VISTA COMPASS

(Software review - Response from the producer)

To clarify at the outset, Vista Compass is more than a course or classroom application, and in our opinion, should not be directly compared with other products that serve discrete course units. Vista Compass is a powerful intranet environment which integrates an powerful and evolving suite of course administration tools with private web space for each user and campus-wide publishing and collaborative areas. Rather, our central aim is to expand the model of on-line support for learning communities beyond the traditional boundary of the course.

Mr. Malinski aptly captures the strength of the Vista Compass model:
"To summarise, Vista Compass is an intranet within which an institution can establish a collaborative online learning environment tightly customised to the requirements of students and faculty"

Based on our background as researchers in organizational psychology and technology/media studies, we seek to support a broader vision of school life: that a user's access and participation spans many courses, groups and content foci. Vista Compass therefore provides a customizable portal for easy access to personal, group and organizational activities. For example, in the "My Space" of Vista Compass, each user has access to personal document and email/message management options; can select, receive and access pertinent data for his/her courses; and can participate in clubs, organizations, or committees and the campus-wide community.

Mr. Corderoy voiced a concern about integration of Compass with existing school database services. Our experience working with rich and complicated computing environments, such as that at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, has proved that our work using the Lotus Domino development environment and database structure, (upon which Vista Compass is built), can readily integrate and share data across many data-based systems. While sometimes the task is complex, we have been successful in increasing on-line access to student services and decreasing multiple and redundant data management sites for this and other institutions. We invite any specific questions from interested parties on this point.

The contrasting opinions of our reviewers on navigation and user interface speak to the many issues involved in optimizing software for users at many levels of comfort with technology. Mr. Malinski specifically questions the structure-creativity dilemma in his summary. While some see a structured design as inhibiting user creativity, we believe that a clear structure can provide a useful frame for creative expression. As such, the consistent forms in Vista Compass allow posting of 1) text or active html code, 2) active URLs, and 3) attached files of any type let users combine disparate media and data types as desired while still providing a consistent and familiar interface format. Users can also integrate their own HTML code into any page in Vista Compass. Our product design supports the needs of novice and expert users, giving them easy access to control of features and flexible means of entering and accessing their data.

In conclusion, Vista Compass is intranet software that provides course management tools in close integration with personal and school-wide data services. Its academic support features are being evolved to meet the needs of students and faculty, in response to customer feedback and the emerging IMS standards. A growing list of schools, such as Babson College, and the business schools of MIT and Cornell University have found Vista Compass to be an elegant and cost-effective solution for Web-based student and faculty services. Please contact me if you have any other questions about Vista Compass software.

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