Groupware

Groupware is "software designed to help people involved in a common task achieve their goals," according to Wikipedia.[1] This definition includes just about every software application and service that has been mentioned in this report, as well as many others. To narrow down the definition a bit, I will define groupware as a suite of applications that can be found on their own, but are put together into a groupware package for the convenience of the collaborative team. This means that groupware includes calendaring, link/bookmark management, document storage and/or creation, communication tools, and usually a wiki-like component. Each of these separate parts can be used on its own, but groupware gives you a common look and feel and a common sign-on to keep the number of usernames and passwords that your team has to remember to a minimum.

External Groupware

External sites that provide groupware capabilities are being launched almost every day. One of the first of these sites was Grou.ps (see figure 13). This site offers—for free—a group website, a desktop client, a mobile interface, and a Facebook application that can be installed in a Facebook account to keep track of the activity in the Grou.ps account. Users can also connect a Grou.ps account to many of the social tools that have already been discussed in this report. Grou.ps can integrate an existing Delicious account into the Grou.ps account so that all of the bookmarks are managed from within the single groupware application. For a large project with a large number of participants, groupware such as Grou.ps may be the best choice.

Grou.ps
http://grou.ps

The ToS for Grou.ps is slightly different from most because it takes into account any code that users might write for the site (HTML for a group site, for example). All code that is submitted to the Grou.ps service is done so under a choice of licenses—but regardless of the license is chosen, Grou.ps claims no rights to user code or user data at any time. The ToS also does an excellent job of explaining why the service has to have the right to modify user content in order to display it properly on the site or the right to publicly perform or display user content—so that others can see it as well. The statement also explains why Grou.ps chose the licenses that must be used—the service wants to encourage sharing of code and data between groups and so make all data easily shared via the license. Users who do not want their data displayed under anything less than full copyright should probably consider using an internally hosted solution.

Internal Groupware

Some projects require more security or confidentiality than an externally hosted application can provide. Projects with those requirements may benefit from the use of an internally hosted groupware solution. This requires more involvement from the IT staff, who will probably be needed to install and run the groupware, plus some special server software (usually the PHP scripting
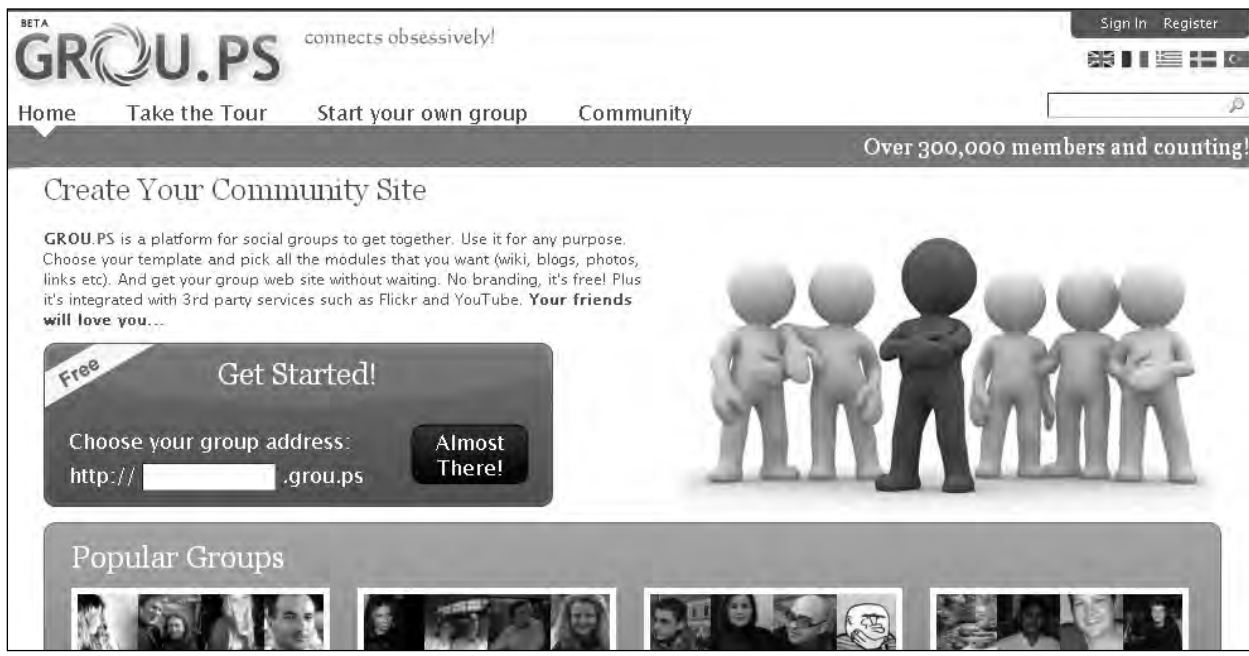
Figure 13
Grou.ps site

language and a MySQL database, both freely available on the Internet). If no IT staff is available, it is important to have an employee with advanced technology skills who can install and administer the software. The administration of this software is not for beginners. In return for this knowledge investment, however, groups can get all of the benefits of groupware without having to transport or store sensitive data through the Internet.

The class of software known as Content Management Systems (CMSs) can work as groupware in this way. Both Drupal and Joomla are free, open source CMSs with the capabilities to become full-feature groupware. The base system for each of these CMS applications provides the group website, and modules can be added to both of them to give a group communication tools, calendars, connections to other social software sites (social bookmarks, social document sites, and social networking sites, to name a few), and wikis. The learning curve is a bit steeper and the setup a bit more complex for an internal groupware solution, but the ability to control your data and know who has access to it—and who does not—may be worth it to the project.

> *Drupal*
> http://drupal.org
>
> *Joomla*
> www.joomla.org

Drupal is a nice groupware system by itself, with built-in blogs, forums, and user management abilities that give everyone a chance to be an author or editor of the content in the site. Drupal can pull in information from other tools that group members may be using by utilizing some of its huge and growing list of modules For instance, a module to pull in a set of Delicious links allows the administrator of the site to choose a number of either users or tags to grab from Delicious and display them on the group's site. There are a number of Facebook-related modules, including one that uses the Facebook Connect service to pull in a user's contact information and other data from Facebook into the group's Drupal site and one that provides a platform for creating a Facebook application using the content already created on Drupal. There are also multiple modules for pulling in Flickr pictures into your groupware site. The Flickr module allows users to either insert their most recent photo or photoset or choose which photos to include through a built-in filter. Drupal has dozens of other modules available.

> *Delicious module for Drupal*
> http://drupal.org/project/delicious
>
> *Facebook Connect module for Drupal*
> http://drupal.org/project/fbconnect

Note

1. "Collaborative Software," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groupware (accessed Dec. 1, 2008).

Joomla also has many extensions to the software that will help users customize their groupware site and allow the group to use it effectively. One of the new modules available is the GCalendar extension. It pulls in Google Calendars and displays them inside the user's Joomla site. Joomla also has an extension that allows a full-featured MediaWiki to be used inside the Joomla-based site. It makes incorporating a wiki into a group's site painless. For those who also use social document services, there is a GoogleDocs extension, which enable users to embed documents from the Google Docs and Spreadsheets service into their site. Many others are also available at the Joomla site so that users can make your Joomla groupware site do exactly what it needs to do.