

## Zaplets: A better form of tactical collaboration?

### **Bottom Line**

*There's a new solution to the tactical collaboration problem and, used carefully, e-mail centric zaplets offer the potential for a dramatic increase in worker productivity despite the lack of offline support and knowledge capture.*

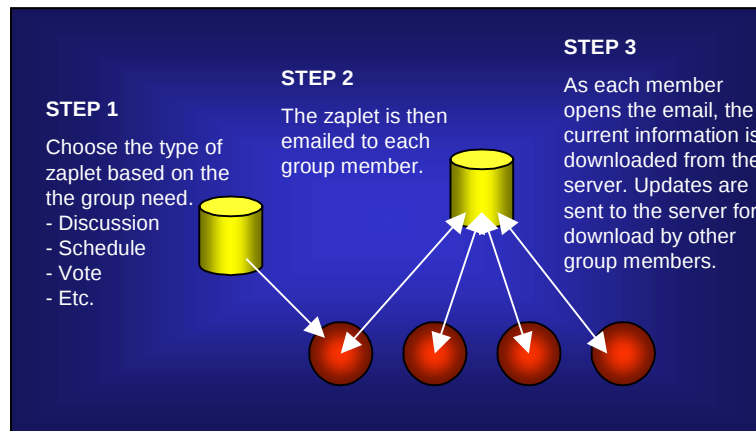
Just when you thought the evolution of collaboration had come to an end with the offerings from Microsoft and Lotus, Zaplet, Inc. ([www.zaplet.com](http://www.zaplet.com), formerly FireDrop) introduces a new lightweight collaborative toolset that may offer a high-value solution to everyday collaboration challenges. Zaplets uses your existing messaging infrastructure to deliver Web-linked messages where the message body is dynamically downloaded through a central Web server. There are multiple types of zaplets from which to choose such as voting and meeting. Send a discussion-thread zaplet, for instance, to a group and every time a member of that group responds, the central server updates that part of the message body to reflect the most recent comments.

Nucleus research has shown that, on average, 70% of an employee's collaboration is tactical rather than strategic in nature. Coordinating meetings, discussing events and issues, circulating documents, and voting on resolutions are examples of daily activities that consume a significant amount of worker productivity. Zaplet addresses this tactical, recurring collaboration through a collection of single-use single-focus collaborative tools that are sent and managed through the corporate mail infrastructure.

For example, using the discussion zaplet a user can initiate a threaded discussion among a group of individuals. The discussion is held through an active e-mail message so the group need not be connected other than through e-mail and Web access. An e-mail message is sent to all members of the group. The body of the message is actually an active java applet that queries the zaplet database for the latest information in the thread. To post a response to the thread the user simply enters the text and presses the respond button. The response is then saved on the server and the next time any member of the group reads the message the response is included in the thread. Essentially, a zaplet is a living e-mail message that grows over time.

There are obvious benefits to decreasing the effort employees expend in engaging in tactical collaboration. Increasing the efficiency of communication beyond simple e-mail can have a dramatic effect on productivity and Nucleus believes that tactical collaboration is one of the most promising areas to explore when a corporation wishes to maximize the benefit technology can have on the bottom line.

**Figure 1—The zaplet model**



## **The Advantages**

The zaplet strategy is an interesting twist on the collaboration theme. It is a simple and easy to install application requiring only a central server to manage the data. It easily spans corporate boundaries, making collaboration with customers and suppliers seamless and effective. Of greatest importance, it is easy to use and thus easy to deploy to the corporation. Nucleus's initial examination estimates training time on the order of minutes in a self-taught mode, contrasted with existing collaboration tools that often require day-long classes.

For all of its strengths, zaplets have a number of significant weaknesses. There is no off-line support and without access to the Web, the body of the e-mail is missing. Additionally, users must re-open the message on a frequent basis to get the latest changes or select e-mail notification, which essentially resends the message at every change. Message traffic and inbox overload can reach annoying proportions quickly in a large corporation where users rely on the notify option.

Lastly, there is no provision for knowledge capture. Zaplets are single-use, disposable discussion areas and if archival is

needed the discussion thread must be archived using manual means. This may not be as much of a barrier as it appears. The effort to capture all knowledge must be balanced by the increase in user productivity. In the most extreme cases, it may be more efficient to re-invent the wheel each time you need it rather than put processes in place to reuse that knowledge.

Zaplets appear to be an excellent addition within existing collaborative environments. Lotus Notes environments that may not be ready for Lotus QuickPlace may find zaplets an effective alternative. These customers will clearly benefit from the quick, lightweight collaboration possible with zaplets. Microsoft Exchange users may also benefit from this tactical toolset. The collaboration promised in Office 2000 – that is buried below training and setup few care to undertake – is easily accomplished through zaplets. That said, companies should be careful to treat zaplets as a supplemental tool and take care not to over-deploy the technology.