

# Grooving with groups

**COLLABORATING ONLINE** with a group of like-minded individuals is simple and effective – not to mention rewarding. By David Peterson

Over the past couple of months Netsmarts has taken a look at how you can communicate 'real time' with your friends and colleagues using both MSN Messenger and MSN Chat. The power of instant communication and its rapidly increasing popularity is set to see it overtake email as the leading form of online communication within the next couple of years – but it would be a mistake to conclude that it will replace email altogether.

There will always be a need for communication and collaboration tools that enable people to work together even when not all of them are online at the same time, and that store information on a longer-term basis than the duration of a single Messenger or chat session.

Support for ongoing collaboration by a group of people can be provided to some extent by email alone, but can be enhanced by products such as Microsoft Exchange and SharePoint Team Services – or through free services such as MSN Groups.

The MSN Groups service can be used to create a 'community of interest' Web site on any topic – with a built-in mailing list, message board, shared file space, group databases and calendar. An MSN group can be public – open to anyone and listed in a community directory – or private, with membership by invitation only, or subject to approval.

## JOINING AN EXISTING GROUP

Start by pointing your Web browser at <http://groups.msn.com>. From here you can browse available groups by subject area or search for groups of interest by keyword. Browsing will, by default, only show you Australian English language groups. This can be adjusted to one



of two dozen other languages and broadened to search for all MSN Groups sites worldwide.

When browsing through a list of groups within a given category, the information displayed includes a brief description of each group, the number of members and how much activity is taking place within the group – from thriving 🌱 to relatively inactive. 🌵

Other symbols that may appear are:

- 👤: The group has been created by MSN and is actively managed by them.
- 👤: The group has an official relationship with MSN.
- 🔒: The group is private – you will need to apply for membership and be approved before being able to access group content.
- 👤: The group contains adult content.
- 👤: The group contains mature content which may not be suitable for all users.
- 👤: The group is safe for people of all ages.
- 👤: MSN has classed the group as 'cool' and of particular value.
- 👤: The group is moderated by managers – all messages must be approved before being sent.

If a group is public, then you can freely browse through its content and discussion boards, but you may need to be approved by the group owner before you can join as a member. Private groups will require you to submit an application for membership before you can access the group's resources.

And if you can't find a group on a particular topic you're interested in, then you can always create a new one and start the discussion yourself.

## CREATING A NEW GROUP

You can create a new MSN group from the 'Create a group in this category' link while browsing, or from <http://groups.msn.com/create>.

The first step is to enter a group name and meaningful description of what the group is for. Next you will be asked to rate how 'family friendly' your group is, if it is public or private, if it will appear in the groups directory and search engine, and the preferred language for communication within the group.

You will also be asked to decide if the group is to be moderated. In a moderated group you (or someone you nominate) must approve all messages before they are sent to group members. This can be useful if you intend the group only for publishing official announcements or if you want to limit off-topic discussion. However, for busy groups it can mean a significant amount of work to regularly review and approve message postings.

Once you have finished, your group is now ready for use as-is, or you can spend some further time customising it, inviting new members or adding content.

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