Forum MATRIX

(Response from the producer)

We believe that the review of Forum MATRIX was competently performed. However, some perspective is needed to correct impressions that might otherwise be misleading. For example, the reviewer was quick to recognize the strong points, which derive from the unusual capability that allows multiple groups of collaborating users to create, edit, and annotate the same documents. Although the pedagogical value was given a 4-star rating, no explanation was given as to why the reviewer believes that this kind of software is valuable nor how he would compare its pedagogical value to traditional threaded-topic discussion boards. We have published many white papers and slide shows on why shared-document conference is better for teaching than discussion boards, but this is not mentioned. In fact, at one point, the reviewer refers to Forum as a bulletin board, which is not appropriate. It is closer to a document management system, though it is not a high-end product in that regard.

No mention is made of price or market niche. This is important, because the product is designed to fill an open niche where users do not need or want course management systems (CMSs) such as Blackboard or WebCT, but do want a powerful shared-document conferencing capability that they cannot get with CMSs. Forum is designed to be simple and low tech (the reviewer comments favorably on how easy it is to learn). And then there is price. WebCT requires special servers, it's campus-version license costs $7,000 per year, and the new Vista Edition is going to cost multiples of that. Forum can run on a regular PC with server software and has a one-time base cost of $895.

A low-end product should be expected to have limitations. For example, Forum does not have an internal mail system where users can hide their e-mail addresses from each other. We made that decision purposely. Forum is designed for collaboration, and effective collaboration requires some trust. If users can't trust their partners with their e-mail address, can they trust them with anything else they do in the on-line workspace? Also, we have found in using WebCT that students often fail to check their WebCT mail, because they habitually run to their main mail account.

Concerning the browser interface use, it is true that users will get logged out if they use the refresh button or back arrow in the browser window. This happens because Forum document navigation is performed through the Forum Java Applet. Think of Forum as a private Web within THE Web. But the solution is simple. Just don't click the back arrow; use the navigation tree in the applet frame to tell the system what to display in the browser window. In our experience, students learn this right away. It is also helpful to set the browser so it refreshes automatically on every page load.

Network delays can be a problem, but some of that is inevitable, given what users do in Forum. Remember, we are not just posting short e-mail messages. Nor are we just downloading a Web document into the browser. We are verifying who the user is, what permissions have been given, opening a WYSIWYG editor, and then downloading a document into the editor. The process does work at acceptable speeds under our conditions with 56K modems and a server located near the university's modem bank. We notice that the reviewer is from New Zealand. If he reviewed Forum from there, communications could have gone through dozens of nodes and routers on its way to our server. I have sometimes encountered delays in just viewing Web pages located on servers half way around the world. The suggestion of client-side caching has merit, and we will look into that.

The review suggested that we get a third-party converter to solve the problem of incompatibilities between Word 97 and more recent versions of Word. We will consider that, but we suspect that this will kill one of the most useful features of Forum, namely, the ability to make in-context, hyper-linked pop-up notes. The alternative is to emphasize the use of the MATRIX editor. We do emphasize the MATRIX editor; that is why it downloads as part of the client-side package.

Finally, there was a specious complaint about difficulties in loading client software in locked-down computer labs. ALL application software has that problem. The same people who lock down computer labs also know how to unlock it temporarily to put on new application software. We have not found this to be a problem. But we assume that you have competent and helpful system operators. We are considering a “Forum lite” version that does not require client-side installations, but that will inevitably sacrifice many of the features of the regular system.
Sincerely,

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