

INSTANT MESSAGING COMES OF AGE FOR ENTERPRISE

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Instant messaging, once thought of as an Internet toy for chatty teens, is not just for kids anymore.

Hubz, a new Java-based instant messaging product unveiled Tuesday by Gainesville, Florida-based Digi-Net Technologies, could become a useful tool for a wide range of enterprises that are taking to the Web to save time and money and build a sense of community among customers and employees.

Hubz is the first application that allows customers and employees to communicate on the Web via instant messaging without having to download or install special plug-ins, according to Ryan Harris, Digi-Net's sales manager of community software.

Using Hubz, visitors to a corporate Web site or intranet can immediately see who else is visiting a given page, according to Digi-Net, even if the visitors are not registered customers or employees. They then can send text messages to each other, exchanging views or product reactions.

Early adopters of Hubz include the U.S. Army National Guard, which has tested a beta version of the product on its site for the past three months, as well as the University of Florida and Johns Hopkins University.

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Saving Big Money

In addition to letting customers exchange views about products and services online, Hubz is designed to let enterprises substitute instant messaging for e-mail in many situations.

For example, using Hubz, managers at corporate headquarters could determine which customers or managers around the world were online, and could send those people an instant message.

Harris said he expects instant messaging will be especially popular with managers of global corporations, who often struggle to overcome language barriers in phone conversations.

According to Harris, "Instant messages can replace costly international long-distance calls."

ASP Option

Hubz is available either as a full-service license installed on an enterprise's server, or as an application service provider (ASP) model that runs on Digi-Net's server. Either way, the cost for setting up the service on one site for 100 users is US\$199. The annual service fee is \$49.

The National Guard site has an unlimited user license, with an option to upgrade to multiple servers if traffic demands.

Hubz is one of three components in a suite of products from Digi-Net. Companies that employ Hubz can integrate it with Digi-Net's corporate chat product, Digi-Chat, currently used by Sun Microsystems (Nasdaq: SUNW), Boeing (NYSE: BA), the Denver Broncos and other Fortune 500 enterprises.

Membership Database

Businesses also can choose to deploy Digi-Net's Membership Database to collect and manage information about the customers and employees who are exchanging messages on their pages that use Hubz.

Membership Database has a MySQL freeware database, but it also can be used with Microsoft (Nasdaq: MSFT) SQL Server and Oracle databases, provided the enterprise downloads free drivers from Microsoft or Oracle, Digi-Net said.

Digi-Net said its DigiChat product currently is used on 10,000 Web sites in 30 countries.