

About Discussion Forums

What is a Discussion Forum

A discussion forum is a virtual place on the internet where conversations can take place and information can be shared more easily among a geographically dispersed group of people. Discussion forums are typically created around a specific topic of common interest or for a specific user group around a particular piece of work.

Discussion forum technology allows any user group to conduct three main types of communication:

- **Threaded Discussions** - which allow discussions to continue over periods of time as participants post messages for other participants to read and respond to at their own pace.
- **Chat Discussions** - which allow discussions to occur in real time, with all participants signed on at the same time and contributing to a moderated discussion.
- **Forum Libraries** – which allow users to post/store documents such as working papers, articles, and other resource materials in a central space for all forum members to access as needed.

Discussion Forum Topics

Within a forum you may have multiple discussion topics or categories going on at the same time. For example, under an RBA forum you might have topics such as Rights and Gender or Children's Rights that interested members can sign up to participate in. You might also have a General RBA Q&A Topic that is open to the entire organization or a more restrictive topic like RBA Reference Group that is only open to group members. Finally you might have a Library Conference to house all final materials produced on RBA, and you might have a short term Conference for the June 2003 RBARG Meeting, which will allow meeting participants to complete pre-work and workshop preparations. There are many ways to structure your discussion forum topics and participation.

Who Can Participate in a Discussion Forum

A discussion forum may have limited or broad membership. The technology provides the capability to have discussion group members that include internal staff members as well external partners and colleagues. Membership may be limited to a pre-identified group of participants or may be open on a voluntary sign up basis to the entire organization.

Purpose/Uses for Discussion Forums

There are many ways to use discussion forum technology. At the least structured end of the continuum, a group may decide to start a forum to advance informal learning and information sharing around a specific topic of interest for anyone who is interested in joining. This is generally referred to as an organic on-line community. At the other end of the continuum, an intact work group or team that is geographically dispersed may start a forum to explore new ways for the team to work together as an alternative to face-to-face meetings and conference calls.

Moderating a Discussion Forum

Regardless of which type of forum a group decides to start, effective moderation of the group discussions will be essential. First off, you should have an overall sponsor for the entire forum. The sponsor will ensure the moderators have the support they need and champion the use of the forum among participants.

Each topic within a forum should then have at least one dedicated moderator. The moderator does not need to be the same for each topic. Also, you may have more than one moderator who shares the role on a particular topic. This may be necessary if you expect a high volume of traffic.

Once you think through variables such as the topic purpose/objectives, expected volume of discussion, degree of participant buy-in for forum use, and size of membership, it will help you determine the size and nature of the moderator's role. This role is not to be underestimated, and time for performing moderator duties should be calculated against the individuals expected workload.