PHPBB2: All It Can Be?

Please allow me to start off and say that I am very happy to run PHP software on my computer. Specifically, the bulletin boards developed by PHPBB2 [an open source program] works head and shoulders above the EZBoard system I gave up on several months earlier. Still, it has its own special challenges that only a regular user or administrator can appreciate. If you are considering starting your own message board community please read on for some homespun advice on how to make PHPBB2 work best for you.

On Memorial Day 2005 I had a rude awakening. Although a national holiday here in the U.S. I was taking advantage of that day to catch up on some much needed behind the scenes work. You see, when you work for yourself a holiday just isn?t the same thing. It ends up being a day where your phone isn?t likely to ring all that much, thereby making it a better opportunity to catch up on all the little niggling details of operating a business, like paying bills and bookkeeping. Okay, I digress.

What happened on that special day was the total overthrow of the EZBoard message board system. Hackers, so EZBoard claimed, infiltrated their entire system and brought down the house. Literally overnight thousands of boards were affected and compromised. Now for the rub: forum managers, myself included, had no power to back up their sites. Thus, what was lost was likely lost for good or would take many weeks to restore from pasted together backups. We depended on EZBoard for our back ups and when their system failed we all suffered.

So then the decision was made for me. I downloaded PHPBB2 software a few days later and immediately went to work.

As open source programs go the PHPBB2 software was free and the instructions were quite good. Fortunately for me the two sites that I planned to set up, the Aviation Employment Board and the Corporate Flight Attendant Community, already had separate web pages hosted with a company that could support a database. This particular MySQL database would essentially power the site and house important stuff including all the member information.

Fortunately those who have been working on building, maintaining, and promoting PHPBB have a copious amount of detailed information accessible right online and available for viewing and/or downloading. Personally, the biggest help to me were the excellently made Flash videos that helped walk me through the installation process. Without them in place, I doubt I would have figured it all out. Truly, in this case, a picture is worth a thousand words each!

In addition to the software itself, PHPBB2 also offers a separate file to help speed the process conversion process from EZBoard to PHPBB2. This EZBoard converter takes messages from the old board and transfers them to the new board. Unfortunately, it was only partially successful which could have been due to the hacked nature of the EZBoard site. Still, what I was able to move over was helpful, but it did not include member files as that bit of necessary information was under EZBoard?s lock and key.

By the time I downloaded everything, followed all the instructions, converted what I could from EZBoard, laid out the new site, and made some additional design changes, approximately eight hours had flown past. At the end of that time a useful and functioning board was in place. The next day I contacted all my current EZBoard members and told them about the switch and put notices on the old site about the change. Most of my members were very understanding as they realized that the switch had to be made.

Without exception PHPBB2 has been a big improvement. Still, it could use some refining and, happily, many of those refinements are routinely accomplished within regular updates of the software or via preselected ?mods? that a forum manager can select.

Without belaboring the point here are some things that I have observed about PHPBB2 that are helpful to know about before going with the software:

Limited Support There is a lot of information right online to read and there are forums moderated by volunteers. At the same time the moderators are stretched very thin and sometimes their responses border on the irritated. Of

course, that could have something to do with all the N00B questions, many of which are answered somewhere on the site. My recommendation is that you spend plenty of time reading before posting a question. Study the forum for similar questions asked and answers given.

Difficult Updates Get on the forum managers mailing list to ensure that you receive notification of each update as they are made. Some updates are simple while others are more difficult. If you make any modifications to your site then only a ?patch? update is necessary while everyone else will select ?changed files only.? If you select ?changed files only? and you have some mods installed, you risk losing all of your mods. Let?s just say that already has happened to me once!

AOL Quirks Some members have difficulty signing up, especially AOL account holders. It seems to be that the confirmation code doesn?t always show up when members register [you don?t need to have it enabled, but it does put a halt to rogue registrants] and sometimes AOL users get booted when logged on. A little thing called ?sessions? monitors everyone?s visits by examining their I.P. address for a match. Of course, AOL scrambles I.P. addresses mid-session, a reason for much of the booting. The fix involved from a PHPBB2 standpoint is not recommended as it puts you at risk for security breaches. Quite frankly, I have urged some members to leave AOL especially if they can?t work around it on their end.

Back Ups The administration panel is simple to use, but back ups don?t always work. Errors messages prevail; therefore backing up through your web host is another option. Speaking of the administration panel, you can select whether members can email each other [not a good thing to have enabled], how long their signature can be, enable automatic pruning of posts, and lots more. Indeed, the features offered by PHPBB2 far exceed the limitations that are inherent with EZBoard.

There are alternative forums to PHPBB2 and one popular one is another PHP program called vBulletin. vBulletin utilizes excellent forum software that takes off where PHPBB2 leaves off. Many of the modifications that are not part of PHPBB2 are standard with vBulletin, therefore removing some of the behind the scenes tasks that a webmaster must do with PHPBB2 in order to customize his site.

So, why not go with vBulletin? For many it is simply the cost. With vBulletin, you can lease a license for $85 for one year or buy a license for $160. Access to updates after the first year costs another $30 per year while custom support can run from $30 for one month up to $300 for one year. Thus, if you have a small forum that makes little or no money, and you need extra special assistance, than vBulletin can be a big expense to carry. Other paid forums have similar expenses, but there are some free ones out there. For the record, EZBoard isn?t free, although the start up cost is very low. However, your renewal fee is calculated on the amount of bandwidth used in the most recent thirty day period and for some forum managers that amount could easily be several hundreds to well over one thousand dollars!

So then, why go with PHPBB2? Well, language packs to name a big reason. Besides English forums, an additional 59 languages are supported by this open source code! From Afrikaans to Vietnamese, Arabic to Russian, and from French to German, PHPBB2 is available in many native languages. For people of very limited means this has become an excellent way to communicate for no capital outlay. One gets the sense that PHPBB2 is very proud of this fact and I must admit that I am too!

As I write this I am in the midst of updating my two sites to the latest release. Because it is near the Christmas season I am also looking at several themed templates for my flight attendant site and have selected a ?Merry Christmas? board replete with drifting down snowflakes. This template, which looks so professionally done, is free as well.

I plan on sticking with PHPBB2, quirks and all, by continuing to support our growing community of forum managers worldwide. Each of us, in our own way, has helped to shape this all important piece of open source software. It certainly isn?t perfect, but it definitely has been a lot of fun and has helped me to increase my knowledge as well as to appreciate the whole open source movement.

Short note about the author

[http://www.corporateflyer.net/forum] for first hand examples of forums built utilizing PHPBB2.