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Designing in a High-Speed Networking Environment

Design is a discipline which determines the shape, processes and specifications for the products, environments and information that surround us. Design can be broken down into 3 sub-sectors: industrial design, design of the built environment and communications design. Design firms are typically SMEs with an average of less than 5 employees. Their small size inhibits their ability to invest in expensive, complex technologies, and individually they cannot afford to handle the capital costs associated with on-line marketing and e-commerce. Recognizing that Canadian designers must compete in a global marketplace, and must often work together on multi-disciplinary projects to gain strategic advantage, in 1999 the Design Exchange (DX), Canada's centre for design and innovation, established DXNet through funding from the Ontario Ministry of Energy, Science and Technology's Telecommunications Access Partnerships initiative. The project is in the pilot stage.

DXNet's mission is to create an infrastructure that serves as a resource for design SMEs to foster industry collaboration, efficiency and competitiveness and to enhance the design community's ability to market and provide its services on-line. DXNet provides the means for Ontario's design sector to become more competitive by reducing operating costs, allowing for collaborative work with members of a design team, increasing efficiencies and accelerating the development and export of new products and services. To date, the company has 7 full-time and 3 part-time employees and is supported by a $2.5 million hardware and software infrastructure. The twenty pilot users include architecture, graphic design, new media design, interior design and product design firms. Monthly user meetings are held to track use of DXNet and monitor its benefit to designers.

Several test projects underway include use of the project management tool to design the web site for the Toronto 2008 Olympic bid. Tilley Endurables and Dupont Canada have used DXNet services to web broadcast national design competitions. DXNet showcasing services were used to promote designers virtually at a DX trade mission to Italy in April 2000.

DXNet features an actual private network (APN) which creates a strong, secure on-line design community. Comprising high speed intranet and internet access and project management interface tools, the private network facilitates on-line project management by designers of all kinds - architects, interior designers, multimedia artists, as well as their suppliers and clients.

On a typical project, a designer will generally use 7 sub-contractors, sub-consultants, suppliers and service-providers. The APN allows designers to communicate, share documents and collaborate on-line through project tracking, project storage, file transfer, messaging, scheduling, chat, application sharing, video-conferencing, and whiteboarding. Through it, designers can offer services at more competitive rates and extend market reach nationally and internationally. DXNet's APN encourages small Canadian design firms to work collaboratively with other designers in virtual project teams in order to bid on large, international projects.

The DXNet web site www.dxnet.net is both a portal to the APN and a public on-line source for information about design. The public component of the site is divided into: press centre, gallery, theatre, and marketplace. The site includes press releases, job postings, streaming video, searchable directories, showcase galleries, and virtual product showrooms. Building on the DX's existing web presence, this new site reaches 300 visitors a day and has 4,000 registered subscribers to a monthly e-mail newsletter that provides updates on the site's content. An additional service, DXNETWire, is being developed to allow registered users to receive e-mail updates the moment new content is added to the site. The web site allows designers to market their services to potential clients, provide information to customers, source material from suppliers and solicit potential employees and consultants within the community. DXNet will also enable designers to specify and order from suppliers on-line.

Suppliers to the design community provide anything from paper to software, furniture to siding, mouldmaking to rapid prototyping. Many of these products and services vary in presentation, applications, features, performance capabilities, materials, warranty, colour, weight, dimensions, installation, and pricing.

DXNet will provide the up to date information that designers need from their suppliers, and a database will allow designers to search for appropriate products based on a range of selection criteria. For example, a designer requires a high-end, ergonomic task chair. Upon entering these criteria, a list of chairs - Keilhauer's Tom Chair, Teknion's Amicus and Smed's Karma - appears on the DXNet site. The site provides images of the chairs and details on each chair, including the sizes available, the adjustment controls, the colours and upholsteries available, and any other unique features. Designers and their clients can access this information from their offices and select the best solution. From there, designers can direct a customized, on-line order directly to the supplier of choice.

Providing this information on-line will save designers time and space by providing all of the information they require in one central on-line location. With a few clicks, designers will identify new and innovative products that will enhance their design projects and their service to clients. Suppliers can increase access to their product information and save on expensive catalogues and brochures, while enhancing the reach through their own web sites and helping their sales representatives to become more effective.

DXNet permits designers to be on the cutting edge of the latest innovations in technology-assisted service-offering. In time, the APN will offer other innovative technologies on-line including on-line training and use of a virtual reality centre. DXNet provides the Canadian design community with a leading edge infrastructure that will help drive innovation in the design community and stimulate the development and testing of new products in the manufacturing, construction, entertainment, communications and new media industries.

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