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Paper chase

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TUESDAY, JANUARY 1, 2002

Firm develops offline Web hookup

Software lets those without cables use Net-based programs.

By Charles E. Ramirez
The Detroit News

ANN ARBOR — A Michigan high-technology firm has devised a way to let mobile workers use Internet-based computer programs without connecting to the Web through modems and phone jacks.

The company, Ann Arbor-based e-business software devel-

oper and consultant Web Elite, calls its invention Web Elite Unplugged. The technology lets users update electronic calendars, access company digital forms and documents while they're far away from phone jacks, cable modems or fiber optic cables that provide high-speed Internet access, said Jacques Habra, the company's founder and chief executive officer.

The concept behind Web Elite Unplugged is simple. The software basically makes a copy

of the users' corporate Web servers, programs and databases. Those copies are then put on laptops or handheld computers. The technology also records changes that are made while users are off-line and updates information — or syncs — when they reconnect with their corporate computer systems.

It could be a boon to the growing number of mobile professionals. About three-quarters of all workers will be mobile at least 25 percent of the time they're on the job by 2004,

according to the META Group, a technology market research and consulting firm based in Stamford, Conn.

Less than 5 percent of corporate computer programs are now available for mobile employees, the consulting firm estimates. It expects that number to jump to nearly 50 percent by 2005, as handheld devices become more common and businesses' dependence on mobile workers continues to grow.

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Web Elite

Services: e-business software development and consulting.

Headquarters: 210 S. 5th Ave., Ann Arbor. Other offices in San Francisco and New York.

Top executive: Jacques Habra, founder and CEO.

Employees: 40

Clients: General Motors Corp., Sun Microsystems, Bell & Howell, University of Michigan and McCann-Erickson.

Source: Web Elite

WEB

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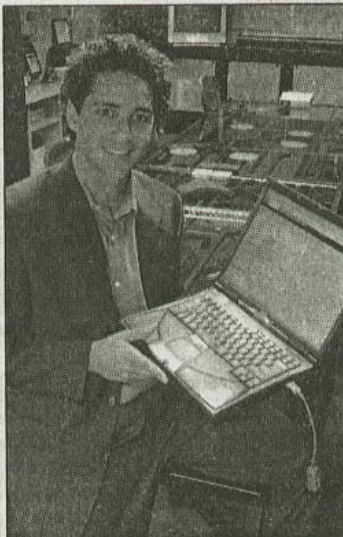
But Web Elite is facing some stiff competition. Technology giants such as IBM, Oracle Corp., Microsoft Corp., and Sybase Inc. offer products that let mobile workers remotely link to corporate computer networks and Web sites. Many of their offerings, such as Oracle's 9i Lite, also sync up data on company networks with entries made on remote computers.

That doesn't worry Habra, however. "Other programs require users have the same software on both the network and the mobile device," he said. "Ours doesn't care."

Web Elite Unplugged debuted over the summer. The firm is in negotiations to supply the technology to two car manufacturers based in Metro Detroit, but Habra declined to name them, citing confidentiality obligations.

Web Elite recently won a contract to provide its Unplugged software to Second to None Inc., an Ann Arbor-based research company that specializes in mystery shopping programs. Companies pay the company to hire consumers to shop at their businesses and provide reports on their products and customer service. Second to None's clients include retailers, restaurants, banks and government agencies.

Second to None plans to use the technology to let its mystery shoppers report their findings with handheld devices. It also plans to use it to let mobile corporate



David Coates / The Detroit News

Web Elite CEO Jacques Habra holds a laptop computer using the Web Elite Unplugged technology.

clients access reports. The firm plans to have the program implemented by the middle of this year.

"We'll be able to get reports from our mystery shoppers in the field a lot faster," said Jeff Hall, Second to None's founder and chief executive officer. "We'll also be able to let our customers who are on the road a lot get the latest information, even if they're somewhere that doesn't have Internet access."

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