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IBM Slims Down the Web for Your Phone

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Robert McMillan, IDG News Service

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Researchers at IBM have developed software that lets mobile users create slimmed-down Web pages that can be viewed more easily on a small device such as a mobile phone.

Called Highlight, the software is an extension to the Firefox browser and was built by researchers at IBM's Almaden Research Center.

Highlight lets users record the steps required to perform a simple task on the Web, say looking up flight arrival information on a Web site. Users can "clip" sections from a Web site and then save them on another Web server, which then serves the slimmed-down pages to the mobile device.

The software lets Web surfers create their own versions of Web sites, free of the clutter that makes them hard to navigate on a small screen.

In addition to acting as a Web server for the mobile user, this second Web server actually runs a copy of the Firefox browser that fetches the data from the Web site being copied and then serves it up to the Highlight user.

Highlight works well for what developer Jeffrey Nichols calls "task-driven things" -- shopping on Amazon.com, for example, or getting local restaurant recommendations from Google Maps.

The fact that Highlight works with a proxy server presents a problem for Highlight's developers, however. Not all Web sites are happy to have their content copied onto other servers.

Nichols isn't sure whether this problem will be solved, but he's hopeful. "IBM or some other company could host a service that hosts these things," he said.

The IBM researcher hasn't publicly released Highlight, but he said that he'd consider doing so if there was enough interest in the project.

Highlight borrows code from another IBM project called CoScripter, which is interesting in its own right. Created two years ago by Nichols' fellow Almaden researchers, the software gives users a way to record repetitive Web tasks and then share them with others on a Web page.

CoScripter developer Allen Cypher says that CoScripter still needs some tuning before it will be ready for widespread use, but by year's end the software should be able to record pretty much anything that can be done in the Firefox browser.

Using a programming technique Cypher calls "sloppy programming," CoScripter turns a series of Web clicks into a script that can then be shared and edited by other CoScripter users. It can turn tricky, repetitive tasks, such as entering data into Web-based intranet applications, into a snap, Cypher said.

The software is useful wherever "you've got this common group of people with the same needs," he said.

As a bonus, the script doesn't look like a computer language and is pretty easy to read and edit, even if you're not a programmer.

IBM employees are already sharing scripts for the company's intranet applications that can do things like forward

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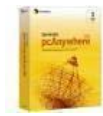
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