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Intersights

Webtop tops Active Desktop in meeting users' needs

By Jim Rapoza

While Microsoft Corp.'s integration of Web controls throughout the Windows desktop is getting most of the attention these days, Netscape Communications Corp.'s simple Webtop is a more practical vision of what a Web-enabled desktop should be.

The Microsoft Active Desktop in Internet Explorer is flashy, but the question remains: Just what is it doing to make users and businesses more productive? It replaces double mouse clicks with single clicks, which works more like the Web and is supposedly more intuitive. But for every user who feels more comfortable with single clicks, there'll be another user needlessly double-clicking on desktop icons.

And although there's something to be said for enabling browser views of all desktop windows, this method adds confusion as to just where the information I'm viewing is located. As I use Active Desktop, I feel that it was created more to undermine Netscape than to help users.

Microsoft's Active Desktop and Netscape's Webtop--now available in beta for Communicator--are similar in concept but a million miles apart in implementation.

Webtop, a fully customizable environment, is a virtual desktop that uses full-screen Web pages, and the more one works with it the more useful it appears, especially for corporate intranets.

A Webtop can be created using a combination of

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HTML, Dynamic HTML, JavaScript and Java applets. This will enable any company that's already investing in Web and intranet development to create a variety of its own Webtop desktops, including a front end to the company intranet or an easily managed server-based common desktop for NCs.

Also, because Webtop is part of Communicator's Netcaster component, pushed content is integrated automatically.

Most importantly, at least to users like myself, it's very easy to turn off Webtop and return to the regular desktop. This cannot be done with Active Desktop, which also lacks Webtop's customization capabilities. Also, unlike Active Desktop, Webtops can be cross-platform.

Like Active Desktop, Webtop has its share of flaws. It lacks the navigation features found in the rest of Communicator, which can make it difficult to find your way if you have a few Netcaster channels open.

Also, for something that is based on standard Web technology, Webtop is pretty resource-intensive and runs very slowly on some less-capable systems (such as my 90MHz Pentium with 16MB of RAM).

Using security models found in Communicator, JavaScript and JDK 1.2, it is possible to create a Webtop desktop that works like a true desktop with access to local file systems, which can be accessed remotely over an intranet. Active Desktop gives you local access by default; it can't do local file access over an intranet. Although this feature has a lot of potential, it also can open up Webtop to security concerns, such as the JavaScript bug found two weeks ago.

The funny thing is that the forthcoming Internet Explorer 4.0's Channel push features are very Webtop-like, providing full-screen Web pages and based mostly on open standards.

I have my doubts, however, that Microsoft will extend the Channel feature as a replacement desktop. After all, Microsoft doesn't have a good track record when it comes to realizing that it's pushing a technology with potential in the wrong direction.

Do you see Webtops in your intranet's future? Tell

me about it at jim_rapoza@zd.com.

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