

Information Resource Center Leadership Conference: Findings and Recommendations

October 2003

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Introduction

The Information Resource Center (IRC) Leadership Conference, which took place in Washington DC from June 13-18, 2003 was a tremendous opportunity for IRC representatives to confer and share common issues and concerns and to bring those to the attention of IIP staff. The Conference was a model of teamwork and collaboration and accomplished an exceptional amount in a short time.

As a knowledge management concept, Communities of Practice connect individuals and teams within an organization so that they can exchange knowledge objects, best practices and lessons learned. The June 2003 IRC Leadership Conference laid the foundation for a Community of Practice that will link the information outreach activities of U.S. State Department public diplomacy shareholders in Washington and embassies and consulates around the world and provide significant benefits to the organization. These include faster response time, improved quality of services and products, and increased re-purposing of content.

The IRC Leadership Conference began in a virtual environment with the development of an agenda of common interests. The opportunity to meet in Washington translated that agenda into concrete strategic and tactical goals – first and foremost the establishment of communication and feedback loops both between Washington and posts and among posts as well as virtual platforms for sharing and accessing information products that until now have been hard to transfer, difficult to quantify and highly customized.

Recommendations:

The IRC Leadership Conference 2003 recommends:

1. That in order to fulfill their mandate, IRCs be provided with an IT environment that allows for flexibility and innovation, the basis of which is outlined in the IRC Leadership Conference: Findings and Recommendations Addendum #1: IRC IT Business Requirements.
2. That both IRCs and IIP work towards becoming a Community of Practice in which IRCs, as the chief “re-purposers” in the field are given access to a greater repository of multimedia content, and IIP as the main provider of products receives improved feedback from the IRCs via the establishment of one centralized, coordinated point of contact and mechanism.
3. That in order to enhance global or regional sharing of locally generated or modified IRC products, an Internet platform be created accessible to all IRCs on a worldwide basis.
4. That a system for recording and manipulating a database of IRC (and potentially PA-wide or even Mission-wide) contacts be recognized as vital to our work, that IIP recognize the need for IRCs to use the system best suited for their individual needs, and that both Contacts/Aesop and Goldmine be added to the enterprise-wide IT CCB baseline.
5. That similar conferences be held on an annual basis and that a budget allotment be reserved for this purpose.

IRCs and Information Technology

The overriding issue of concern to all is that of the information technology requirements of IRCs. There can be no question that any loss of IT tools and support would diminish, if not devastate, our ability to operate at current levels. At present, IT support is frequently inadequate and is inconsistent among posts. Additionally, the news of the impending loss of PDnet, a less restrictive IT environment than OpenNet Plus, raises fears of diminished IT capabilities and tools overall.

The newly announced possibility of an “IRC” or “web development” local area network is a promising development as, at the very least, it reflects IIP’s understanding of the unique role and requirements that IRCs in the field have in web development, electronic outreach, reference and programming work. However, such a separate LAN for web developers and/or IRC staff is undefined and the needs of IRC staff must be considered in shaping such a LAN.

In order to fulfill our mandate, IRCs require an IT environment that allows for flexibility and innovation. IRCs are shaped by IT and IRCs use IT intensively to work effectively and efficiently. Since the proposed IRC/web development network is not linked to a global, or Washington-based network and therefore less of a security concern to Departmental interests, IRCs should be allowed full administrative rights to such a network.

Special notice must be made of the key relationship between PA/IRC staff and IMO staff at post. Past experience at many posts offer lessons in how NOT to conduct relations between these two key elements. In order not to repeat these failures, the IRC Leadership Conference recommends that the purpose and eventual configuration of any new IRC or Web LAN be communicated unambiguously, and in a timely fashion to all IMOs in the field. Such a message and the overall working relationship at post between PA/IRCs and IMOs could be strengthened by support from IIP and could take the form of a central point of contact where posts could submit questions or issues and which would have powers of enforcement. Ideally, PDnet would not be removed until its suitable replacement is fully functional.

Please see IRC Leadership Conference: Findings and Recommendations Addendum #1: IRC IT Business Requirements (attached).

Unfriendly Environments

IRCs are at the forefront and are arguably one of the most visible of all U.S. diplomatic mission efforts to counter strong and possibly growing anti-U.S. sentiments in a number of parts of the world. Many IRCs have been extremely resourceful in finding ways to continue to connect with their audiences, even where the foreign policy message is not particularly welcomed. Emphasizing the role of the IRC as a means and a source for identifying and disseminating accurate, comprehensive and timely information on the U.S., with or without being an advocate of such information, has been critical to maintaining our strong reputations and credibility.

The IRC Leadership Conference recommends IIP expand its coverage of the U.S. to include greater emphasis on “softer” issues (as opposed to hard policy issues, our main stock in trade) such as those defined under the “U.S. Society and Values” label, across all platforms and media.

The major IRC target audiences remain multipliers in the host country government, media and academic/research communities. A number of posts have, however, begun to initiate additional outreach programs focusing on larger public audiences, such as students and teachers, to engage them on some of the perceptions and misperceptions they might have about American society. These new initiatives range from new web-based and print products to supporting Mission staff in programming efforts.

IRCs should actively seek a role in applying innovative technology towards improving the Mission's overall interface with the public at large. Efficient and friendly customer service will lessen the divisiveness of political differences, and IRCs should explore possibilities of using web-based technologies including email, telephone, sms and chat services, to improve customer service from all sections of the embassy to the public. At some posts this can be an important public affairs opportunity for the IRC.

Content Repurposing

Content repurposing involves creating and enhancing existing relationships between IRCs and IIP and between IRCs in the field for mutual benefit. A conference discussion and a participants' survey showed that there is no standard IRC outreach program. Technology has enabled IRCs to design outreach and information products relevant to country and regional needs and in support of specific Mission programs and initiatives. Most of these products are based on standard IIP products such as the Washington File, the electronic journals and other publications; but there is increasingly more customization and re-purposing of IIP materials being undertaken at posts. For example, translations, host country material, and background documents related to speakers programs and cosponsoring institutions are being combined to produce post-specific information products.

To maximize the relationship between IIP and the field, we should also maximize the advantages of technology. At a minimum, that would mean providing increased access to source files, for both web-based and print publications. XML is the preferred format for source files. Leading up to true content management solutions for all posts, procedures for taking advantage of XML should be facilitated for field use.

Beyond technology, there are a number of issues relating to the content itself. IRCs, as the chief "re-purposers" in the field require access to a greater repository of content in both print, graphic and multimedia formats. Specifically, access to the AP Photo Database and other similar sources, currently available only through IIP, would be more effective in the field were it available directly, such as through subscription by individual post. This would also apply to streaming audio and video files. The establishment of one centralized, coordinated point of contact and mechanism for IRC feedback, requests or comments on issues relating to IIP business would create a communications mechanism of use to both Washington and the field.

Global Teamwork in a Worldwide Network

Re-purposing and customization go beyond the IIP-field relationships. IIP's resources are limited and address a worldwide audience. Global or regional sharing of locally generated or modified IRC products is a heretofore untapped resource that merits greater attention and effort. This is an example of teamwork which can reduce redundancy and exploit individual post efforts for the widest possible audiences. The IRC Leadership

Conference recommends the creation of a centralized Internet platform to facilitate posting and sharing products for use by any other IRC. In the interim period IRC Bangkok has created a temporary repository: <http://ea.usa.or.th/iipirc/index.htm>

As a first experiment, posts will share their Article Alert products. In partnership with IIP, IRC Brussels will create an XML format for Article Alert to facilitate re-purposing at individual posts. IRCs will continue to use the listserv IRCCConf-L to develop additional shared products. The Oslo IRC will explore and report on the possibility of initiating two global IRC teamwork projects: i) a 24/5 (weekday) online answer service staffed by participating IRCs around the globe, and ii) a publicly accessible USIRC blog (modeled on Gary Price's Virtual Acquisition Shelf) that will log web discoveries and other relevant tidbits contributed by IRC staff and IROs worldwide.

Whither the Center (or IRC Models)

There are myriad forms and types of IRCs in the field. A discussion of these covered physical spaces occupied by IRCs, line authority for IRCs within PA and expanded roles for the IRC beyond traditional reference, programming, outreach and website work.

It is the finding of the IRC Leadership Conference that IRCs should remain as distinct centers, with spaces as required for monograph and periodical collections, Internet PCs and other tools of the trade. An actual distinct physical center may serve a number of purposes: a quiet reading area for Mission staff, a limited public access reference center, or an area for IRC programs and, given this, form should follow function. However, it is also the finding of the Conference that where space is not available, the IRC can and will adapt to become a more virtual service and operation, and that an IRC's identity and function is not dependent entirely on its form. An IRC is much more a function than a place.

Contact Management

A system for recording and manipulating a database of IRC (and potentially PA-wide or even Mission-wide) contacts is recognized as vital to our work. The long-time DRS/Paradox software is now essentially moribund and unsupported, although it is still being used by some posts. Alternatives ranging from commercial packages such as Goldmine to the in-house DRS/Paradox successor, Contacts/Aesop, are meeting the needs at other posts. Since approval by local CCBs are time-consuming and can be difficult to obtain, the IRC Leadership Conference recommends that both Contacts/Aesop and Goldmine be added to the IT CCB baseline. Furthermore The IRC Leadership Conference recommends that IIP recognize the need for IRCs to remain free to use the system best suited for their individual needs, to be able to test new products, or innovate with existing ones with full technology support from IMO.

Continuous Learning

IRC Leadership Conference participants are dismayed by the discrepancies in training and professional development opportunities among posts, which range from very good to almost non-existent. We recommend that IIP address this problem.

The preeminent model for IRC continuous learning already exists in RPO Vienna. By virtue of its established infrastructure, it offers a range of training and conference opportunities ideal for PA/IRC and other staff. This model should be replicated in every Area. Another model which could be considered more immediately and for less cost is that currently in place by long-standing tradition for IRC directors in EAP: annual conferences hosted by different EAP posts each year. Both these models recognize the importance of conference and training opportunities for IRC staff.

The support of PA management at post for IRC staff development is essential – both for training and for conferencing – as post must grant staff time away from the office and frequently fund same, wholly or partially. Support by individual IROs at post for this is valuable and should be ongoing.

A distinction between “conferencing” and “training” must be made. Training or skills development, usually but not always for IT subjects, can often be found locally and can be arranged on a post-by-post basis. These could include courses at local universities, through FSI’s distance learning programs and media, or other learning organizations. Another possibility that should be investigated is to establish affiliations with U.S.-based universities that have a tradition of real-time distance learning programs offering a variety of classes ranging from American studies to IT topics. This would allow for flexible scheduling, reduced travel expenses and expand the number of participants worldwide while involving top-rate academics as speakers. However, distance learning should not be considered as a complete replacement for networking meetings or live classes, where appropriate. Conferences and other opportunities to network with, and share issues and concerns unique and common to IRC directors and staff, are equally important.

Finally, the value of conferences such as this IRC Leadership Conference is inestimable. In addition to its role bringing together shared experience and problem-solving, it also provided an opportunity for its participants to carry their message to a range of key IIP management and staff, and for IIP management and staff to tap into the extensive collective experience and expertise of participants.