

Free, cheap, easy and effective: Knowledge management strategies for building a global community of practice

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ABSTRACT

This case presents the knowledge management activities for building an online community of practice for the India, China & America (ICA) Institute. The ICA Institute is a non-profit organization with the vision of providing a sustainable, non-governmental platform to identify and drive synergies among India, China and America in the areas of emerging markets, commercial growth and alignment of policies for the benefit of the global population. As a non-profit with little funding, the strategies for knowledge management used by the ICA Institute have all been free or relatively inexpensive. These strategies have been easy to access and implement due to open source availability and have proven to be effective for their mission. To analyze the knowledge management (KM) strategies of the ICA Institute, the following topics will be covered: 1) the needs of the knowledge-based community of the ICA Institute; 2) explanation and evaluation of knowledge management strategies in use; and 3) gaining buy-in and maintaining solutions.

INTRODUCTION

While the increase of interest in knowledge management over the past ten years has primarily focused on improving organizational performance and improving worker's productivity in large consulting firms, the lessons from this field also spread to offer guidance for improving knowledge based activities of government and non-profit organizations (Benbya, 2008). This case presents the knowledge management activities for building an online community of practice for the India, China & America (ICA) Institute. The ICA Institute is a non-profit research institution with the vision of providing a sustainable, non-governmental platform to identify and drive synergies among India, China and America in the areas of emerging markets, commercial growth and alignment of policies for the benefit of the global population. The ICA was formed in 2005 in order to encourage thought-leadership related to business and economic issues between three of the world's largest emerging economies. The ICA institute welcomes and includes members from academia, industry, government and non-profit institutions. Currently, the ICA Institute is funded as part of Kennesaw State University's Coles College of Business.

In many ways, the ICA institute is not just a non-profit organization but an open form of a large consulting firm. It tries to build on the knowledge base of its community of policy makers, scholars, industry leaders, and broader community of inquirers to optimize business practices of organizations globally. As a non-profit with little funding, the strategies for knowledge management used by the ICA Institute have all been free or relatively inexpensive. In addition, these strategies have been easy to access and implement due to open source availability and have proven to be effective for their mission.

To analyze the knowledge management (KM) strategies of the ICA Institute, the following topics will be covered:

1. The needs of the knowledge-based community of the ICA Institute;
2. Explanation and evaluation of knowledge management strategies in use; and
3. Gaining buy-in and maintaining solutions.

NEEDS OF THE KNOWLEDGE-BASED COMMUNITY OF THE ICA INSTITUTE

The ICA Institute gathers experts from around the world to discover, construct and disseminate knowledge towards ensuring a peaceful and productive triad partnership between India, China & America. This ambitious and vaguely defined purpose is an ill-structured problem that requires a knowledge management strategy that will foster flexibility, higher-order problem-solving, innovation and wide-spread dissemination.

The ICA Institute's executive, research and advisory board members are distinguished scholars, industry leaders, and top level government officials. Research fellows, interns, and volunteers are post-graduate researchers or graduate students in several disciplines, including economics, business administration, information systems, political science and instructional technology. The model in Figure 1 visually depicts the knowledge based social system of the ICA Institute that needs efficient strategies for knowledge creation and dissemination. Different members are responsible for tasks of administration, facilitation or participation. Each member may have responsibilities in one or more of these categories. For example, research board members are most often called on to identify experts and help build a network around a particular topic, then facilitate a project towards the creation of knowledge in their research areas; however, research board members also often participate in virtual or physical knowledge dissemination efforts.

The relationship between the ICA Institute participants involves a knowledge-based value exchange which may be illuminated by considering how these components function and for what purpose. If the ICA Institute provides and gathers useful resources to and from its members, prompting them to pursue successful academic, industry and governmental partnerships between these three countries, then these members of society have a stake in maintaining peaceful relations.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the ICA Institute provides knowledge-based services in an effort to drive market synergy between India, China and America. The audience which desires this knowledge chooses to access the information and networking opportunities related to the tri-lateral market relationships for the purposes of comprehension, research, strategic business planning and business opportunities. The geopolitical system that exists within this tri-lateral relationship benefits from the wealth generation and creation of peaceful and productive partnerships that occur as a result.

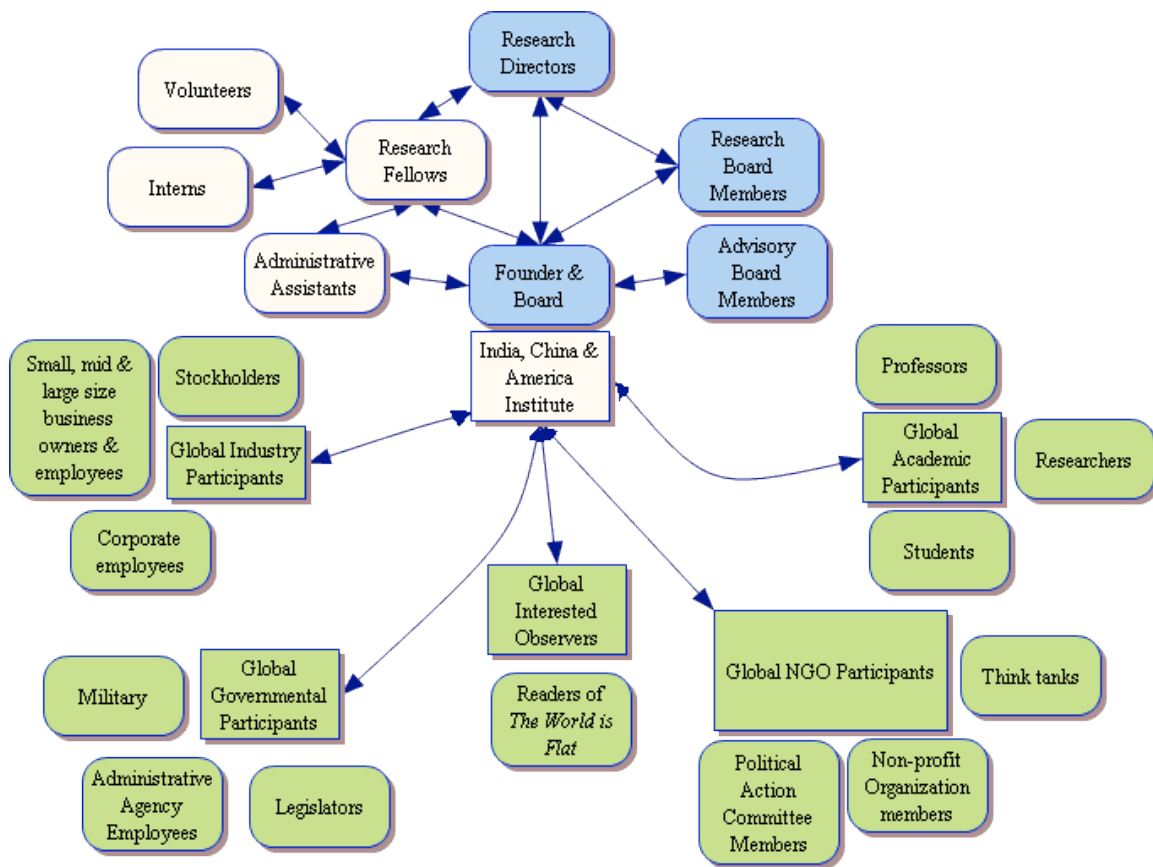


Figure 1: Knowledge Based Social System Model of ICA Institute

Within the staff of the institution, the organizational system works like a fairly traditional top-down structure such that upper management sets the mission, vision and strategies for the organization and collaborates with management to implement. However, this is a small institution with few full time dedicated board members, so ICA Institute's founder regularly works with the administrative assistants and research fellows directly instead of through a vertical organizational structure. He holds final decision-making power on educational initiatives, knowledge dissemination efforts, research projects, event planning and partnerships with related organizations; however, he collaborates closely with research fellows and interns to strategize, develop and implement. Dissenting voices are welcomed and encouraged along the way. Outside of the founder's final decision-making power, there is little imbalance of power between the other members of the organization. In the ICA Institute, knowledge "supersedes any one individual" and finds "knowledge creation within distributed, multi-actor routines rather than individual minds" (McLure-Wasko & Faraj, 2000, p. 160).

Therefore, the approach to KM at the ICA Institute should correspond to a perspective of knowledge as "embedded in the community" as described by McLure-Wasko & Faraj (2000, p.160). Wenger (2002) presents the case of a transgovernmental community sponsored by the World Bank where this perspective evolved over time as those responsible for KM acknowledged that "the areas where the knowledge-sharing system worked best were those in which there was a community of practitioners interacting on a regular basis, with a tradition of collaborating around

problems and sharing knowledge” (p.2). The ICA Institute finds great internal value in viewing knowledge as embedded in the community and seeking alliances with outside communities. It uses its own experiences in building around this strategy to foster more such communities. Technology in this view is used to support community creation and ownership of knowledge through the use of interactive web spaces.

Most active knowledge building participants of the ICA Institute are engaged through intrinsic motivation and passion for the research areas and mission of the ICA Institute. There is, however, also a large part of the ICA Institute community that functions more as an audience, engaged due to self-interest with the purpose of gaining the incentives afforded by obtaining this knowledge. These incentives include the furthering of business opportunities through exposure to this targeted audience, gathering of free business knowledge and access to the global business network. McLure-Wasko & Faraj (2000) explain that the “motivation to exchange knowledge is affected by whether the decision to share is viewed as primarily economic and motivated by self-interest , or non-economic and motivated by community interest and moral obligation” (p.161). The non-profit nature of the World Bank, therefore, impacts the organizational culture in significant ways; in a non-profit organization, information flows may be more open, stakes of accountability may be less intimidating, and incentives for sharing knowledge may be more intrinsically rewarding. The ICA Institute 's strategies for KM rely heavily on an organizational culture that views knowledge as a public good (Benbya, 2008; McLure-Wasko & Faraj, 2000) where participants are willing to share knowledge and are receptive to seeking knowledge from others.

EXPLANATION & EVALUATION OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN USE

With the needs and attributes of the ICA Institute and the constraints of very limited resources in mind, the leadership of the organization sought and implemented several publicly available KM solutions. These tools, which are described in the section below, are all relatively inexpensive (or free) solutions used by the ICA Institute to achieve its strategic goal of building a global community of practice. All of these solutions support this overall objective by creating unique methods to disseminate knowledge to the audience by which it is desired. This section will highlight four of these solutions: 1) a web conferencing/seminar tool; 2) a research study database and reviewing tool; 3) an e-mail distribution and professional networking tool; and 4) a data mining tool.

Web Conferencing

The ICA Institute uses various technologies to assist them in their efforts of collecting, creating and disseminating knowledge. One of those technologies is GoToWebinar.com, a website that allows its users to host meetings online as well as share documents. While there are other products similar to GoToWebinar, the unique benefit that GoToWebinar provides to the ICA Institute is that it is extremely affordable. Other similar products offered in the marketplace cost approximately \$500 a month and limit the number of users able to access the site. GoToWebinar is only \$99 a month and provides the ICA Institute with unlimited user access.

There are two main ways that the ICA Institute is using the GoToWebinar technology. The first is to host their annual Global Virtual Seminar Series. In each series, subject matter experts are selected to give a speech on selected topics in which they research or work. Virtual delivery of this Series allows individuals to obtain knowledge that may have been previously inaccessible due to location or cost constraints. With the GoToWebinar technology, the ICA Institute is able to host the Global Virtual Seminar Series events online, allowing users from all over the globe to

attend and even participate in the event. Users are able to ask questions which the speaker can answer in real time. This solution affords the opportunity of evolution, pushing the Series from a point of pure knowledge distribution to a collaborative forum where knowledge is distributed and created via the speaker and the engaged participants.

This web conferencing technology is also being used in place of monthly roundtable discussions, which were previously attended by participants who met in one physical location at a prescribed time. The online forums which were the subsequent replacement, made it possible for participants from around the globe to attend at their convenience. Providing webinars through the ICA Institute's website has also yielded the following advantages over the monthly roundtable discussions:

- Creates dynamic web presence
- Archives institutional memory
- Gathers global networking resources
- Sustains continuous momentum for participants throughout the series
- Fosters global membership community

Before the ICA Institute implemented the use of GoToWebinar technology, attendance to the roundtable meetings averaged near one hundred participants annually, most of whom were local scholars. The online forums were found to be frequented by a diverse cross-sector of participants from around the globe, at a rate of approximately one hundred per month.

The use of this web conferencing technology also creates and fosters communities of practice. Wenger & Snyder (1999) define communities of practice as "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise." That definition carries over well to how the ICA Institute helps build and facilitate these communities of practice. They are developing groups that have a "shared expertise and passion" to learn and discuss topics essential to the ICA Institute's mission. For example, by participating in the Global Virtual Seminar Series, participants are able to develop and build on their knowledge base in ways they normally could not due to physical limitations in location and the financial implications of this limitation. Further, the online forums allow participants to share their personal experience which gives others the ability to learn from previous successes and failures.

Online Research: Study Database and Reviewing Tool

To accomplish their objective of knowledge dissemination, the ICA Institute has recognized the need for this knowledge to be organized in a way that makes it readily available to and searchable by the audience it is trying to serve. The ICA Institute also needs a way to codify the knowledge that is shared by the parties' utilizing this information. In 2009, the ICA Institute launched the Journal of Emerging Knowledge on Emerging Markets. This was done using the Open Journal System of the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) to provide a publicly accessible forum for working papers. The PKP is a research and development initiative that aims to improve the scholarly and public quality of academic research. This is done through the development of innovative online publishing and knowledge-sharing environments. The PKP provides open software that enables research organizations to effectively manage, publish, and index journals and conferences (See Figure 2). The software is provided to the organizations that use it at no cost. Without the financial capability to pay for the web development and storage cost associated with traditional publishing services, the inexpensive nature of this service proves to be an advantageous benefit to non-profit organizations like the ICA Institute.



Figure 2: Screenshot of PKP Open Journal Demo

McDermott (1999) highlights the importance of using information technology to support communities that share knowledge. He emphasizes how technology can help organize, maintain, and distribute that knowledge to others in the community. Between the ICA Institute and its participants, trust creates a possible imbalance of power. For example, visitors to the ICA Institute website expect information disseminated by the highly credible board members to be reliable; therefore, the ICA Institute must not betray this trust by distributing misleading or biased messages. By building a global editorial review board and using the review tools available through the PKP's Open Journal system, the ICA Institute is better able to ensure the credibility of the knowledge gathered.

The ICA Institute has seen positive results since the implementation of the Open Journal System in their ability to disseminate information about the economies of India and China. Global virtual community members are now able to take advantage of e-mail notification, commenting ability for readers, online submission and editorial management of all content. These features make the ICA Institute's research more accessible and credible to viewers around the world.

E-mail Distribution and Professional Networking Tools

From the beginning stages of building the ICA Institute's global network, leaders in the organization recognized a need for the ability to identify interested parties and "push" information to these parties. The ICA Institute wanted to be able to keep all of its users up to date on recent events and information in a manner that would be cost effective to the Institute and require little effort from the user. For this, they turned to an email marketing service provided by Constant Contact. Their service allowed for an email newsletter to be created from a variety of simple templates. This newsletter is e-mailed to all users who register for the service at no charge. The approximate cost of this to the ICA Institute is \$30 per month.

Use of this service has provided many benefits to the ICA Institute. Most importantly, it increased from a small original subscribing population of 1,000 users to almost 10,000 in the course of its

first year. In addition, it allows for recent, up-to-date information to be disseminated to its subscribers on a weekly basis. This weekly information is collected from a variety of cross-sector contributors scattered throughout the world known as the International Contributors Editorial Board. This knowledge dissemination effort supports the primary focus of the ICA Institute's mission.

As part of an effort to build distribution of the newsletter, another strategy was discovered to connect those interested in the ICA Institute. This involved formation of a community of practice on the professional networking site, LinkedIn. This site allows users to "link" themselves to other users interested in the same professions, organizations, interests and affiliations. It exemplifies the definition of a community of practice (COP) as defined by Wenger & Snyder (1999). This site would be considered the more professional version of MySpace and Facebook. Users can exchange contact information between each other, review profiles of other members and participate in discussion forums. This service provides great potential for members interested in collaborating on information and research. The user profiles on LinkedIn provided the primary resource for the ICA Institute to identify members who were qualified experts and invite them to serve on the International Contributors Editorial Board for its free, weekly newsletter.

Another benefit resulting from the use of Constant Contact involves the service's data mining tools. Each subscriber that receives the newsletter is "tracked" as to their movements within the content of the letter. The service provides statistical feedback information detailing which articles were accessed, for how long and by whom. This, in turn, provides useful information to the Institute that they can use to tailor the information they are providing to their users in the future.

Data Mining Tool

Another data mining tool that the ICA Institute is using is Google Analytics. The use of Google Analytics does not cost money, but it does involve a value exchange of allowing Google access to information about the activity on the website. In exchange for this valuable information, Google provides thorough and comprehensive information about users of the website. In addition to information about the domain, location and page preferences of users, Google Analytics also provides information detailing types of browsers and screen resolution of the users. Perhaps proving most useful, Google provides specific information about which search engines and search words led users to the site.

To exemplify the value of Google Analytics to the ICA Institute, an example comparison is presented between the information on location of users provided by the typical domain host and that provided by Google Analytics. Table 1 shows how information from the domain host is provided and Figure 3 provides a screenshot of just one of the many ways Google Analytics gathers and displays user location information.

Table 1: *Typical Doman Host User Location Display of Information by Country (country specific domain names, listed in order of frequency of visits)*

INDIA	Sweden
Canada	New Zealand
Germany	Seychelles
Finland	Malaysia
Singapore	Ghana
Australia	Norway

UK	Czech Republic
CHINA	Portugal
Thailand	Ukraine
France	Trinidad & Tobago
US	Mauritius
Japan	Vietnam
Belgium	Guyana
Italy	Austria
Ivory Coast	Philippines
Taiwan	Hungary
UAE	Saudi Arabia
Netherlands	Argentina
Greece	South Korea
Switzerland	Turkey
Brazil	Fiji
Romania	Togo
Denmark	Nepal
Estonia	Egypt
Mexico	Colombia
Hong Kong	Georgia
Russia	Spain
Indonesia	Luxembourg
Pakistan	Niue
Poland	South Africa
Israel	Yugoslavia
	Lithuania

The only information provided by ICA Institute's domain host is a listing of countries and gleaned only from country specific domain names. This information may not be accurate depending on the domain name in use by the user. For example, it is clear from the Google Analytics data that the US users far outpace the users from India and China; however, since few US users use a US specific domain name, that fact is not reflected in the list provided by the domain host. The domain format also lacks specific numbers of page views or time on site by these users. Conversely, Google Analytics provides such specifics and includes number of users by continent, country and city. This information can be displayed visually based on the user's needs.

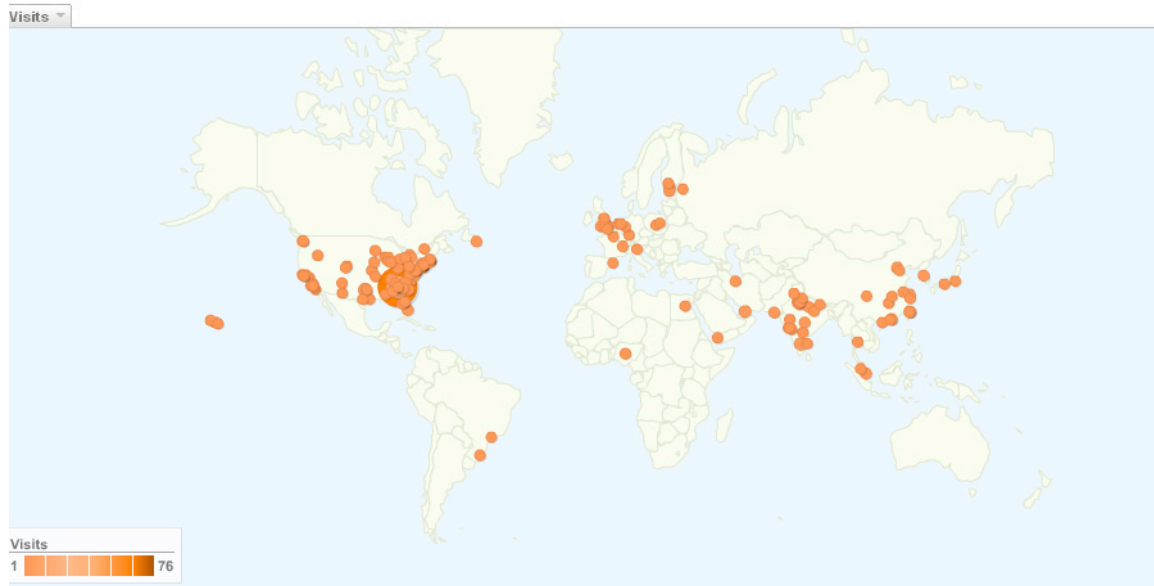


Figure 3: Screenshot of Google Analytics Display of User Location Information by City

The impact of Google Analytics at the ICA Institute was immediate. As soon as the organization's leadership had insight regarding user location, they were able to target information for these users and set goals for reaching a broader audience. Google Analytics also offered specific information about which pages were most popular. It was clear from the data that the publications webpage was the most frequently accessed. This information prompted the creation of the *Journal of Emerging Knowledge on Emerging Markets*.

GAINING BUY-IN AND MAINTAINING SOLUTIONS

The decision makers of the ICA Institute had already obtained exposure and were aware of the various strategies outlined above. Given this previous introduction, it was only necessary to convince these leaders that these new strategies, and the specific tools utilized, would support the needs identified and align the overall goals of the ICA Institute. Most importantly, it was shown that these strategies and tools could be used and would require minimal investment. Once each of the ICA Institute's strategies had been launched, upkeep and facilitation strategies were put in place to ensure an active knowledge building community and to avoid discontinuance. For example, members of the International Contributors Editorial Board were polled for availability and asked to make specific time commitments based on detailed estimates of what would be involved. In exchange, the members are featured as part of the leadership on the ICA Institute site. Already, members of the board have either offered to extend their involvement for the next year or have actively referred knowledgeable colleagues as replacements.

The additional concern of intellectual property has been attended to by an ICA Institute board member who is a practicing attorney and Georgia's Honorary Consul to India. He has helped put in place agreements to protect the rights of both the ICA Institute and contributors on the use of knowledge products. For example, speakers in the Global Virtual Seminar Series agree to allow the ICA Institute to sell recordings of the webinar, if necessary, but do not grant the right to distribute their original PowerPoint slides.

CONCLUSION

As described above, the ICA Institute's mission is to provide a platform for experts around the world to discover, construct and disseminate knowledge towards ensuring a peaceful and productive triad partnership between India, China & America. The knowledge management strategies discussed expand the outreach capability of the ICA Institute towards accomplishing this mission with convenience and at minimal cost. With the fast-paced and growing development of knowledge management strategies in the public domain, these examples seem to be obvious solutions to bring together a diverse audience for the discovery, creation and dissemination of knowledge. It seems likely that these obvious solutions are so widely available because of the strides made in knowledge management over the years. Knowledge management is a field of study which helps organizations recognize and optimize assets that are already available and helps to avoid the "reinvention of the wheel." Knowledge management research has also helped in the development of tools which can prevent smaller organizations from duplicating these efforts by taking on knowledge management solutions from the ground up. This case provides some guidance for implementation and utilization of global virtual communities of practice. It considers their knowledge based social systems and needs and provides a roadmap to show how these knowledge management solutions can be used to advance opportunities while leveraging open source technologies which are readily available.

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