

Search engines smarten up

A new solution lets your desktop do the work

by Angelo Fernando

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Does the advantage of “ubiquitous computing”—tech-speak for being connected to a computer and network no matter where you go—give you a better shot at searching and finding the information you need? Back in the late 20th century, communicators speculated about the marvelous gains in productivity to come once information became accessible through all sorts of portals and domestic appliances, from cell phones to refrigerators. According to this vision, real-time information and data sharing would be possible in a few mouse clicks.

But, as we now know, with information access comes information overload. The retrieval and sorting of usable data is one of the bigger headaches confronting us. There are some 11.2 billion web pages that are indexed—meaning that they show up on search engines—out of some 45 billion pages out there on the World Wide Web. As for the information that shows up as e-mail, there seems to be no intelligent life out there to help us manage it.

When Suranga Chandratillake, a software developer in Cambridge, England, clicked on his e-mail one day, some 2,000 messages landed in his inbox. He had just returned to work after a vacation, and he knew that a greater part of that week would be wasted sorting through the fluff to find the use-



Using Blinkx, you can search the Web for TV programs that reference keywords, and then go to the exact spot in the broadcast (inset).

ful content. He would have to carefully save the information he needed in folders and name them in a way that would enable easy retrieval.

Of course, we've all had similarly traumatic post-vacation experiences. But Chandratillake was not just an inbox victim. He was in the business of solving information retrieval problems like this for his clients, at a company that designs industrial-strength search engines. Frustrated and challenged, he had an epiphany: Could the future of search involve solving the spam problem at the same time? He wondered what would happen if he designed a search application to scour not just the Internet, but also the folders on local hard drives and even those saved as e-mail. Information

would be easy to retrieve using keywords. In fact, he thought, it would be possible to create “smart folders” that automatically populate themselves with content when a PC is connected to the Web.

Searching the Web and your PC

Blinkx, the search utility that Chandratillake launched, works like a search engine but resides on your desktop. It treats the PC and the Net as one integrated resource. This means that should you be searching for information using the keyword *biotechnology*, the engine could find and display web-based documents, video, audio, blogs and any document you have created on your PC. This includes out-bound and incoming e-mail. If

you want to search all the e-mail references to someone called Lorenzo, you no longer have to wade through your inbox, outbox, deleted messages, etc. Just enter his name and the results will pop up even before you have finished typing. It's that fast!

Blinkx is not supposed to be a replacement for traditional search engines, but you could treat it as a second-in-command, especially if you're struggling to manage and monitor incoming, archival and competitive information. As for the latter, there are many vendors that could monitor the competitive landscape for you (see "Tech Talk," CW, July-August 2005), but you could creatively use Blinkx to stay on top of things right from your desk—and it's free, too.

Staying on top of things is what these so-called smart folders do well, but something search engines don't usually help with. When we typically search online using Google, Yahoo!, Firefox or Dogpile, we bookmark the results. But a web link is static. A smart folder, on the other hand, resides on our desktop and gets filled up with information over time, based on the way we configure it.

If you create a smart folder for *risk management*, for example, you could instruct the application to search for keywords whenever you are connected to the Net. You could

Search and you shall find

- 84.2 percent of people who are online use a search engine to find information, according to Media Metrix.
- According to a study conducted by the search engine Dogpile with the University of Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania State University, those who search online use 2.8 search engines a month.
- The same study found that not all search engines deliver similar results. A mere 1.1 percent of the results using the top four search engines (Google, Yahoo!, MSN and Ask Jeeves) are the same.

—A.F.


even configure a smart folder by simply dragging a relevant document into the folder, and the search engine does the rest. The results it pulls from the Web and your hard drive sit in the folder and get updated every time you are connected to the Internet. You can have the results (those documents, mpegs and web pages) available for offline viewing as well.

Blinkx has two other features that should be appealing to searchers and marketers. The company is cutting deals with television companies to embed metadata tags into programs that the search engine can sniff out. A metadata tag is basically digital code that tells a search engine to go to the exact spot in a program. Say you are a manufacturer of infrared goggles and are looking for TV news programs that reference night vision. You could do a Blinkx search of all Fox TV dispatches on the war

in Iraq, using keywords such as *night vision* and *goggles*.

The other feature opens a whole new world for marketers because the "engine" sits on the desktop. Companies could create dedicated, downloadable, branded smart folders. For the launch of the movie *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, for example, Touchstone Pictures used a downloadable smart folder (www.blinkx.com/h2g2) to give fans sneak previews, special footage and updates.

A variant of this, called the shareable smart folder, might give communicators a powerful way to collaborate on projects. Members of a group could swap folders stuffed with content they customize based on their search results and documents.

Customized search, a branding tool and web collaboration, too? This is certainly not your father's search engine! 

Desktop search: The not-so-new frontier

Companies continue to make—and users continue to benefit from—advances in the desktop search arena. A few years ago, Google released the Google desktop search utility. Apple Computer's Tiger operating system has Spotlight, the most advanced desktop search feature under the hood. Microsoft, not wanting anyone to steal its thunder in the desktop arena, recently released a plug-in for Internet Explorer, but that is only a stopgap until the long-awaited new operating system, Longhorn, comes along, with full search features.

—A.F.