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b2evolution

By Ryan Goodrich

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The open-source blog software ⧉ **b2evolution** has been described as a hulking monstrosity of a multi-user, multi-blog engine and somewhat thin, yet powerful content management system software "centered around the blog concept." For our purposes, we've reviewed it as the latter. This content management ⧉ system (CMS) offers many capabilities commonly found in blogging software, though it can be quite difficult for a non-technical blogger to use. If you want to perform any customization at all with this system (beyond simple CSS), you will need to speak the language of the PHP tribe.

b2evolution contains most of the major features commonly found among CMS applications. However, its main architecture is still a blog, so it lacks many CMS functionalities. On the plus side, this application includes friendly URLs, image resizing, photoblogs with thumbnails, UI levels, a WYSIWYG editor, spell check and style wizard. These components are fairly straightforward and useful.

The add-on community is relatively limited in terms of the availability of extensions and their ease of use. Locating a centralized library of add-ons proved quite difficult, and what few we could find were somewhat basic. The process for installing any plugins is quite simple and involves putting the files ⧉ in the Plugin folder and then installing it from the Available Plugins screen. Some extensions required further configuration, which requires PHP coding.

There are plenty of skins and themes on the b2 main website, but again, you won't be doing much customization beyond simple CSS if you don't know the PHP language. As we have some experience with coding, we put caution to the wind and attempted a simple PHP tweak in a template file. Suffice it to say, the result was not pretty. The code used in the theme automatically generates its own XHTML counterpart, so when we tried to do something as simple as remove the header code from the date display, it became a giant mess warring with the automatic XHTML. However, as they say, patience is a virtue, and dedicated b2 users swear that patience pays off here.

Overall, navigation in b2environment is quite straightforward, with the exception of when you need to actually do something. The interface felt quite clunky to us and was unnecessarily complex when we wanted to customize anything. PHP plays a major part in enhancing the experience of both the user and administrator, so start brushing up on your coding skills.

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The installation is quick and straightforward, though it apparently created some issues with a number of files. At the bottom of the dashboard screen – every screen, really – there are warnings and notices about issues with PHP files being undefined or invalid. We aren't certain which issues these errors caused in the actual interface, but there was apparently something wrong with it.

You can stage and schedule your content with b2 from the main admin interface, which, by the way, might be a deal breaker for less-patient people. The admin panel interface has basically no context-sensitive help and is fairly sprawling and incomprehensible. The admin panel can accomplish the bulk of the management work, yet there is no mass-edit mechanism for removing or editing multiple posts or comments.

The b2evolution website includes a plugin and theme bin where all the add-ons live and evolve. There is also online documentation in the form of a finely organized wiki. Email support is available, which can be a benefit because the user community for this CMS is somewhat small and might not be as timely in responding to your questions.

Overall, **b2evolution** is ideal content management system ⤢ software for many types of advanced bloggers and professionals in a blog-centric organization. Used by a relatively small but enthusiastic klatch of bloggers, the community is active and vital and continually works to improve not only the user experience but also the versatility of the CMS itself.

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