

Technology

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FEATURE STORY

Ann Arbor's Web Elite disconnecting the Web

■ Company trying to change the way businesspeople use the World Wide Web

A new product developed by Web Elite of Ann Arbor may change the way business is conducted on the Web as we know it.

And that's exactly what the staff at Web Elite wants to do.

The e-business development firm has created Web Elite Unplugged, which is not a wireless application, but rather a way to work on a Web application without an Internet connection of any kind. Translation: it can be used on airplanes, while travelling, or any location that is not normally fit for an Internet or wireless connection.

Sound confusing? It's really quite simple. Web Elite Unplugged is an application that downloads information from a company's Web application onto a user's lap top computer, and the application is formatted exactly like the original one. The user can then use the Web applications' information to add, remove and change items as necessary to the Web's application. Then, when the user is able to connect to the Web again, the information and work that was done without the connection is flushed into the actual Web-connected application. That creates online work done offline.

Jacques Habra, CEO of Web Elite, said the idea was his, though Web Elite as a company developed and refined the product, which is available to the general public and is currently being used by Web Elite's clients.

"One thing we realized was a disadvantage with Web applications is that they require an Internet connection," Habra said. "When you don't have that connection, basically you can't do anything."

Web Elite Unplugged, he continued, is a "fully functional Web application that is available offline without a connection."

Habra said there are key advantages over "wireless connections." Although a wireless connection on a cell phone or Palm Pilot can gather real-time information, that is the only real advantage it has over Unplugged, according to Habra and Blake Bolick, executive producer for Web Elite.

"If you've ever used a Palm Pilot, or tried to look at such a small screen, you know how hard it is to get information from it," Bolick said. "In addition to the tiny canvas, sometimes you can't get a signal in all areas, which means you can't work. And the connection is so slow, that trying to post or pull a significant amount of information can take tremendous amounts of time."

In addition, Habra and Bolick said in order to make a Web application wireless, the application must be rebuilt (picture the tiny bit of information available at a given time on a cellular phone or palm computer) and that takes lots of time and money. And the people that use the wireless application may have to be trained to use the application again, as its wireless format can be highly varied from the orig-



Photo by Jennifer Beasley

The staff of Web Elite in Ann Arbor has released its newest application, which offers Web applications without an Internet connection.

inal one they're used to.

"The cost of rebuilding for wireless is enormous," Habra said. "We're saying they don't have to do that."

Money saved is a big advantage to the product, Habra said. Web Elite creates dozens of Web applications every year for its clients, and the clients spend millions, even billions of dollars on the applications.

"These applications are very complex," he said. "The reason clients put huge investments into these applications is because they see the value of putting business procedures online. But yet, they require an Internet connection to do the basic information. You can't conduct business unless you have that connection."

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Jacques Habra
Web Elite

Web Elite Unplugged, however, has the same functionality and data as the Web application, and simply syncs in the changes and updates made when the computer gets connected, Habra said.

"It can be added to an existing application, so it's not like reinventing the wheel," Habra said. "It localizes the intelligence of the application."

Bolick said Web Elite Unplugged can be useful to businesses in a myriad of ways: to update calendars, access sales force tools for salespeople on the road, view document management systems, and anything in the application that could be worked on when the user is away from the phone jack.

"This increases productivity for organizations by 100 percent because it is cost-cutting technology and makes people more productive," he said. "The greatest value of the Internet is also its greatest limitation: you always have to be connected. There is nothing else on the market right now that can do this."

Habra said though real-time information is an important aspect of the Web, it is not often how businesses get things done, aside from getting stock quotes or weather forecasts.

"Real-time is only about 10 percent of the value of the Web," he said. "Interconnectiveness is the real value. When you're talking about true business, there's a lot more complexity to it. It requires a powerful

Web application that doesn't need an Internet connection."

The IT industry hasn't had a banner year as of late, and Habra said that's another reason he and his company are so excited about Web Elite Unplugged.

"To be able to come up with real technology with real results is a big deal," he said.

"This is technology that everyone can benefit from," Bolick added. "Whether it's for conducting work at home, or for field sales people who need to access information, or during meetings, or for management travelling, it has value throughout the entire organization. It eliminates headaches."

By Jennifer Beasley, IBJ