



Abstract

Southern Alberta communities of all sizes are linked together in a public library-based videoconference network known as RISE (Rural Information Services InitiatiVE), which reaches more than 500,000 people in 89 municipalities through 79 public libraries and three regional library headquarters. Chinook Arch Regional Library System, Marigold Library System and Shortgrass Library System formed this partnership to create and sustain the RISE videoconferencing network. Each library system is a partnership of member libraries and municipalities; therefore, RISE strengthens communities by enhancing local services through a “partnership of partnerships.”

The RISE videoconferencing network uses the Internet and broadband services of Alberta’s SuperNet to provide residents and businesses in rural and remote communities with real-time access to information, training opportunities and other forms of information and recreation close to their own home without traveling great distances. For example, residents of rural communities may use the videoconference service to access specialist medical consultations that were previously only available in large cities. The direct interactivity of RISE (involving one or more individuals at each location) provides an experience and layers of information that exceeds searching the Internet.

Innovative uses of this videoconference network and the formation of partnerships with information providers is what sets RISE apart from point-to-point web conferences. Small libraries with only one or two staff members can access, develop and host a wide range of value-added programs and they can showcase the skills and assets in their own community. Libraries with more resources make programs available to those libraries with fewer resources. In addition, consultant librarians at each of the regional library headquarters work closely with libraries to develop programs, to facilitate the development of partnerships and to promote the videoconference service to communities throughout southern Alberta.

RISE Vision

Improved community information resources and the creation of new services provided by community libraries, thereby building rural development and sustainability.

RISE Mission

Building sustainability for rural communities through collaborative action.

RISE Origins

In the fall of 2005, Alberta's public libraries were connected to the SuperNet, a high speed broadband communications network implemented by the provincial government to link all communities throughout Alberta. This inspired library leaders to dream about how they could maximize the value of this high speed connection to link libraries in Alberta to each other as well as to the world.

In the most southern part of Alberta, Chinook Arch Regional and Shortgrass Library Systems had begun to develop a small scale videoconference project. This initial concept was expanded significantly as a result of a rural leadership conference sponsored by Chinook Arch in Taber, Alberta and attended by trustees and staff from member communities served by Chinook Arch, Marigold and Shortgrass library systems. At this conference, participants engaged in a world café style conversation to answer the question, "what should rural information service look like?" The answer was simple – information and programs available in rural communities. This brought about the ambitious project that would create a cost effective vehicle to deliver information programs and resources in an interactive manner to all the communities involved.

When the Alberta government announced the creation of the Rural Alberta Development Fund, the three library system directors saw an opportunity to raise the needed funds, so they collaborated to develop a videoconference project proposal, which also included additional funding to ensure libraries could be open enough hours to use the videoconferencing equipment. Chinook Arch Regional Library System, Marigold Library System and Shortgrass Library System developed a memorandum of understanding in 2006. As a result, the RISE partnership was formed to provide a collaborative solution to the expressed needs of member libraries and to enhance their local library services. Specifically, the RISE project responded to a stated need for rural libraries to provide cost-effective information services and programs that would be accessible at the local community level so that residents of rural and remote communities would not have to drive long distances for continuing education, health care information, literacy programming, community and individual consultations. To this end, the RISE partnership raised \$5 million to develop and implement the network over a three year period.

Funding

RISE began as a three year, \$5 million project. Chinook Arch, Marigold and Shortgrass Library Systems' project proposal was successful; the Rural Alberta's Development Fund (RADF) provided 75% of the funding. Other sources of funding included the Public Library Development Initiative (PLDI) from Alberta Municipal Affairs and The Alberta Public Library Electronic Network (APLEN). The three Regional Library Systems raised an additional \$500,000 through an anonymous donor and contributed a significant amount and value of in-kind support. As the project phase ends in May 2011, ongoing support

for the project will be incorporated into the operating budgets of participating libraries. RISE was a demonstration project with the intention of building upon the support provided by local municipal councils which provide library funding along with provincial grants and local fundraising sources.

Implementation

With funding sources identified, a Request for Proposal was prepared to invite proposals from videoconference equipment vendors who could also assist with designing the network. The successful vendor was MTS Allstream. In Phase One, videoconference equipment was purchased for and installed at six libraries in each regional library system plus the three regional library headquarters. This trial helped to determine the standards and requirements for the roll out to the remaining libraries over the following 12 months. It was immediately evident that the partnership would need to build and support a central bridging site to manage the technology of the videoconference network. Marigold Library System agreed to provide the central site support.

Successful implementation also included hiring a full-time consultant librarian at each regional library system and providing capacity grants (two grants each year) to participating libraries. The capacity grants enabled member libraries to increase their opening and staffing hours for more public access to the videoconference equipment. During the initial launch, on-site and remote training was delivered by the consultants to library staff on videoconference equipment features, trouble shooting and best practices to enhance the videoconference experience. Consultants continue to manage bookings through a centralized system, bridge calls and monitoring live sessions, as well as developing best practices and procedures. Training and testing were regularly provided to RISE libraries from their system headquarters to improve image and sound quality and to cultivate local videoconferencing expertise and use. In responding to community needs and interests, consultants worked closely with library staff to develop RISE programming and establish community partnerships. Initial support for libraries included promoting the RISE network through a wiki, listservs and marketing materials. The recent development of a full-featured website has been a great asset in promoting the effective use of RISE.

RISE Achievements

RISE has been used for a multitude of purposes including:

- Training facilities for distance education students and life-long learners who benefit by having group interactions with instructors and other learners. (Approximately 80% of our communities have no other facility for that purpose.);
- Virtual meeting room facilities for staff and clients of business, economic development, literacy and support-based organizations;
- Access to experts and expert presenters;
- Participation in job interviews and career development sessions;

- Access to government resources to enhance individual lives and to foster best practices for business and agriculture;
- Innovative programming between resource libraries and libraries of all sizes based on the model that all participants will be able to interact with presenters and other participants;
- Provision of training for local library staff to deliver enhanced information service in remote communities;
- Facilitation of meetings, presentations, and training between collaborating libraries throughout the province.

Library patrons have successfully used videoconferencing for meetings, medical consultations, distance education, as well as personal growth and lifelong learning opportunities. For example, RISE facilitated a conversation between local farmers and the Agriculture Canada Research Station, thus exchanging valuable information while saving time and money. Also, women business entrepreneurs in and around the town of Strathmore held a videoconferencing session with a business leader in Colorado. English Language Learning students in Nanton and Hanna connected with instructors at Bow Valley College in Calgary.

RISE 2010 – Statistical Overview

The following statistics for all three regions in 2010 point to the success of RISE:

1. 2,005 videoconference programs and meetings with 9,821 participants.
2. 81 libraries, including the 3 headquarters, participated in these 2,005 sessions at various times.
3. 35 sites hosted 519 programs in 2010. On average, five sites participated in each interactive videoconference program.
4. Participants in RISE videoconferences saved more than 5,000 hours of travel time and reduced their carbon footprint by not travelling more than 225,000 kilometers.
5. 54 RISE Coffee Break sessions provided training and support to participating libraries on a weekly basis. These were presented by the consultants at the three regions.

In addition, because of the extra funding provided to participating libraries by the RISE Capacity grants and the opportunities provided by the videoconferencing network,

1. RISE libraries increased their hours open by approximately 340 hours per week for a total increase of 17,680 hours per year in library services; and
2. 16 Full time and 52 part time positions were created by RISE libraries. Many libraries also increased the hours of part-time staff without creating full-time positions.

RISE: What worked and why

- The collaborative nature of RISE and its implementation as a network is key to its success. Without the cooperative approach to programming and promotion, the videoconference equipment is just another piece of equipment. Library staff make connections and develop partnerships and programs that transform the equipment into a rich, interactive information delivery mechanism.
- Ongoing training with library staff ensures that videoconferencing becomes a comfortable and effective medium for communication; when staff are more comfortable, they are more likely to recommend its use to their patrons.
- Libraries have embraced the concept of sharing with one another; this sharing has strengthened the library community in southern Alberta.
- Training sessions for videoconference proficiency (e.g. Coffee Breaks) have been repeated to allow more library staff to attend; this has led to skill development and idea sharing.
- Videoconference programs that were developed because of a particular community interest for videoconference delivery have been well-attended and well-received (e.g. quilting, genealogy, Puppets and Pajamas).
- Lunch hour sessions have worked well for customers at member libraries.

RISE: What did not work as well and why

- The registration process for libraries requires too many steps and has too much room for error.
- With the pressure to act quickly to secure a limited spot, libraries sometimes reserved before community interest was gauged or generated. This resulted in “empty rooms” on occasion.

RISE: What could have been done differently to achieve better results

- The quality of the presenter makes or breaks the videoconference; more training for presenters on how to do effective presentations via videoconference is clearly beneficial.
- Reminders sent to libraries that have signed up for a session could be developed and promotional materials could be circulated earlier to generate more participation in program sessions.
- Clearer procedures for member libraries to access after-hours support would help.
- More training and practice to help library staff become even more comfortable with the equipment and to become better advocates for videoconferencing use in their communities would also be helpful.

- More time and money for marketing RISE/videoconferencing in libraries would make a difference. There would likely be more use of videoconferencing if more community members knew about the service and how it could be used. (This is a typical challenge with library services generally.)

Conclusion

Chinook Arch, Marigold and Shortgrass Library Systems are justifiably proud of the collaboration that created the innovative RISE Network. RISE has significantly changed the delivery of information and library programs in southern Alberta. As the originating project and project funding concludes in May 2011, the library system directors and consultants are considering the impact and value of RISE. Consultant librarians from each system are collecting information from participating libraries and collating the information. In addition, researchers from the University of Lethbridge are conducting a study into the impact of the RISE Network communications technology in southern Alberta communities. These researchers are interviewing participants and community members to assess their impressions and how they value this technology in their rural communities to determine if RISE has made a difference.

Next steps

The three year RISE funding will be used up by April 2011; however, the RISE Network will continue to exist. The three cooperating library systems will continue to manage and support the central network equipment and will also continue to provide technical and consulting support to participating libraries. Libraries will continue to develop and share programs with other libraries on the network.

Currently, the three participating regional system directors are preparing a proposal to extend the RISE Network to all public libraries in Alberta as part of the Public Library Services Branch (Alberta Municipal Affairs) Technology Plan.

For more information on the RISE Network, visit www.risenetwork.ca.