Chapter 3

Tackling Acceptability Issues in Communities of Practice by Providing a Lightweight Email-Based Interface to Social Software

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ABSTRACT

In the framework of the PALETTE European research project, the Swiss federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) is designing and experimenting with eLogbook, a Web-based collaborative environment designed for communities of practice. It enables users to manage joint activities, share related assets and get contextual awareness. In addition to the original Web-based access, an email-based eLogbook interface is developed. The purpose of this lightweight interface is twofold. First, it eases eLogbook access when using smart phones or PDA. Second, it eases eLogbook acceptance for community members hesitating to learn an additional Web environment. Thanks to the proposed interface, members of a community can benefit from the ease of use of an email client combined with the power of an activity and asset management system without burden. The Web-based eLogbook access can be kept for supporting further community evolutions, when participation becomes more regular and activities become more complex. This chapter presents the motivation, the design and the incentives of the email-based eLogbook interface.

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INTRODUCTION

eLogbook (http://eLogbook.epfl.ch) is a Web-Based collaborative environment particularly adapted to the needs of communities of practice (CoPs). It is developed at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL). It relies on three fundamental entities: Actors, Activities and Assets. An actor is any entity capable of initiating an event within the eLogbook workspace. An asset is any kind of resource (e.g. text documents and images) shared between community actors. An activity is the formalization of a common objective to be achieved by a group of actors. In eLogbook, the term “space” is used instead of “activity”, and these two terms are considered to be equivalent. Events related to these three entities are governed by Protocols. eLogbook supports management of invitations, roles, and deliverables for the activities; and supports access rights management for the assets. It provides personalized and context-sensitive awareness information crucial in collaborative environments (Gillet, El Helou, & et al., 2007; El Helou, Gillet, & et al., 2007). The features of eLogbook are useful to any kinds of CoPs (Rekik, Gillet, & et al., 2007).

The eLogbook is a general-purpose activity-oriented collaboration space that can be customized by users to serve as a task management tool as well as an asset management system allowing the collaboration around shared artifacts. Moreover, awareness services of different types are provided by eLogbook, because awareness is crucial in collaborative environments.

The original interface of eLogbook environment relies on Web 2.0 technologies for enabling effective Web-based user interaction. It can be considered as a flexible and adaptive Web-based collaborative activity and asset management system or service that could easily be adopted by communities of practice.

The main Web interface of eLogbook is called Context-Sensitive View. Awareness cues are embedded in the view for providing contextual information to users. Communities of practices expressed the need to work in a user-friendly environment that can serve simultaneously as a task and asset management system, a social network, and a discussion platform. The context-sensitive view was designed as a response to this need. In fact, this view consists of a central element, surrounded by three main regions, respectively dedicated to activities, assets and actors. The central element can be either an asset, an actor or an activity. Selecting an entity to become the context or the central element causes a change in the surrounding areas to display related entities, their relation with it and the eventual related actions that a user can perform on it. Consequently, just by changing the type of the focal point from an activity to an actor or an asset, the interface can serve different purposes, keeping however the same overall skeleton layout and structure. Awareness “cues” of different types are seamlessly incorporated in every area through the use of symbolic icons, colors and the manipulation of the layout order in which information is displayed. Figure 1 illustrates an example where a specific activity is chosen as the focal element. In this case, the assets posted in this activity, the actors participating in it and the other activities related to it, are displayed.

As pointed out by de Moor in (de Moor & van den Heuvel, 2004) and confirmed in the framework of the Palette project (http://palette.ercim.org) through a participatory design approach (Daele, Erpicum, & et al., 2006), it is difficult for a community to select and adopt new environments and services for enhancing their practice without inducing disturbances. For the communities that have been using email as the main communication tool, email-based interface environment may be more acceptable than Web-based one. It is desirable to enable communities to choose their suitable environments. Therefore, there is a need for solutions that facilitate the introduction of advanced collaboration services in CoPs. Our assertion is that, by providing an email-based...
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