

Planning to RISE

Judith M. Umbach

At the Alberta Library Conference this year, one of the most impressive presentations was made by the Chinook Arch Regional, Shortgrass and Marigold Library Systems.

Together they have planned and implemented an innovative technology project named RISE, or Rural Information Services initiative. The vision is "Improved community information resources and the creation of new services provided by community libraries thereby building rural development and sustainability." In my view, their greatest accomplishment is overcoming the many distance and training barriers encountered in delivering rural library services.

What really impressed me was the detailed, sustained planning that led to the achievement of their goals. These library systems did not underestimate what was required, yet they did not succumb to the intimidation of complexity – neither technical nor organizational. This project demonstrates that we need not be driven by circumstances, because human ingenuity and determination can solve all problems if people work in concert over time.

Sophistication

According to the presentation, RISE was initially a project for video conferencing and sharing of programs. Evaluation of needs, many meetings, and training for staff resulted in beneficial results from the pilot. Early feedback revealed additional

needs, showing that ongoing development of both concepts and equipment would be required to keep the first participants involved and to attract more participant libraries.

When the decision was made to expand beyond the model for four regional nodes to a model for all 80 libraries in the three systems, the group applied for substantial funding from the Alberta Rural Development Fund. The size of the funding request itself was indicative of the sophistication of the organizers. A common information technology formula for estimating projects is that only 17% of funding is needed for equipment; the other 83% is needed for software, training, project management, etc. Because hardware is often the easiest part to estimate, grossing up from that cost is the most reliable way to understand the size of a project.

In asking for funding, the RISE project group acknowledged the need for dedicated staff and scoured the community for almost 400 letters of support. They spent a year meeting with private sector sponsors, politicians and various provincial departments to finally obtain \$3.7 million from the provincial government, a portion of the almost \$5 million budget.

Simplification

Crucially for success, RISE standardized everything possible. Communications and equipment were planned with consideration for both larger and smaller libraries.

Simplification was the theme for installations and operations, recognizing that many inexperienced people would eventually be part of the network. Even the equipment carts had to be rethought to fit into tiny libraries with no extra space. The independence of individual libraries was respected by designing the system to allow each library to conference with any other, avoiding the costs and bureaucracy of central management.

Over and over again, the presentation speakers emphasized the importance of having clear goals, understanding everyone's critical needs, planning in phases, listening to feedback and responding to change. Community involvement was sought and respected, a rarely considered approach to information technology projects. Much more information is available at <http://wikirise.pbworks.com>.

Undoubtedly, the RISE journey from concept to realization was rough, because that is the nature of interpersonal relations on a macro scale. Nevertheless, vision and leadership addressed one of Canada's most serious cultural issues: the enhancement of rural life in an urban age.

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