

MSWL Project Management: OLEF Project

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1 Introduction

WebTools SL is a company specialized on Web Development. With a total of 20 employees, the company has developed different web tools designed and customized for different software development customers in Spain. Among the customers, they have important companies in different environments, such as:

- Hardware development companies.
- Software development companies.
- Internet Service Providers.

The main strength of the company belongs to the well qualified work force. For working in the company, having a good knowledge of Web development languages and tools is a MUST, although additional knowledge having to do with FLOSS projects associated to Web development are appreciated as well.

Moreover this, the company invest up to 20% of the earnings in technology training for the employees, in order to provide employees with updates of the latests technologies used, both in Web development, but also in other environments such as DDBB (DataBases) programming and administration, generic programming languages, scripting languages, software forges and VCS (version control system), graphic design, etc.

Among the weaknesses of the company, the lack of a strong marketing knowledge is an issue. Besides this, the commercial work force consists only of 2 of the 20 people working on the company, so selling strength needs backing to wide spread the company's business.

Among the different available web products they have developed, main incomes come, nowadays, from most to less importance, due to the next ones:

- Web Network Administration tools.
- A web software forge frontend for CVS and SVN.
- A web forum framework, based on CSS3, HTML5 and JQuery.

All of this software products are under proprietary licenses, with copyright belonging to the company.

Regarding Web Network Administration tools, the product is well sold and

has a strong market share position, increasing along the time, so no changes are considered in terms of licensing, development strategy or billing.

Meanwhile, the company has lost definitely the market associated to their software forge web tools, due to the appearance and huge spread of GIT.

Somehow, this company wants to promote, improve and enhance their Web Forum framework, called OLEF (Open Libre Enhanced Forums) in order to explore this Market Niche. Feedback regarding this tool is quite good from customers perspective, above all in terms of usability, performance and look-appearance.

However, customers have communicated the company the lack of different functionalities they would like to own for integrating the product on their corporate network. Among the different functionalities pending, next ones can be found:

- Integration of an additional Question / Answer mode, similar to Stack Overflow
- Integration of a badging/vote system to highlight the best responses
- Integration of a much powerful report & statistic moderation tool
- Integration of a live chat and voice over IP communication system between the forum members
- Security improvements
- Multiple theme selection

The mission is to achieve previous enhancements in one year time.

Unfortunately, the company has no budget to invest on developing all the new functionality, so releasing the software as FLOSS is the unique solution for achieving the goal. Two very important customers would be willing to integrate the FLOSS product and acquire a very important integration and support contract with the company.

So, to summarize, this is the challenge. Developing all the new functionality described above by starting a FLOSS project, with no impact on performance, while keeping the look and feel and ease of use of the framework.

2 Current competitors analysis

Web Forums are a very useful way of off-line communication. This kind of web interaction has reached to be the standard for handling question/answer issues related to a specific topic. FLOSS world is not an exception to this point. Rather, it can be ensured that FLOSS projects use and deploy web forums even in a more active way compared to other fields.

Apart from previous statement, it is important to highlight that, in the last years, new Web programming languages such as HTML5, together with new version 3 of CSS and libraries such as JQuery have improved drastically the web look and feel.

However, it seems that in Web Forums market, no further development of Web forums has appeared based on this technologies, or if existing, there is still a market niche to work and take profit on.

On this chapter, some of the main Web Forums frameworks will be analyzed, in order to consider the strenghts and weaknesses of any of them and take some conclusions on the different aspects where development of the project should concentrate.

Both FLOSS and proprietary software Web forums would be analyzed, although the first will be the ones to focus on, as they are in fact a closer competitor due to the similiraties of strategy followed (in terms of community management, distribution, business model, etc.).

But, which are the most used and deployed Web forums existing on the Internet? Although no reliable market share research have been found related to this issue, some of the most important forums can be checked on this URL: <http://rankings.big-boards.com/>

This web indexes main Web forums around the world and ranks them considering the number of posts existing on the web. Although not a 100% trustable method, is a good approach to consider how spreaded is a particular forum. So, to summarize, <http://rankings.big-boards.com/> contains information of the main Web forums all over the world, such as:

- Number of posts
- Number of users

- Statistics of the site
- Language used
- **Software used** (when it was possible to identify it)

A quick inspection on the data hosted on this page allows to take some conclusions. On the one hand, it seems that Web forum software market is basically splitted into two main Web forum frameworks:

- **vBulletin.** A proprietary software which is, apparently, the market leader on Web forum market, with a total of **1384** entries on the web.
- **phpBB.** A FLOSS web forum software which a wide-spread use on the Internet, with a total of 240 entries on the rank.
- **Invision.** A proprietary web forum software, with a total of 226 entries on the rank.

The rest of the forums have a much lower market share, and no further inspection will be performed. Previous data allow to take some conclusions regarding the market:

1. The market leader solution is **Proprietary Software**.
2. The second market position, although being a FLOSS project, could be considered to have a very **much lower market share compared to the market leader**.
3. In the third position is, again, placed a proprietary Software Web forum framework.

In next sub-sections, a deeper analysis of each of the two first software solutions would be performed, in order to identify the weakness and strenghts of each of the products, one of each type (FLOSS and proprietary software) and take some conclusions on the development strategies.

2.1 vBulletin

vBulletin seems to be the leader in the Web forum software. Developed by Internet Brands Inc., some of the main world-wide forums, such as <http://offtopic.com> are using this software. But, why is this software so popular?

Why does it have a so big market share compared to its competitors? What

is the key factor for the success of this software?

No evaluation can be provided on this forum software, as it is a non-free (249\$) proprietary solution, but, having a look at the most important forums using this software, the software seems to be characterized by **strenghts** such as:

- **Flexibility:** A multiple bunch of plugins allow to improve the functionality and, above all, to adapt the look and feel to the administrators necessities.
- **Ease of use:** In terms of user experience. The interface for the end user is really simple, but, in turn, very complete.
- **Ease of administration:** In terms of administration permissions, banning, statistics, post management.
- **Look and feel:** The key factor. It is, surely, the best in this aspect.
- **Robustness:** In terms of bug, errors discovered. The up-time statistics are also very good in these aspect.
- **Integration with Content Management Systems,** such as Wordpress.

Meanwhile, the main **weaknesses** of this product are related, basically, to the fact of **not being FLOSS**:

- No inspection of the software can be performed.
- No modifications can be performed to adapt to the user requirements.
- Support depends on a single-vendor. No FLOSS community exist associated to the product.

Apart from that, having to pay for the license make it not available for certain communities with no budget for software acquirement.

2.2 phpBB

phpBB is the leading FLOSS software for Web Forums. Some of the most important forums world-wide, such as <http://gaiaonline.com>, are hosted on top of this forum software framework.

In terms of software, the product seems to be characterized by **strenghts**, some of them associated directly to being FLOSS, while others don't, such as:

- Community Support
- Developer Support
- End-user Ease of Use
- Robustness: In terms of bug, errors discovered. The up-time statistics are very good, and the community behind allows continuous improvement in this sense.

Meanwhile, among the **weakness**, it can be highlighted the next ones:

- SEO-friendliness
- Installation/Administration Ease of Use
- Flexibility Due to the difficulty of installing Plugins/Themes
- CMS integration

To summarize, it has to be highlighted that there is an important market niche in Web forum market. The key factor is trying to improve those factors that are weaknesses of phpBB FLOSS project, such as:

- Ease of installation and administration
- Ease of module expansion and plugins
- CMS integration
- Look and feel

Taking into account that the Look and Feel issues are well considered in our product, for being programed in HTML5/CSS3/Jquery and PHP, it is concluded that the main development strategy will be focused, on the one hand, **on administration/installation ease of use**, and, on the other hand, **on module and themes expansion** and integration in general, and with CMS (Wordpress preferably) in particular.

3 Licensing selection

4 Technical Infrastructure

5 Project Management

- Communication strategies, Marketing.
- Documentation, Netiquette.
- Organization politics (Apache/Neutrality/Community Driven vs. Single-Vendor)

6 Community Management

- Volunteers: Community Management
- Mechanisms to grow
- Emphasize on:
- Quality?
- Usability?
- ???

7 Conclusions