoard conferences for answers to questions. WebBoard's message searching functions quickly find information on a given topic, posted by a specific user, or from a specific date.

Online brainstorming

WebBoard makes it easy for team members to hold brainstorming sessions despite being separated by time and distance. The fundamental rule of brainstorming is never to discard ideas, but record them all. In the traditional brainstorming model, each idea may be the seed of the final, creative solution.

WebBoard's fully-integrated chat provides a great vehicle for brainstorming sessions. The chat room is connected to a conference and inherits all the security settings for that conference. Set a time for the chat brainstorming session and have the WebBoard administrator record the session in a chat log. The log can then be posted in the conference for participants to review.

Similarly, you can brainstorm through WebBoard's conferences. Because WebBoard keeps conference postings until the administrator removes them or they reach an expiration date, participants in a WebBoard brainstorming session can refer to earlier comments, previous ideas, and the entire flow of the conversation throughout its lifetime.

What Are Some WebBoard Features?

We've talked a lot about how you might use WebBoard, and you probably have some more ideas of your own. Now let's take a look at some specific WebBoard features. This overview should help flesh out your ideas and get you headed in

the right direction for installing WebBoard and building your own web conferences.

Fully-integrated chat

WebBoard provides interactive, real-time conversations with fully-integrated support for chat based on ChatSpace's award-winning Community Server. This chat technology is renowned for being stable, secure, and reliable while offering a rich feature set. The chat server works with firewalls and provides automated transcribing and access through wireless devices. Its integration with WebBoard means seamless movement from conference to chat room for your users, with all their expected privileges in place. WebBoard chat is IRC-compatible and also supports the Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) so users can participate using WAP-enabled mobile phones.

Active Server Page (ASP) interface

The ASP interface for end-user interaction with WebBoard opens a world of site programming possibilities. Community architects and web developers can now tightly integrate WebBoard's ASP components into their sites for greater flexibility and customization. The ASP interface also makes future upgrades of WebBoard easier, since components can be upgraded or added without touching the HTML interface.

HTML frames, email, and NNTP interfaces

In addition to the new ASP interface, WebBoard 5 also offers a standard frames HTML interface. Using HTML pages for its interface, users have access to a host of features. Customizing boards and conferences can be as simple as editing the HTML or applying a built-in scheme. More complex changes are possible through WebBoard's Open Scripting object model. You can also offer users access to a board or conference through email or a newsreader by setting up mailing lists and newsgroups for conferences. WebBoard's flexible interfaces make participation a breeze for your users.

Host Master support for unique hostnames

Boards can now sport their own hostnames for use in board URLs and emails. WebBoard 5 includes Host Master support to provide flexible, enhanced naming conventions. A boon for those hosting boards for others, unique board naming helps build brand identity for the board owners.

Built-in MSDE database or SQL Server support

The Microsoft Data Engine (MSDE) database that ships with WebBoard meets the needs of even the busiest site. It holds up to two gigabytes of data, eliminating the need for upsizing. However, for those who prefer to use Microsoft SQL Server Version 7.0 or 2000, WebBoard provides tools for seamless integration with a SQL Server database.

Web server support—built-in or external

WebBoard's built-in web server requires no configuration or special maintenance. It supports all WebBoard features, including all three security modes, file attachments, and the JavaScript used for administration wizards. If you want to use an external server to tie in to existing user databases for authentication, use WebBoard behind a firewall, or support SSL, you can add it as a gateway to WebBoard's built-in server. Install the external web server on the same or a different computer from WebBoard. WebBoard's ASP interface requires a web server that supports ASP.

WebBoard Archive Creator

This new, separate utility lets you create static archives of conference message for historic or other distribution purposes. You can create archives in HTML Help (compiled HTML) format or static HTML format. The HTML Help archive results in a single file that can be easily distributed. The static HTML archive results in a collection of linked files. Archives can include a list of board users and file attachments. When you no longer need to keep a conference active, but don't want to destroy the information, creating a WebBoard archive is the solution.

Watched topics and conferences

Users can now have WebBoard send them an alert email whenever a new message is posted to a topic or conference they are watching. When a user posts a message, he can tell WebBoard to watch the message. When someone responds to the message, WebBoard sends an email alert. Users can also have WebBoard watch any topic, by checking the Watch This Topic box after reading a message. To have WebBoard stop watching topics, the user simply visits his or her Watch Lists on the More Options menu.

Message search feature

WebBoard includes a search engine for finding specific text in message topics and message bodies or finding messages by a specific author. Search all messages or limit your search by conference or date. You can also sort messages in a variety of ways, including by weight, where WebBoard judges which messages are most likely to be the one you're looking for. Full-text searches make finding specific information even faster on your board.

Attention messaging

Make sure specific users read a message by posting it to their attention. Each user has a private address book available when composing a message. WebBoard notifies the users you include on the ATTN: line of the message the next time they go to the board. To help manage ATTN: messages, WebBoard provides an ATTN: message view, where only messages posted to your attention are listed.

Paging and broadcast messages

Users can page other logged in users, sending private messages or inviting the user to join a chat. The WebBoard administrator can broadcast a message to logged-in users on all boards, for example, to warn of an impending system shutdown. Board managers can broadcast to their board users.

Administrative privileges

WebBoard supports three levels of users with varying administrative privileges. Each level performs different tasks and is essential in delegating the upkeep of WebBoard. Figure 8-1 in Chapter 8, *Managing Users*, provides a good overview of WebBoard's user hierarchy.

What's New in WebBoard 5?

This chapter has already mentioned several new administrative and end-user features you'll see in WebBoard 5. If you are upgrading from a previous version of WebBoard, here are some of the new features you'll notice:

- Improved speed. Several changes to the database and built-in server result in faster response to user requests.
- Fully-integrated chat, using ChatSpace's award-winning chat server technology. Rooms and users are registered and work seamless with WebBoard conferences. WebBoard privileges are maintained in the chat server environment.
- WebBoard Archive Creator lets you create HTML Help or static HTML archives of conference messages.
- Full integration of Host Master. Formerly a companion product, Host Master is now part of WebBoard 5. Give your boards unique hostnames using Host Master naming support.
- WebBoard's frames interface for end users now meets the United States Government Web Accessibility Guidelines (Section 508). Refer to www.section508.gov for more information.
- You can now bind the WebBoard server to a specific IP address so WebBoard can use the same port as another server, such as a web server, on the system.
- Watch Lists allow users to receive email alerts when messages are posted to topics or conferences they are watching. Users can manage their watch lists through the Watch Lists option on the More Options menu.
- Administrators can also manage a user's watch lists through an interface similar to managing a user's profile and mailing list subscriptions.
- Email participants can now obtain file attachments via a link to the attachment included in the email.

- Inline image support lets users attach digital images to their postings and have them display in the message body rather than as an attachment. You can determine the size of the displayed image.
- Conference home pages—displayed when a user clicks the conference name—include useful information about the conference. By default, this information is the conference’s name and description; mailing list, newsgroup, and chat room names; and a list of file attachments (as links) in the conference. The page also includes a link to post to the conference. You can modify these pages on a site, board, or conference basis.
- All new messages in the Conferences tree are marked with the New icon (new.gif). When a conference or topic is fully expanded, each new message has the icon, rather than just the topic message.
- Message editing now allows the user to remove file attachments. The person who posted the message can edit the message. Conference moderators, board managers, and administrators can also edit messages to delete attachments.
- Message editing also allows users to replace attachments, by deleting the current attachment and adding a new one.
- A new WebBoard tag, `<ESC> </ESC>`, allows users to include HTML code in messages and have it appear as HTML. Without the escape tags, the HTML is processed by WebBoard.
- The Message Preview page includes a Cancel button, allowing users to cancel a message before posting it or cancel a spelling change without having to rely on their browser’s Back button.
- A Post button at the bottom of the Message Preview page allows the user to post the message after reading it, rather than having to scroll up to the top of the message. Long messages posed usability issues when the Post button at the top of the preview page was no longer visible.
- Email and NNTP messages no longer contain the email address of the posting user, if the user has chosen to hide his email address.
- A user can have WebBoard stop remembering his or her password by logging in again and deselecting the Remember My Password checkbox. This feature allows for a secure logoff on a cookie-based board.
- Messages archived in the WebBoard database (through automatic archive settings) can now be manually deleted from the database. Deleting archived messages helps clean up your database.
- By default, new installations use a minimal logging format for the WebBoard.log. Upgraders continue to use the verbose format. This setting is changeable via the Registry (see Chapter 5).