GLOBAL CHAT

ONE OF THE BEST parts of life on the Internet is the ability to talk to people from around the globe. If you want to reach out and touch thousands of other computer users, try Usenet. It's a worldwide network of thousands of UNIX systems. The network transmits messages to special-interest newsgroups covering just about any topic you can imagine (and many you wouldn't want to imagine). This public bulletin board can be accessed by anyone with a newsreader.

A few Usenet newsgroups are moderated, but most are free-for-alls. Some people have compared Usenet to talk radio, without a host or producer to filter inappropriate callers. If you pose a question to a Usenet group, you may be lucky enough to get terrific responses from experts around the world, or you may get "flamed" (an abusive posting) by another participant. Nothing is guaranteed in this anarchic arena. Anyone can "cross-post," which means that someone can write one message and post it to any number of groups. Some small businesses and advertisers use this method to plug products or services. Cross posting commercial messages to many newsgroups is referred to as "spamming" and is considered poor taste.

Newsgroups are useful if you are looking for very specific information, such as an HR software program for administering employee benefits. But it can take a lot of time just to read through the barrage of postings. To avoid getting lost in the information deluge, start with a clear goal. Newsgroups also seem to appeal to Netizens (see accompanying box, Words To Surf By) who have time to kill so they post useless advice or offensive commentary. Beware.

Let's take a closer look at the anatomy of a newsgroup address. The first part of the address is called the hierarchy, which refers to the broadest area of interest covered in the group. Here are some examples of popular hierarchies found on the Net:

- alt.—alternative
- biz.—accepted place for commercial postings
- comp.—computing discussions
- misc.—miscellaneous discussions
- news.—discussions about Usenet
- rec.—hobbies and recreational activities
- sci.—science-related topics
- soc.—social, cultural, or religious groups.

Words after the hierarchy refer to the group's focus and serve as topic descriptors. For example, "comp. EPSS.trainers" might refer to a group that talks specifically about how trainers use electronic performance support systems.

To read a newsgroup, you'll need newsreader software. A newsreader helps you to wade through the Usenet swamp. Many ISPs (Internet service providers) have their own newsreaders, and they restrict access to their customers. Others let anyone log on. Netscape has its own newsreader, as do most of the large browsers. Most newsreader software provides these capabilities:

- **Subscribe.** The software provides immediate access to your choice of newsgroups so that you can peruse the contents quickly and easily.
- **Unsubscribe.** The application deletes groups from your reading list.
- **Thread.** The software links postings with their replies. Then, a reader can follow messages within a news-

Be sure to visit ASTD's Web page at http://www.astd.org

WORDS TO SURF BY

Here are some words you'll find helpful in cyberspace.

- **FAQS.** Frequently asked questions are documents that list and answer the most common questions on a particular subject.
- **Flame.** A derogatory or abusive posting.
- **Hierarchy.** The broadest area of information covered by a newsgroup.
- **ISP.** An institution or company that provides access to the Internet in some form and usually charges for this service.
- **Lurk.** The act of reading a newsgroup but not posting.

- **Netizen.** A citizen of the Internet, or someone who uses networked resources.
- **Newsgroups.** Usenet discussion groups, or message areas, organized by hierarchy.
- **Newsreader.** Software used to participate in Usenet discussion groups. It allows you to read or post to the discussion group, or groups, of your choice.
- **Posting.** A single message entered into a network communications system.
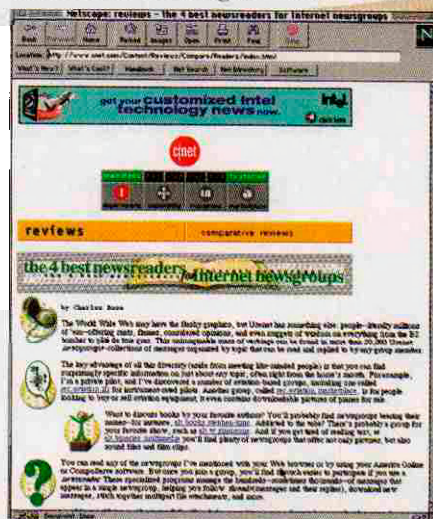- **Spamming.** Inappropriately posting the same commercial message to multiple newsgroups.

group that are part of a discussion involving numerous participants.

▶ **Post.** The newsreader enables you to participate in a discussion by posting to a newsgroup.

▶ **Respond.** This enables you to respond to the whole newsgroup, individual authors, or a single posting.

According to San Francisco-based C|NET: The Computer Network—an on-air and online source for news, information, and resources related to computers and digital technologies—good newsreaders are Free Agent, Agent, Trumpet Newsreader, and WinVN. Go to **http://www.cnet.-com/Content/Reviews/Compare/Readers/index.html** for a detailed review of each newsreader.

Let's say you're interested in finding information about computer-based training programs. You might start by searching "comp" newsgroups with the keywords "training," "programs," "software," or "CBT." A searchable index for both newsgroups and listservs can be found at **http://www.nova.edu/Inter-Links/cgi-bin/news-lists.pl or http://sunsite.unc.edu/cgi-bin/find-news.**

Once you've found a newsgroup that piques your interest, the newsreader will provide headers for all unread messages within a certain time frame (for example, 60 days). All Usenet postings are made in 7-bit ASCII format, so they're great places to exchange text. But it can be difficult trading pictures, software applications, video clips, and sound bites.

Many have tried to define Usenet, few have succeeded. For a closer look

at the intricacies of this system, visit **http://www.cis.ohio-state.edu/hype...enet/usenet/what-is/part1.faq.html.** A comprehensive summary of newsgroups can be found at **http://www.w3. org/hypertext/DataSources/News/Groups/Overview.html.** The granddaddy of Usenet FAQs (frequently asked questions) can be found at **http://www.cis.ohio**

state.edu/hypertext/faq/usenet/top.html.** This extensive site contains a list of all Usenet FAQs found in the group "news.answers." The list is alphabetized by topic.

Sources include Wired, *the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the ASTD Information Center, and Marcia Conner's Online Learning Resources page.*

COOL SITES

These sites address everything from Internet TV to career advice and job postings.

▶ Penn State's Training and Development Internet TV. **http://milkman.cac.psu.edu/~dip/TRDEV/trdevtv.html.** This site tells about Penn State's experimental Internet TV project and how you can participate.

▶ Career Path.com. **http://www.careerpath.com.** Reportedly, this site has the most employment listings on the World Wide Web. It's free and features job listings from the *Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, San Jose Mercury News,* and *Washington Post.*

▶ CareerWEB. **http://www.cweb.com/.** This site lets you store your resumé online for free so that potential employers can see what you have to offer.

▶ Search.com. **http://www.search.com/.** This site is a source for finding information on the Internet through a collection of search engines and databases.
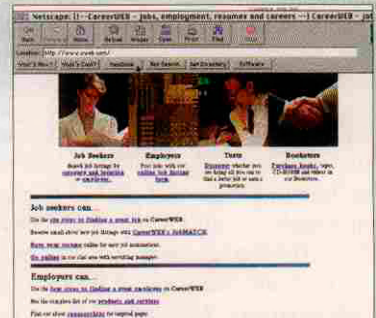

NEWSGROUPS TO TRY

▶ **alt.authorware** authorware issues and discussions

▶ **alt.education.distance** education over the Internet and intranets

▶ **alt.education.research** educational research

▶ **bit.listserv.edtech** educational technology list

▶ **comp.multimedia** general discussions and resources about multimedia

▶ **misc.education.adult** adult-education discussions

FORAGING IN THE INFORMATION JUNGLE

Here's how to get started with a newsgroup, as well as netiquette (appropriate behavior) while participating in online discussions (from The Net: User Guidelines and Netiquette by Arlene Rinaldi, **http://www.fau.edu/rinaldi/net/dis.html**).

▶ When you join a newsgroup, lurk (monitor the messages) for a while until you get a feel for the group and which topics are off-limits.

▶ See if there is a FAQ page, read it, and avoid posting previously asked questions.

▶ Don't send commercial notices or test messages.

▶ Use proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Use both upper-case and lowercase letters. Using all uppercase is perceived as SHOUTING and is also hard to read.

▶ Some discussion lists and Usenet groups have members from many countries. Don't assume that everyone will understand a reference to TV, movies, pop culture, or current events in your country.

▶ Keep questions and comments relevant to the focus of the group.