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Open Coffee Club: Where Old-School Networking Meets Cyber Socializing

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In early 2007, a London entrepreneur who wanted to meet like-minded people used the Internet to invite others to a real-world meeting. He called it Open Coffee to emphasize its informal nature, and he created a social media website where participants could continue their conversations after the in-person get-together.

His meetings became weekly events, and more than 80 Open Coffee Clubs have sprung up around the world. All are based on the original model: to encourage entrepreneurs, developers and investors to organize real-world informal meetings to chat, network and grow.

New Mexico has three established Open Coffee Clubs — one each in Albuquerque, Los Alamos and Santa Fe. As each new group begins, it joins the international homepage of Open Coffee at <http://opencoffee.ning.com/>.

Social serendipity

Designed to work in tandem with online conversations, there's nothing like experiencing an Open Coffee session in person.

A recent gathering at the Santa Fe Complex featured a demonstration of Simtable, a technology developed for wildfire training, incident command and community outreach that recently received \$100,000 from the Venture Acceleration Fund of Los Alamos National Security, which manages and operates LANL for the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration.

The Venture Acceleration Fund invests in creating and building Northern New Mexico businesses associated with LANL technology or expertise and aims to help companies get closer to bringing technological breakthroughs to the commercial market. The fund is an initiative of Northern New Mexico Connect, the lab's principal economic development wing and sponsor of the recent Open Coffee meeting in Santa Fe.

At that meeting, participants gathered around Stephen Guerin, Simtable's Chief Technology Officer, as he projected Google Earth and GIS (Geographic Information System) data onto a tray of sand. Changes in the sand surface are an interactive part of the model; if a fire is simulated in

the sand, the model will show where it is most likely to spread, as well as where traffic will backlog during an evacuation.

Guerin and his team will use the Venture Acceleration Fund award to refine their user interface, market the product and approach firefighting academies with their invention. For the people who attended the Open Coffee demonstration, it was an opportunity to see emerging technology they might otherwise never see.

Trevor Loy, general partner of Flywheel Ventures and coordinator of Santa Fe's Open Coffee meetings, calls the gatherings "serendipity" because business people never know who they'll meet at the free-flowing and unconventional get-togethers.

The next Open Coffee event will be held on May 6 at the Santa Fe Complex. To learn more about these events or start an Open Coffee Club in your town, visit the founder's Web site.

Finance New Mexico is an initiative of the New Mexico Small Business Investment Corporation (NMSBIC) and its partners to assist individuals and businesses in obtaining skills and funding-resources for their business or idea. To learn more, go to www.FinanceNewMexico.org.

