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FireFox: what's up next?
Business to Business
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ComputerWorld Canada   (21 Jan 2005)

On Nov. 9, 2004 something significant and potentially earth shattering occurred in the world of software development, and specifically to the Web development industry. Yet this event has either gone unnoticed by many IS departments or they've chosen to ignore it. This big event was the release of FireFox version 1.0, the first full production version of this free open-source, standards-compliant browser.

It's potentially earth shattering because the once dead browser wars are starting to heat up again. FireFox, during its first week of release, averaged over a million downloads a day and continues to gain momentum. FireFox has the potential to impact the industry almost as much as, if not more than, the Linux operating system.

What does this mean for your business and how, as an IT professional, can you take advantage of it?

To start off, simply think of FireFox as a more secure browser than Internet Explorer (IE) with a deeper feature set, improved performance and lower overhead. To date, and during several years of development, there have been only a few security warnings concerning this browser.

Additionally, while hard disk space has become inexpensive, the fact that FireFox requires far less space is also significant. This means it's faster to distribute throughout an organization and faster to install.

From a business perspective FireFox has a lot of positive points. Some large businesses may soon, if they haven't already, start using it as the corporate standard. There are a lot of small businesses which have been turned to FireFox and made it their corporate standard. For small businesses, worried over the security issues surrounding IE and their limited resources to continually implement IE patches, FireFox makes an ideal choice.

In a larger organization one might think the features of better security and smaller file size alone would have IT security departments insisting on FireFox for every computer in the company.

The reason many IT departments are not installing FireFox on their users' computers usually boils down to one of two pat answers. First, the most common — it's open source and for security reasons one shouldn't install open-source software because the source code is available to the general public.

This is a strange stance because IE — the current corporate browser and a proprietary Microsoft product — has so many security holes that you could drive a truck through it.

The second answer — users are used to IE and a new browser will just confuse them — unfortunately does apply to a large segment of the user community. But this remains a weak argument because users do get used to change, and the fundamentals of using any Web browser are a constant.

If you're interested in FireFox for your organization and are facing resistance, here are some tips that may help you with your quest.

For those already on the FireFox bandwagon this should be second nature.

For the security department, start telling your superiors about the new browser and how secure it is. Get it installed on your manager's computer and make it the default browser. Before long the manager might be convinced that it's a better browser for the organization.

From the Web development group perspective, simply insist upon it for cross-browser testing.

Before you're convinced that IE's days are numbered, better put the breaks on. First off, many corporate Web-based applications (time tracking utilities, payroll systems, existing Intranet application etc.) are not built to W3 standards. These applications only work on IE. On any other browser their formatting is messed up, effectively making the applications unusable. Because of this, organizations are likely to run into a lot of speed bumps that need to be addressed before FireFox can become their corporate standard.

A couple of last thoughts: One of the many things that killed Netscape was the mass distribution of IE into homes

(it came free with the operating system). People simply wanted to use the same browser at work and at home. This is going to be a hurdle for FireFox. Recent stats now show the dominance of IE starting to drop. While this drop may be just two or three percentage points, it is still the first significant drop in several years.

This column is not an attempt to bash IE, but an opportunity to enlighten the IT community of a viable alternative. In one corner there is IE, backed by billions of Microsoft dollars, and in the other is FireFox, backed by a handful of paid employees and the open-source movement. Just as Linux has slowly chipped away at the footholds of various operating systems to become a viable alternative, so too will FireFox.

While it may be too early in FireFox's life cycle for many organizations to welcome it as a corporate standard, the time has come to evaluate it and compare it to the current standard. It's only then that organizations can choose which one is right — not only for the organization, but for the individual user within the organization.

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