*G*eographical isolation has long been blamed for the continued struggle of many rural economies and the people involved in them. Their demands and needs are just as comprehensive as their urban counterparts, but because of their dispersed nature and lack of services, rural communities' requirements are not met.

One of the obvious problems for both businesses and voluntary organizations is the lack of like minded support. There is little or no opportunity to exchange ideas and expertise with others.

In order to tackle this problem, Simon Berry from the National Rural Enterprise Centre (NREC) decided to establish a network for rural organizations and individuals in both the voluntary and private sector, which became known as RuralNet. More than a simple online community, RuralNet was envisioned as a virtual enterprise network, whose members could benefit from each other's expertise. The network would also offer conferences with information on funding sources and rural development initiatives.

"Networks in the UK tend to focus on urban groups, so smaller, dispersed communities get far less stimulus," said Berry, Director of the NREC. "I wanted to develop a network that would have advisors 'on tap', giving practical support and counsel which could help rural organizations fulfill their potential."
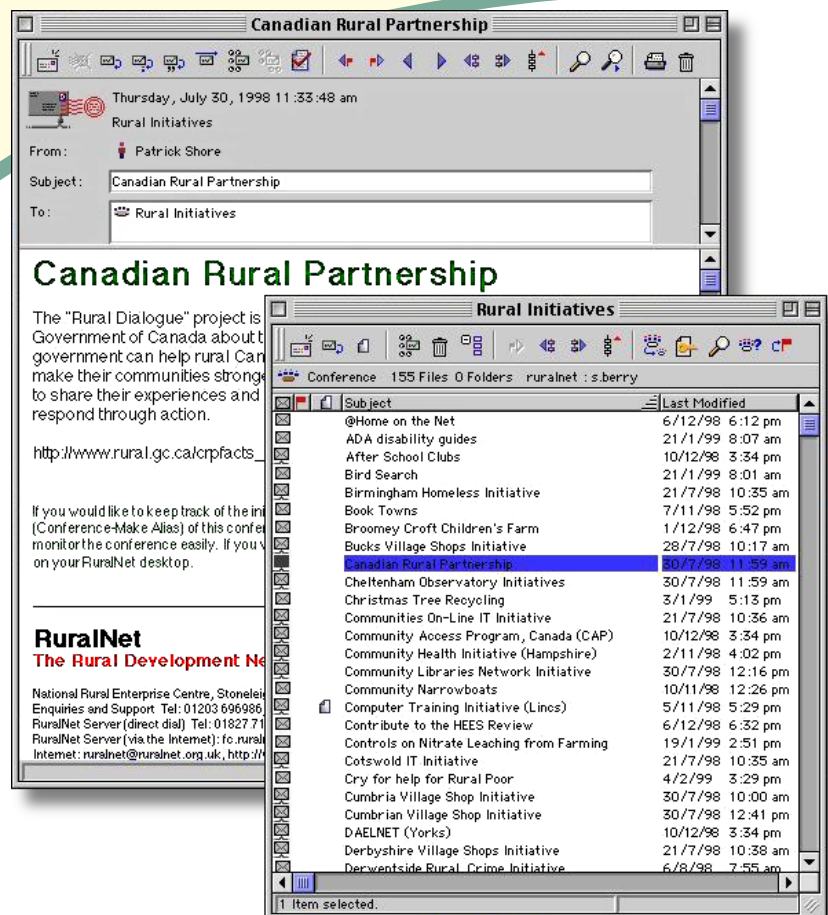
Simon Berry had worked on a similar project which delivered advice on a much smaller scale called the WRENConnect. To deliver information to members,

the WRENConnect network had used an earlier version of SoftArc's FirstClass Intranet Server, which offered the functionality Berry wanted.

"I looked at other software on the market, but couldn't find anything that matched FirstClass," said Berry. "The nearest competitive product had administrative and training costs which priced most of our potential members out of the project."

"Our aim for the network is to encourage communication in remote areas. FirstClass gets users online without fuss and runs on technology as old as 286 PCs. It is the only comprehensive solution available," he added.

RuralNet uses an IBM server running on NT 4.0. Members have the option to link up to the main server through a direct-dial connection or via the Internet (TCP/IP). Berry is extremely pleased with the way the FirstClass software has supported the project, and has been able to

expand the conferencing capabilities by creating mini, multi-user databases.

"We are running three main conferences based on this database template: funding opportunities, on-going rural initiatives and essential contacts. We also offer a search facility for members, who currently number 260," he explained.

As Berry points out, it's the little differences in FirstClass that make a significant impression and make long-term fans out of first time users. "The message history function is fantastic," said Berry. "It makes communicating incredibly efficient. I know if and when messages are read. It's just one of the many killer features of FirstClass."

Visitors can access the RuralNet site at:
www.ruralnet.org.uk

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