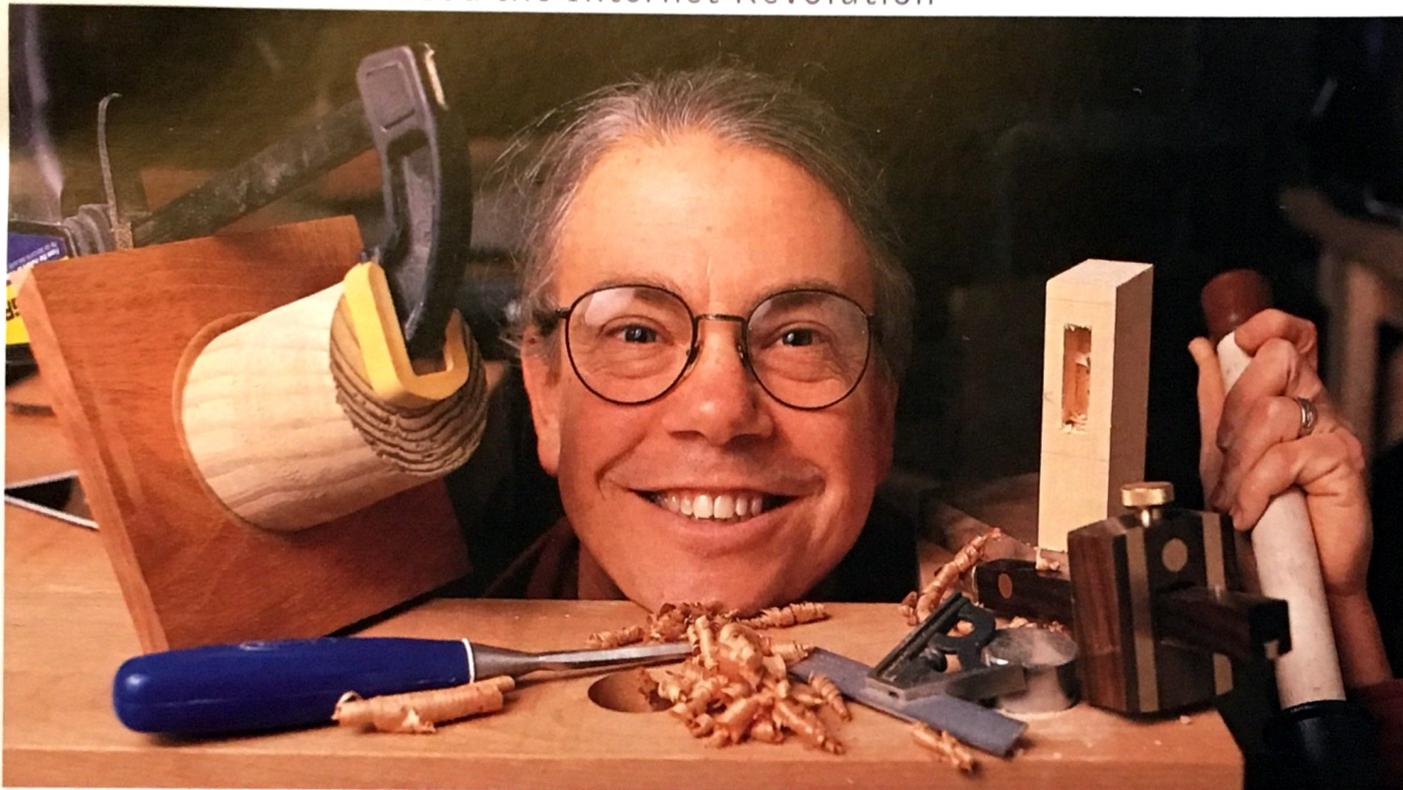


Waiting for the Next Wave

How Minnesota missed the Internet Revolution



Mike O'Connor

Co-founder, gofast.net and guru of the Information Age

O'Connor, 49, is the Forrest Gump of IT, pushed as much by happenstance as volition onto the front lines of the Internet revolution. From his start in 1970s community radio he moved on to earn an MBA from Cornell University in 1979, and in the process "tripped over the computer." In the Eighties he became a "systems guy," handling MIS projects with Arthur Andersen, other consulting firms and the University of Minnesota. Friends in academia introduced him to the power of the Internet.

By 1994 O'Connor was semi-retired, mostly just "goofing around with the Internet." When he discovered how difficult and expensive it was to secure high-speed Internet access for his home, he and long-time tech friend Ralph Jensen wrote a table-napkin business plan and started their own Internet service provider. Evangelically committed to the promise of the Internet, the pair started their company not to make money but because they knew that "fast was better" and no one else was providing

the service. Appropriately, they named their venture gofast.net, and that it did.

Last year O'Connor relinquished his share of gofast.net in an acquisition of the company by Agiliti, Inc., a Twin Cities application services provider. Now comfortably retired in St. Paul, O'Connor continues to be a leader in Minnesota technology. He recently completed a volunteer stint as a full-time Y2K community-preparedness advocate.

What's on his Mind?

A self-described "curmudgeon," O'Connor isn't afraid to call things as he sees them. When asked about the cyber revolution, he responds: "It's over and we missed it." That is his assessment of Minnesota's contribution to the evolution of the Internet.

Most of the truly exciting Internet developments occurred—and are occurring—on the coasts, he says. Minnesota failed to get into the game because the state's technology leaders didn't embrace the youthful energy and ideas of the Internet pioneers. O'Connor believes that this foregone opportunity holds important lessons for technology policy in Minnesota.

So, the great Internet wave has already crested?

Like in the early days of the railroad or electricity, the big winners of the information revolution were defined early on; they were pioneers who leaped in before things had matured. After that era, there are lots of other winners, but they are the more traditional, hard-working kind. The odds of another Bill Gates-type fortune being created out of this revolution are very small.

The people now launching Internet startups are different from the pioneers. They are almost always thinking about the venture capital sequence of events, not approaching it passionately like we did. This isn't a bad thing, but it's an indication that the market is maturing. There will always be the next big wave, but it's going to come from somewhere else. The Internet has become mainstream.

It's odd to think of the Internet revolution being over when the majority of users—individuals and companies—are just beginning to explore its potential.

What's left for the Internet is profession-