

**Strengthening Social Capital through  
Computer-mediated Community Participation**

**Software Applications Selection Report**



Building an exclusive online professional and social networking community for The National Association for Multi-ethnicity in Communications' Executive Leadership Development Program members

### Executive Summary

There are numerous open source and free tools to create and manage blogs, calendars and discussion boards; however, the authoring companies that offer the free or general public license software usually do not have technical support as an option for their applications. Additionally, the NAMIC.com web site is hosted in a shared hosting server environment. Shared hosting servers are limited by the kinds of software that the site owners can load onto their systems; the proposed software must match the current configuration options of the web site's server. Software that is installed on the server also require a staff or contract technician for installation and maintenance, and for these reasons, only externally-hosted third party applications were considered as options for the ELDP Online Community software.

This report presents research and reviews of and recommendations for discussion board, event calendaring and blog applications for the ELDP Online Community. The requirements for each application are outlined, followed by an analysis and discussion of competing applications, with recommendations for purchase of the applications that contain the required specifications.

The software applications recommended for purchase are:

Application Type	Selected Software	Price	Website
Discussion Board	<b>WebSiteToolBox</b>	\$60/year	<a href="http://www.websitetoolbox.com">http://www.websitetoolbox.com</a>
Event Calendaring	<b>MHSoftware</b>	\$99/year	<a href="http://www.mhsoftware.com">http://www.mhsoftware.com</a>
Blog	<b>21Publish</b>	\$950/year	<a href="http://www.21Publish.com">http://www.21Publish.com</a>

The technical requirements for all software selected for the online community are that they are easy to use, have a high customization level, domain-mapping ability, ease of technical integration and offer user and administration technical support.

*High level of Customization.* Customization level is important because the software must offer the ability to manipulate every layout element to achieve a look of total visual integration into NAMIC.com. The applications must be seamlessly integrated so that the user experience is identical in architecture, navigation and layout between host and hosted sites.

*Domain Mapping.* Domain mapping imparts branding integration into the applications by allowing the NAMIC.com name to be used in all URLs associated with the hosted software. The mapped domain allows the user to feel as if he never leaves NAMIC.com. Low annual price per user: The chosen software must meet the budgetary requirements for setup, installation and ongoing maintenance and support.

*Ease of technical integration:* Applications integration, which includes installation as well as quality assurance testing, must be accomplished within the implementation time period. As a result, the chosen applications must possess a low level of technical integration complexity.

*Technical Support.* Since NAMIC does not have an internal IT department, it is necessary that the chosen application provide an ongoing technical support option. The contract for the chosen applications must include software maintenance and upgrades as well as offer support for any technical questions that NAMIC staff may have during normal use of the applications. The online help sections of each application must be easily accessible from all top-level pages in the application. The information architecture of the help sections must be arranged so that users can quickly and easily find answers to targeted questions. The applications must not only meet the technical requirements, but also applications must have a low annual price per user that is within budget. In addition to the technical requirements, each application has its own set of unique evaluation criteria, which are outlined in the discussion section below.

### **Discussion Board Applications**

Users expect a standard type of interactivity and usability from discussion boards that generally do not vary among board applications. Boards are arranged in topic categories in a hierarchical layout structure that is fairly intuitive and user-friendly. At its most basic level, user interaction primarily consists of reading posts and threads, and entering a username and password in order to post a message.

Application	Price	Customization Level	Domain Mapping	User Support Type	Admin. Features Level	Security Level
Proboards	\$85/yr	High	No	Forum, Email	Medium	High
Website Toolbox	\$60/year	High	Yes	Online User Manual	High	High
Boardhost	\$60/year	High	No	FAQ, Knowledge-base	Low	High
Network54	\$100/yr	Low	No	FAQ, Forum-based support	Medium	Low
Ready Bulletin Board	\$29/yr	Medium	No	FAQ, Forum, Knowledge-base	High	Medium

*User Features.* Beyond the basic user interaction features, the competitive feature set requirement for the selected discussion board include:

- *HTML posting:* Messages can be posted in HTML format
- *Personalization:* Users can choose representative avatars, apply signatures to their postings, and create profiles to display personal data on message posting)
- *Email messaging:* Users can choose to be notified in their emails when new messages are posted
- *Message preview:* Users can preview messages before posting them live
- *File uploading/attaching:* Users can upload and attach files to their messages
- *Inserting graphics into messages:* Users can place graphic files in their message postings

*Support.* In terms of user support, discussion boards usually have a FAQ and knowledgebase section, with a few boards that offer online user guides or user manuals.

*Installation.* For all hosted applications reviewed, technical installation was a similarly straightforward and uncomplicated HTML solution.

*Security.* The reviewed board applications distinguished themselves by their level of security options offered and administration features. Board security consists of features that protect the board against undesirable posts. Competitive security feature requirements for the selected discussion board include:

- *Profanity filter.* Messages are scanned for profanity by the system before being posted to the board
- *Password protection:* Users cannot post without entering a valid password
- *IP Banning:* Board administrators can ban IP Addresses known to deploy unwanted posted

- *User name banning*: Administrators can ban users from posting by their login name
- *Email Banning*: Administrators can ban users from posting by their email address
- *Spam Filter*: The system filters messages for spam prior to posting
- *Invalid login attempt tracking*: The system keeps a record of the number of failed login attempts, which can signal a possible problematic IP Address, user name or email address

*Administration*. The discussion board administrator installs the board HTML code and also configures the board's administration feature set through a Web-based administration panel. The feature set controls user-posting options as well as board operation. Administration feature set requirements for the selected discussion board include:

- *Set Member Registration Requirements*: The board administrator chooses the fields on the registration form that users fill out the first time they post to the board
- *Edit/Delete Posts*: The administrator can edit or delete messages posted to the board
- *Edit/Delete Members*: The administrator can edit or delete user profiles
- *Lock Threads, Forums, Topics*: The administrator can close discussions to prevent further posts
- *Archive Messages*: Older messages can be removed from the general posting area and stored in a designated place
- *Activity Statistics/ Tracking*: The administrator can access reports that display user traffic patterns and activity

In terms of security, neither Network54 nor Ready Bulletin Board supplied spam filters. The discussion boards that were viewed from their client list contained obvious spam posts. Also, both Network54 and Ready Bulletin Board had low customization levels that limited layout and design options, and neither of these boards offered any of the advanced personalization features (avatars, signatures, profiles) that users have come to expect from a discussion board. In terms of administration, neither Boardhost nor Network54 allowed administrators to edit or delete members.

The three boards in the same price range and with high customization levels, Proboards, WebsiteToolbox and Boardhost, also offer all of the required competitive security features. WebsiteToolbox was the clear choice for discussion board because it is the only board to offer domain mapping.

### **Events Calendar Applications**

Event calendaring offers the ELDP the opportunity to list both professional and relevant personal events, and send out email notifications, invitations and reminders to registered alumni. The events calendars reviewed all contained the required user and administrative features. Calendars differed largely on their support options and in their prices.

Application	Price	Customization Level	Domain Mapping	Help Section	Email Reminders / notifications.	Events RSS feeds
CalendarWiz	\$249/yr	High	Yes	Extensive	Yes	No
MH Software	\$99/year	High	Yes	Extensive/ Intuitive	Yes	Yes
MyHosted Calendar	\$99/year	High	No	Poor	Yes	Yes
Trumba	\$1,200/yr	High	N/A*	Extensive / Intuitive	Yes	No
GreatHill	\$180/yr	Low	No	Poor	Yes	No

\* Domain mapping is not required for Trumba because it uses Ajax

*User Features.* The reviewed calendar applications offered similar usability options. For example the steps for users to add new items to the calendar were similar from calendar to calendar, with each having a web form interface with similarly named fields for the user to enter in event information. The required user feature set for the selected calendar application is:

- *Calendar Views:* Calendar displays multiple event views consisting of monthly, weekly, and daily
- *Calendar Listings:* Calendar event lists in order by date
- *Search:* Calendar search the by keywords, dates or event types
- *Email Notifications and Reminders:* Users can specify to receive email reminders for upcoming events, and also to receive notifications when new events are posted
- *RSS feeds:* Calendar event data is aggregated and displayed on other web pages
- *Contact List:* Users can add names to the contact list

*Administration.* All calendar applications, with the exception of Trumba, had similar integration processes that consisted of placing standard HTML tags on a Web page. Trumba is a collection of Ajax applications wherein Javascript modules display calendar components on your Web page. A general familiarity with Javascript is required; however the installation process involves few steps for the Javascript tag placement. All of the other reviewed calendar applications provided a similar standard HTML placement and display of the hosted calendar. Additional administration feature set required for the calendars are:

- *Manage Users:* A list of user names and passwords can be uploaded into the calendar to pre-register users
- *Email Settings:* Administrators can configure mail settings for email notifications and reminders
- *Submission Filters:* Administrators can apply filters that scan postings to ensure compliance with calendar standards

*Support.* User support options are particularly important for the selected calendaring application. Calendar applications present the user with many form field options in order to add new event listings. While the Web interface to update and post event listings is similar across most events calendars, many users may not be familiar with the interface. Therefore, an extensive yet intuitive online help section is a requirement for the selected calendar applications. The support offerings of the reviewed calendar applications are:

- *Trumba:* Trumba's "Help Center" is highly intuitive and the information is arranged hierarchically, with general questions hyperlinking to more specific questions and content.
- *MyHostedCalendar:* Support was limited to a bulletin board that contained few posts
- *GreatHill:* No online manual for the hosted version of the calendar software; however there is a well-documented online manual for the server install version. Additional support options are a FAQ page and an email contact form, and phone technical support is available during normal business hours
- *CalendarWiz:* An extensive searchable knowledgebase, and also an email support form for users and administrators
- *MH Software:* An extensive yet intuitive help section that provides multiple ways for users to access information through a pull down menu interface that displays:
  - *View Contents:* View the help topics in a table of contents listing. The TOC page has access to an Index topics listing and also a Search function.
  - *Tutorial:* Select from tutorials on targeted subjects
  - *FAQs:* Read a from a list of frequently asked questions
  - *Video:* View flash video of step-by-step instructions on how to perform each aspect of calendar event posting and administration

CalendarWiz has a 100-user restriction level, which may become problematic over time. Trumba's customization level was also high in that each Javascript module placed on page could be manipulated for position, size and color. That Trumba did not offer an RSS feed to display calendar postings is not the reason it was not selected as the final calendar choice; Trumba's price of \$1,200/yr is outside of budget. Neither MyHostedCalendar nor GreatHill could map to domains. MH Software was selected as the events calendar application because it not only met all technical requirements, but also it was among the lowest priced.

### **Blog Applications**

There are many free blog hosting services, such as Google's Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>), while other companies offer free entry-level blog hosting packages as well as subscription packages with premium features for a monthly fee, such as LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com>). Blog hosting services generally host a single blog on which multiple users may register as members. However, only the blog owner may create a blog; the multiple users can only post comments and use other blog features prescribed by the blog administrator. Since the ELDP Online Community requires multiple blogs, each blog created by a unique author, the free hosting services were not an option.

An exhaustive search for hosting providers that offer blog community packages revealed TypePad Business Class and 21Publish as the only viable alternatives. Both TypePad and 21Publish met and exceeded the technical requirements; both applications had high customization levels, domain-mapping ability, and ease of technical integration.

Application	Price	Customization Level	Domain Mapping	User Support Type	Administration Features Level	Administration Support Type
21Publish	\$950/yr	High	Yes	FAQ, Email, knowledge-base	High	FAQ, email, knowledge-base
Typepad	\$899 per blog / year	High	Yes	Phone, email, FAQ, knowledge-base	High	Phone, email, FAQ, knowledge-base

*Support.* TypePad's technical support options for both users and administrators far exceeded 21Publish's support options. 21Publish provides FAQs, an online help section and an email form for queries. TypePad provides priority technical support for users and administrators that includes phone support.

*Security/Administration.* TypePad and 21Publish offer similar security features to protect blog postings. TypePad's security level for blog postings is slightly higher than 21Publish's in that TypePad offers spam control to protect blogs from undesirable postings. Both candidates offered the required security features for a blog application:

- **Authentication:** Administrators can configure whether or not users need to be verified registrants before they can comment on blogs
- **Password Protection:** Administrators can chose to password protect blogs to allow only registered members to post
- **Moderation:** Blog authors can have review, edit or delete control over published comments
- **IP Banning:** Administrators can ban the IP Addresses that generate unwanted postings

*User Features.* Both TypePad and 21Publish offered the required user feature set that promotes information seeking:

- *RSS Feeds:* Aggregate links of most recent blog entries
- *Trackbacks:* Lists of links that refer to your posts as a source are posted on blog pages
- *Search within Posts:* The entire blog community can search within blog postings
- *Search and replace within posts:* Blog authors have the ability to perform search and replace in their postings
- *Mobile Blogging:* Users are able to blog from their wireless devices
- *Visitor Statistics:* Blog authors can view reports of visitor activity for their blogs

## Recommendations for Purchase

The software applications recommended for purchase are:

<b>Application Type</b>	<b>Selected Software</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Website</b>
Discussion Board	<b>WebSiteToolBox</b>	\$60/year	<a href="http://www.websitetoolbox.com">http://www.websitetoolbox.com</a>
Event Calendaring	<b>MHSoftware</b>	\$99/year	<a href="http://www.mhsoftware.com">http://www.mhsoftware.com</a>
Blog	<b>21Publish</b>	\$950/year	<a href="http://www.21Publish.com">http://www.21Publish.com</a>