

GET ME MY AGENT!

IF YOUR MIND BOGGLES at all of the information available on the Internet, there may be a solution. A new breed of information-gathering tools called robots can help speed your searches for information. Instead of spending hours surfing, you can program a *bot* to do the work for you. This month, we examine a category of robots called intelligent agents. They are programs that travel between sites, "deciding" when to move and what to do.

Rick Hauser, an online writer, says there are five ways to use agents on the Web:

- ▶ researching, analyzing, and managing information collection
- ▶ sharing information and feedback via voice, collaboration, and e-mail
- ▶ selling products, services, and content
- ▶ providing entertainment
- ▶ building communities.

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

One company, Agents Inc., which runs the Firefly Web site, <http://www.firefly.com>, built its site on the premise that people want to connect with others with similar tastes. The site suggests music and movies for its members based on a profile of you that is created each time you visit the site.

In effect, the site's bot learns more about you each time. Although some people may find the idea of having a computer get inside your head a bit creepy, the site does have some entertainment value. Firefly members also can create their own Web pages and chat with other users who are logged on.

Surflogica, <http://www.surflogica.com>, makes the agent, Surfbot. It can check for changes to sites in your bookmarks file, apply data filters to content, and deliver updated pages to your desktop. Because most sites are organized hierarchically, Surfbot was

designed to explore linked pages so you can receive updated pages throughout all levels of a Web site. Unfortunately, the product runs only on Windows 95, with no additional platforms planned as of this writing.

Heaven or hell?

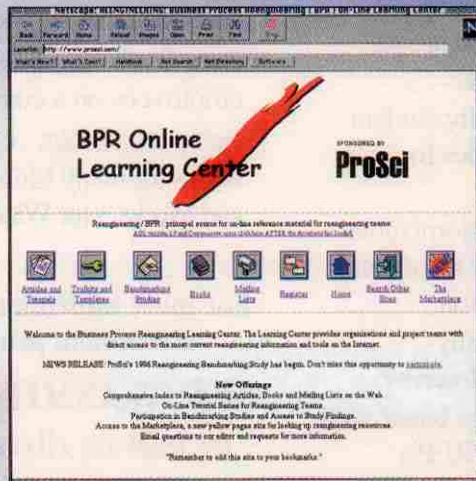
The Angel, from San Francisco-based NetAngels, is an agent that searches and recommends interesting sites based on your needs and interests. As a member of the Angel Network, you receive a personalized, regularly updated WorldPage that displays your own private version of cyberspace. The company is conducting a beta test of its product. So, if you have Windows 95 you can join other guinea pigs by going to the NetAngels Web page, <http://www.netangels.com>.

Knowing that the Internet is full of exaggerated claims, I decided to try out one of the so-called intelligent agents. Because Surfbot and the Angel are un-

COOL SITES

▶ Business Process Reengineering On-Line Learning Center, <http://www.prosci.com>. Everything you ever wanted to know about BPR but were afraid to ask. This site "provides organizations and project teams with direct access to the most current reengineering information available on the Internet. You can find articles, tutorials, mailing lists, case studies, suggested readings, and resource links that relate to BPR on this well-designed site.

▶ The Glass Ceiling Commission, http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/library/e_archive/GlassCeiling/. A site containing material that relates to the "invisible, artificial barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing within their organization and reaching full potential." Selected



papers and research include, "The Glass Ceiling and Persons With Disabilities," "Use of Enforcement Techniques in Eliminating the Glass Ceiling," and "The Impact of the Glass Ceiling and Structural Change on Minorities and Women."

NET TRENDS

According to a nationwide survey of executives conducted by Arlington, Virginia-based Accountemps, "working the Net" may be as important as networking when it comes to your job search.

Of 150 executives polled, 40 percent of respondents said that using the Internet for recruiting efforts is now commonplace. The executives were asked "How common is it for companies to use the Internet for recruiting job candidates?" Their responses:

- ▶ very common 10%
- ▶ somewhat common 30%
- ▶ somewhat uncommon 38%
- ▶ very uncommon 19%
- ▶ don't know 3%

Says Cecelia Mandanis, area manager for Accountemps in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, "The message for job candidates is that searching for positions on the Internet will clearly give them an added advantage in landing a position."

ONLINE JUNKIE

First came therapists, then group therapists, then animal shrinks. Now, there's a therapist that can help you if you are addicted to cyberspace. For \$100 an hour for individuals and \$45 an hour for groups, Marissa Hecht Orzack, a cognitive-behavior therapist, can help free you from the wired world. Orzack, who is founder and coordinator of Computer Addictive Services at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, uses standard behavioral techniques to help cure victims of "pathological-computer-use disorder."

"People often gravitate to the computer when they want to kill time or avoid an unpleasant task," warns Orzack. "The problem is, nobody's teaching them when it's time to get off." You can reach Orzack at 617/855-2907 or perhaps more likely by e-mail at orzack@tiac.net.

(Source: *Inc. Technology*)

NET TRENDS: PART DEUX

Sure the Internet has its problems: slow speed, bandwidth limitations, and piles of meaningless content. But according to a survey by Louis Harris and Associates, most people are happy with their Internet surfing experiences. The company polled 1,005 people, plus an additional 181 that have used the Internet or World Wide Web in the past 12 months.

Here are some of the questions and their answers:

- ▶ Have you ever seen, read of, or heard of the Internet?

Have seen, read, or heard	87%
Have not seen, read, or heard	13%
- ▶ How often are you likely to use the Internet or WWW in the coming year?

A lot	65%
A few times	32%
Not at all	3%
- ▶ How would you rate your experience with the Internet or the WWW?

Excellent	16%
Good	63%
Fair	20%
Poor	1%

(Source: *Business Week*, August 1996)

available for Windows 3.0, I started with AutoNomy, a suite of software for the "creation, training, and monitoring of AutoNomy Corporation's neural network-based information agents." Sounds pretty complicated, right? Well, in reality, the software was simple to download from the company's Web site, <http://www.agentware.com>. Once I'd installed the agent on my computer, a process that took about three minutes, I tried to "train" an agent to do a search for me. The agent, an animated dogbot that moves lethargically on the screen, reminded me of a lackluster Snoopy. The first few times, the agent brought back an assortment of Web sites—some useful and some irrelevant. It was fun to watch as my personal assistant sniffed around the Internet for information while I worked on other projects. But after reinstalling the beta software on my computer, it caused my system to crash each time I tried to conduct a search. Conclusion: A snazzy little gadget that is more style than substance.

The features that a useful agent should have are lacking in the AutoNomy software. AutoNomy says that "a truly autonomous information agent would have the ability to sense and respond to its immediate envi-

Someone To Watch Over You?

Are you worried that your employees are visiting the Dilbert Web page instead of working? Well, now your fears can be alleviated with the Internet Monitor from Optimal Networks.

This network management tool lets administrators collect and analyze Internet and intranet traffic data. It also helps employers monitor where employees go on the World Wide Web.

"The idea of monitoring people seems controversial," says Steve Holtzman, vice president of strategic marketing at Optimal Networks. "The goal is to improve Internet performance."

Scary.



ronment, to exercise judgment according to its training, and to learn about and adapt to its user's wishes, tastes, and preferences for information." Wishful thinking.

Although the promise of an agent that can do all of your research while you're off scuba diving

sounds appealing, it's a long way off. Remember: Just like much of the software available on the Net, agents will take time to develop and master. At least now you can experiment with some of the software for free.

@Work is a monthly column devoted to the use of the Internet. E-mail your online experiences and suggestions to atwork@astd.org.

THE LAST WORD

From Phillip Winn's Tune In to Taglines Web page:

- ▶ "I'm not smart enough to lie."
-Ronald Reagan
- ▶ Always draw your curves, then plot the data.
- ▶ Guru: One who knows more jargon than you.
- ▶ It's lonely at the top, but you eat better.
- ▶ Taglines \tag-linz \. The bumperstickers of the Internet.