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It seems that just about every technology vendor is referencing "Web 2.0" these days, but for those who are waiting to see some dramatic new product or technology arise, you can stop holding your breath. Web 2.0 is already here, and it has been for a few years now.

But for those still wondering, "What exactly is Web 2.0?," well, that's a little more difficult to explain. You see, Web 2.0 is nothing. It is not a new version of the Web's infrastructure or specifications, or a patch or update of any definable nature. Nor is Web 2.0 related to specific websites. Heck, it isn't really even a new technology, per se.

Web 2.0 Defined, Sort Of
So what is it? Web 2.0 was initially coined to mean using the Web as a platform for development of new programs and interactive tools, but its definition is greatly dependent on how users implement these functions. As such, my definition is that *Web 2.0 is you and me*, the users of the Internet, as well as the developers who design programs that run across the Web. The word programs is key here, because the best definition of Web 2.0 is that it is a change in the way we use the Internet for productivity, collaboration and information sharing. But more than just being an extension of existing tools that have been made web-accessible, applications in the Web 2.0 paradigm are designed specifically and exclusively for online usage. They are, in short, things that essentially couldn't exist in another format.

The early Internet, now sometimes referred to as Web 1.0, was often referred

merely accessed remotely and had the same (or perhaps less) functionality. Web 1.0 websites still exist, of course.

The actual term Web 2.0 was coined in 2004 by Tim O'Reilly, founder of O'Reilly Media, a leading technology publisher. But as he defined it, the changes that form the core of the Web 2.0 concept actually started coming years before the term. As the Internet matured and access to high-speed connections increased, developers starting taking greater advantage of its inherent collaborative nature and began creating websites and programs that took advantage of these qualities.

Interaction
Initially, websites began to display Web 2.0 characteristics, with greater interaction capabilities by their users. Auction sites like eBay thrived and other static sites evolved, such as with the extension of Craig's List from what was originally just a job posting board, into a much more interactive network. Wikipedia emerged as much more than just an online encyclopedia by enabling any person to make entries and edits, while under the purview of more seasoned and responsible users.

If interaction with other people is considered one of the defining elements, then the early bulletin board listings could be considered a precursor to today's social networking sites, which may be the epitome of Web 2.0 styled websites. The likes of MySpace, Facebook, Friendster and others have become core interaction methods for not only many of today's youth, but also professionals who use marketing-oriented sites like LinkedIn and Plaxo. Other sites, like Flikr, have enabled online sharing of photos. Google Maps, Yahoo! Maps and MapQuest, which once provided maps (duh), have added locations of restaurants, retailers

and other businesses that users can search for while viewing maps. This has

Collaboration

But one of the keys to real Web 2.0, certainly for business purposes, is the ability to use these functions and others to actually get work done. This means turning simple interaction capabilities, like those found in the above websites, into real collaboration tools that enable sharing of not only static completed documents, but the ability for multiple people working in remote areas to access and work on the items simultaneously.

Groove Networks, acquired by Microsoft a couple of years ago, was one of the pioneers in terms of developing an online program geared toward group communication
and document collaboration using a shared workspace. Websites that used to specialize
in searching and directory services have also boarded the bus. The king of all search engines, Google, is one of the most notable examples of this, with the company now offering Google Apps, a collection of communication and collaboration
tools that includes Google Docs, as well as spreadsheet, calendaring and team information sharing.

Computer-based phone functions, not just IP-based, but computer-driven telephone software like Skype can also be classified as Web 2.0 advancements, letting users make phone calls over the Internet free of charge.

The look, feel and operation of websites and applications are major components of the Web 2.0 paradigm, both when it comes to implementing new tools and functions,
and when it comes to providing online alternatives to PC-based programs. In the second part of this column (in the September 2008 issue), I'll discuss

the development side of Web 2.0, as well as its effects upon software (particularly

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