INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR NIGERIAN LIBRARIANS

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as means, not ends, as tools that enable desired changes in all areas of life. It recognizes the fact that more could be done in the libraries using ICT for resource sharing and exchange of information in development purposes. It notes that librarians must be highly creative and imaginative to make it work. This paper also seeks to propose a number of essential strategies for consideration by the librarians who understand the roles of libraries and information centres in providing access to information that will sustain development and who will like to effect changes in their immediate constituencies. It also highlights the efforts put in place by the Nigerian Library Association in building new frontiers for libraries and librarians in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The whole world is saddled with the responsibility of finding lasting solutions to crises of hunger, war, illiteracy, poor health, to mention just a few. All these vices have been constituting hindrances to human development. The search for relevance in life has been the ultimate pursuit of man. But then the reality of abject poverty in our environment prevents a person from realising and maximizing his potentials in his/her quest to live a very meaningful life. The human survival ingredient which includes good nutrition, clothing, shelter, energy, transport, health, education and recreation is lacking in many cases.

The search for significance knows no boundaries. The rich and poor alike need access to reliable information so that during difficult times they can adopt the best survival strategy, which will enable them and their families to keep going even during extreme hardship. Information will make people to understand their environment better, learn new skills and be able to make well informed decisions about their lives. The onus rests on the libraries and librarians to use their professional skills to facilitate access to useful and relevant information, which will enable people to develop their full potentials and lead productive lives.

Librarians play an important role in providing practical information that

can be used to facilitate development, whether for seeking employment, understanding rights, learning a skill, checking a fact or gaining health information. The role of information as a national resource for socio-economic development can not therefore be compromised nor negotiated. This has manifested so much in the recent time; as information appears to be gaining fairly wide recognition among government officials and other stakeholders. This has resulted in nations creating strategies to ensure that information and knowledge are used effectively, shared and made accessible. Such strategies have addressed the application of information and knowledge at all levels of education.

The developmental information ranges from civic responsibility through scientific discoveries and business information. It is therefore, imperative that libraries must provide relevant literature to administrators and policy makers in government which they need in taking decisions and necessary actions. With the information explosion being experienced all over the world and the demand for quick and relevant information by library users, librarians are constantly challenged to provide accurate, complete, and timely information. Libraries have quite an enormous amount of well organized quality information for research and development. Application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) will promote access to this information and maximize the benefits.

Embracing ICTs depends on renewed drive by librarians to grasp the opportunities presented by new technologies to develop better information management services. New technologies offer enormous opportunities to develop and adopt new strategies to improving access to information.

There must be a departure from planning in the absence of adequate information as opined by Abiodun (1999) "Accordingly, with or without data, we have conceived and executed a variety of major development schemes...many of them have been launched through plans that are beset by inaccurate projections and a chain of uncertainties even before the schemes were completed." There are many issues in the delivery of government information. The content, methods of access and support systems are all critical to good governance.

With little or no financial support from both the government and the private sector, library development in many years has experienced frustration, in many cases stagnation. Consequently, librarians are implored to remain resolute in their fight and struggle for better working conditions. The librarians must adopt different strategies to remain relevant in the knowledge age driven by digital technologies.

The strategies must take into consideration dilemmas faced by librarians while performing their duties. It is important that ethics are considered. It is also good to be aware of the codes of ethics of our immediate constituencies.

Professional codes of ethics are important because they can give the librarian a sense of direction when making difficult decisions. Mitsy (1991) correctly points out that "code of ethics are there to guide librarians in making decisions that support the goals and beliefs of the profession rather than make decisions based on personal values."

Strategies should be developed to make ICT work and help to put an end to the monster called poverty in the society within the framework of our noble profession. Librarians need to perform well on their jobs. The excellence of performance must draw support from well mapped out strategies that keep us abreast of new trends in the profession and using them to satisfy library patrons for the purpose of developing our nation.

Information and Communication Technologies in Nigerian Libraries

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are the tools that can encourage national leverage and healthy rivalry in the modern world. Innovative technologies, digitization and the internet continue to provide opportunities to streamline and broaden library services, providing users with simple access to library collections and a wealth of information elsewhere.

The present democratic administration has put in place an enabling environment. This is due to the fact that Nigeria, though a developing nation has understood the role of science and technology in national development plans. The embracing of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in Nigeria has greatly promoted integration of ICTs in national development plans, resulting in commendable developments. Fadeyi (2006) dwells extensively on the liberalization of telecommunication systems, launching of the Nigerian satellites and also the Information technology policy.

Going by the new trends in the information industry, it is not uncommon to find Nigerian libraries flooded with computers and internet facilities, but how well have librarians been able to make the maximum and effective use of these information resources? With all these facilities, have librarians been able to enhance learning and knowledge? Have they been able to create a platform for simplifying and integrating services that can allow users to find and get materials? Have librarians been able to establish or discover new ways of collecting, sharing, recording, disseminating, and preserving knowledge?

Honest answers to these questions cannot exactly be given. The attendant problems are numerous but they are surmountable if we are ready to look inwards and determine what works and what does not work in the nation's information system. We are still faced with the challenges of integrating the traditional functions and the emerging trends in the

information industry. Librarians need to apply digital technologies to all operations in order to remain relevant in the current information environment. Sreekumar (2006) emphasizes that "we must ensure seamless access to the pertinent, contextually relevant information to stakeholders."

There is need for a new attitude and workable solutions towards the embarrassing state of these gadgets since their functionality is critical to the success of all development activities. The library audience will be disappointed if attention is not given to what works and what doesn't work? It would be a good platform to look into the present weaknesses in information management with a view to correcting them.

Role of the Nigerian Library Association

The present leadership of the Nigerian Library Association is focused and has strategic plans to transform library services using digital technologies. It has continued to make well informed decisions beneficial to members and equip members with ability to function well in the modern age. The strategy employed by this leadership since assumption of office focuses on 'Building New Frontiers for Libraries and Librarianship in Nigeria '. The leadership has been instrumental to development of websites that provide useful content, discussion groups for exchange of ideas www.nlablog.blogspot.com, nlaitnews@yahoo.com. Many librarians have access to this discussion group. To every one that is proactive, there are unique privileges of knowing what is going on in the association and the profession.

Okojie (2007) reports on successes achieved in establishing alliances with international and national partners such as the US Embassy, the Mortenson Centre, University of Illinois, USA;UNESCO, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA); University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; IFLA Africa Section; National Library of Nigeria; Publishers, Booksellers and ICT vendors.

The themes of the conferences and workshops more often than not provide platform for delegates to exchange views, share experiences, learn from best practices and develop sustainable network with colleagues outside the country. Proceedings of conferences and workshops are now in digital formats and are also available on the association's website.(www.nla-ng.org) There have also been workshops on 'Proposal Writing, Fundraising, and Grant seeking.

The recent workshop on Library Automation held in Jos (2007), is an eye opener to many of the participants who are ready to make changes in their establishments. Participants were encouraged to share their new knowledge with their superiors, colleagues and subordinates. Eyitayo and Okojie (2007) in their presentation highlighted the efforts put in place by the British Council

and the US Embassy in Nigeria to organize series of one-day seminars on crucial issues in the profession. Librarians need to build on the solid foundation laid by the leadership of the association.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION STRATEGIES FOR NIGERIAN LIBRARIANS

Continuing Education of Librarians:

Nigerian librarians must change their perspective about the modern information industry. They must continue to be abreast of new trends in the profession in order to ensure that they are providing information and services that are up to date. Librarians should be encouraged to attend training and retraining programmes to enable them cope with challenges of the profession especially in this electronic age. These responsibilities include being skilled in information retrieval and research techniques. The NLA online forum and related sites publicize training programmes in form of workshops and seminars on continuing education for information professionals.

Standardization for Automation:

Standards are to be ensured in automating library services. It is necessary to look out for appropriate software that will preserve library data for the purpose of future migration into other library application and also check suitability to library operations. In other words, there is need to understand the intricacies of different software and also have abilities to compare different versions of the same software to figure out which will best meet the needs of patrons.

Periodic Evaluation of Services:

There is need to assess our library services to patrons and to be prepared to change our strategies if the present framework is not effective. Mintz (1991) observes that "poor and out-of-date services for users are the end-products of not keeping up with new technologies." Thus, efforts should be made to provide best services to patrons. Equally important is the sharing of ideas among librarians about new ways of doing things as well as strategies for bringing about positive changes in the library operations.

Patron/Library Relation:

It will be advantageous to introduce good customer services that could promote harmonious relationship between librarians and users. Librarians should be able to play with technologies in the library to learn what problems commonly come up and fix them if necessary. Information professionals

should be able to fix printer, use the scanner and photocopiers to help the users while performing their duties. They should be able to troubleshoot new technologies as they are being rolled out into the market for use. Collaboration between IT professionals and librarians will give better results in troubleshooting new technologies.

Use of Portal Technology:

Librarians should be able to employ the use of portal technology to bring together content from diverse resources, including library catalogue, online subscription, reference materials and e-journals through a single interface as this will save the time of researchers.

Use of Online and Internet Resources:

Librarians need to be able to find quality online resources to increase the range of digitized collections. They have the professional and technical know-how to identify, evaluate, organize and classify information for research. The internet has a lot of useful information but Sherman (2007) says it is a false assumption that everything can be found online. Diamond (2001) gives particular attention to the "need for librarians to be aware of how to authenticate online resources and the limit of electronic resources as a whole."

Project Gutenberg provides opportunity for librarians to download books that are no longer protected by copyright. Opportunity abounds to identify the open access resources on the internet that are relevant to subject areas. It should be noted that the internet reveals a wealth of information to that person who is equipped with tools to find it.

Library homepage and alert service on search engines are good for the use of proactive librarians. The services can be used to source information that can be added to the library catalogue.

The internet provides a forum for exchange of viewpoints and opinions. Some of the services provided by the internet are good for sampling public opinions, gathering quick facts on subjects of interest. It is possible to identify relevant subject group that can be added to the library's database and also market the services to target users. Patrons can be assisted through setting up e-mail, and groups for discussions, and by teaching them basic internet and search skills. Many libraries are using these tools to complement services to their users.

Keep learning and experimenting with new products or services that can be applied to library operations and then share experiences in the form of email/newsgroup postings to colleagues who are willing to provide best services to their users.

Provision of Library Website:

Librarians can promote rapid and easy access to their collections and other resources on websites. The library's sites will provide a good platform to describe the content of the collections and reveal them to potential users, so that people may actually use them. Current services that are provided by the libraries can also be posted and published on the site.

Formation of Partnerships:

Librarians can provide a range of public programmes and actively engage the broader community in such projects. They can also invite individuals and organizations to support the library in a variety of ways, including through philanthropy, sponsorship, volunteering and friends' of library organizations.

Information and Internet Training for Users:

The internet, many believe has offered librarians the opportunity to be independent. Access to the wealth of information on the internet depends on skillfulness in the use of search engines to browse it. Internet is not a do-it-yourself medium; as it has been portrayed to be. It requires a specialized know-how. Sherman (2007) observes that the specialized know-how belongs to the librarian. Libraries need to guide and educate their users on how to find information, regardless of whether it is in book or digital form. We need to equip people with skills and means to become information-literate and to enable them locate, access and evaluate information. This is the basis for enabling people to participate as active citizens since they need to make informed choices and decisions and to act on them.

Conclusion:

An attempt has been made to look at the issue of empowering library users to develop their potentials and capabilities and this cannot be isolated from the struggle for access to government and other forms of information. The Information and Communication Technologies have proved to be very useful in solving any information and developmental issues. There is no far fetched reason other than the fact that the needs of patrons have increased in variety and complexity, with greater emphasis being placed on timeliness. Librarians must come to terms with the new world order of partnering together to share and exchange information for human development. The era when librarians would wait for the government to send them on training programmes is gone. They need to go the extra mile by way of sacrificing comfort and pleasure for skills and knowledge acquisition at own expense. Therefore information professionals should move along with emerging trends and also introduce new services that will promote the library profession.

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