The Long View

(Continued)

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Netscape Communicator 1.0 in Beta

Communicator represents as significant a step forward for Netscape's browsing interface as IE4 does for Microsoft's. While Netscape can't implement a shell integration like Microsoft can, its Communicator is nevertheless a powerful tool, and perhaps a more comfortable one for those who feel a little edgy at the thought of turning their whole desktop into a Web browser.

Netscape has decided to use its Collabra Share discussion client as the basis for its integration of mail and newsgroup readers. This approach has allowed Netscape to break the reader interface into two frames, one for a network directory structure and the other for messages. The directory structure can be extended into and outside the internal network. Where the Collabra client finds a Collabra server, users see simple names. Regular Internet newsgroups, however, still use the alt.etc.etc naming structure.

A Collabra-based discussion group permits users to select their own moderators, easing the administration burden on IT. Messages are displayed in two additional frames, the first showing the current message list and the second containing the message being accessed. To access an alternate list or folder, you must return to the left-hand window or to a drop-down menu in the toolbar. While this may sound more complicated than what you'll find in Outlook, it is not; in fact, it works intuitively.

Netscape takes Microsoft's support of HTML pages within the body of an e-mail message a step further. Communicator's e-mail composer actually defaults to the HTML format, though it will also support basic text as an option for those recipients that don't yet support HTML. Netscape's inclusion of additional security here is notable; Communicator allows the use of S/MIME for messages and Netscape's Certificate Authority for public-key encryption. Netscape's features are powerful and can be extended through Java plug-ins so that multiple actions are possible through the reception of a single message.

To further compete with Microsoft's inclusion of the Outlook client, Netscape has added a calendar application. Although not hugely advanced, this application is certainly functional and can be used as a stand-alone app on the client side or in conjunction with a compatible server. This would allow workgroups to track each other's schedules easily and set group meeting times and agendas.

Other intuitive features include the ability to place links you access often directly on the toolbar. The bookmark list has been moved to a toolbar button, so it's no longer a two-step process to access it. Bookmark lists can be subdivided into folders, and you can add links directly into folders rather than just make an overall list of them. You can even create a shortcut to a page in the same way that you'd create a shortcut in Windows 95. And, in a similar vein to Internet Explorer, Communicator's backward and forward arrow buttons display lists of recently visited Web sites, letting you access those pages directly rather than repetitively clicking on the arrow buttons.

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Once again mirroring the functionality of IE4, Communicator arrives with a teleconferencing tool that supports whiteboarding and audio for voice communication or presentations. Though basic in terms of functionality, this teleconferencing feature's fairly robust whiteboarding tool supports OLE and offers decent annotation tools.

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