

# USING TECHNOLOGY TO EDUCATE AND CONNECT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

## 2005 COMPUTERWORLD HONORS CASE STUDY

### GOVERNMENT & NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

IN THE HEART OF ONTARIO'S NORTHERN WILDERNESS A GROUP OF FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES CREATED A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE THAT WOULD ALLOW INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO SHARE IDEAS ON HOW TO BETTER USE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE AND EDUCATION WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES. [20055288]



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## SUMMARY

Deep in the heart of Ontario's northern wilderness – between the barren shores of Canada's Hudson Bay and northern Minnesota – a group of First Nations communities had an idea that would introduce a new level of access and communication for Aboriginal people. The idea: to create a virtual conference that would allow indigenous people to share ideas on how to better use information and communications technology (ICTs) to improve the quality of life and education within their communities. Known as the Kuh-ke-nah Network (K-Net) of SMART First Nations, these northern communities – considered some of the most remote in Canada – had already been using broadband applications regionally as a way to improve community well-being and enhance learning opportunities. The international conference was a natural progression that would allow them to take what they learned in their area and share it with an international audience. It would also provide a unique forum for indigenous communities around the globe – including those from Australia, New Zealand, Bolivia, Guatemala, the United States, and Tanzania – to share their challenges and successes in adopting ICTs so they could learn from one another. To roll out a conference of this magnitude, the K-Net team needed to find a reliable and easy-to-use software application that would work in some of the harshest conditions, and accommodate the cultural, geographical, and technological diversity of the participants.

## APPLICATION

In 2003, John Rowlandson, co-facilitator of the International Gathering, and Jesse Fiddler, technical director at K-NET, began working together to determine which technology would be used to make the Kuh-ke-nah Smart International Conference a reality. Their mission: to find a communication and collaboration platform that would be easy to use, reliable in harsh environments and at various Internet connection speeds, and compatible with Microsoft PowerPoint. After looking at numerous options, including an in-house design, they decided to pilot Macromedia Breeze in December. "From the get-go, Breeze looked like the right solution, but we needed to get a feel for how it would function in dramatically different environments," said Rowlandson. "We recruited groups from both Geneva and New Zealand to pilot Breeze in conjunction with a telephony bridge, and the results were excellent. It was a great tool for those presenting, and a very effective platform for the learning participants."

With the right technology now at their fingertips, planning for the "Kuh-ken-ah (which means everyone, together) Smart International Conference went into full swing. Thanks to Breeze, Kuh-ken-ah would host the world's first international gathering of indigenous people over the Internet.

## BENEFITS

### Benefits for K-NET Communities

- Enabled a geographically dispersed group of K-NET communities to host an international conference, even though there are no roads to the area
- Archived course sessions to allow participants to continue learning from other experts around the globe (see archive at <http://smart.knet.ca/international>)
- Recognized as an IT innovator for creating the world's first, First Nations Internet conference for Indigenous ICT practitioners
- Provided K-NET with insight into how other communities are tackling similar challenges adopting and using ICTs

### Benefits for other Indigenous Communities

- Enabled collaboration and sharing of challenges and ideas to improve their own educational programs
- Breeze was easy to learn, enabling more contributors / presenters

- Provided insight into new ways of using technology to foster education and build communities
- No high-speed / No problem – Breeze condenses PowerPoint slides into smaller Flash files so even presenters with dial-up connections could participate
- Immediate feedback on course discussion topics
- Inexpensive way to learn from international peers

## **IMPORTANCE**

The success of the Kuh-ken-ah Conference directly depended on our ability to deliver a platform that would work in remote areas. Macromedia Breeze delivered. Presenters were able to ramp up in no time, and it proved to be a flexible and effective way for other indigenous people to learn from one another. In the end, we were able to connect groups from as far away as Argentina, Guatemala, Australia, and Tanzania through one common tool: Macromedia Breeze. It was a remarkable experience. “What amazed me about the Breeze platform was how well it worked anywhere, under any condition. It really allowed us to get the best presenters from anywhere on the planet,” said Fiddler. Because of Breeze they had presenters pushing slides from as far away as Tanzania using a satellite downlink. Even at \$200 an hour for the LD telephony portion, it was far less expensive and far more practical than bringing their team to northern Ontario. Certainly. They could not have embraced the global community as successfully as we did without Breeze.

## **ORIGINALITY**

See summary for originality. From concept to implementation this was something that had never been done before in this way.

## **SUCCESS**

When the weeklong conference ended in March 2004, it was branded as a huge success. For the first time ever, a global cohort of indigenous practitioners were able to share ideas on improving their use and adoption of online tools and systems in a live, media-rich, collaborative environment.

## **DIFFICULTY**

This was very difficult and would have not been possible without technology.