

MANAGING LIBRARIES FOR POSITIVE RESULTS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF LIBRARIES IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing perception that information management identifies, coordinates and exploits information entities in an organization for the purpose of utilizing the characteristics of information to achieve greater value in the research environment or to gain competitive advantage over competitors in an industrial environment. For the professional librarian, managing information in response to and in anticipation of the needs of users so that information received becomes more relevant is one of the basic attributes of professional efficiency and skills. This paper examines the management practices of a cross-section of libraries using the non-participative observation method followed by discussions on some of the key observations with information professionals with a view to drawing attention to some of the practices that are not in conformity with international management standards. It examines such issues as professional attitude to work, user behavior, change management, and marketing of library services. The paper further discusses some basic problematic in the practices of information professionals and concludes with suggestions intended to be realistic options that could be adopted to enhance information services provision.

KEYWORDS: Library Management, Managing Change, User Need Analysis, Professional Attitude, Information Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Information is one vital resource that plays a very significant role in a nation's development process. Conceptual changes in socio-economic and political processes as well as advances in scientific and technological developments all depend on the availability of up-to-date information. Also, the quality of decisions is inextricably linked to the quality of information available to decision-makers. In research, academic, industrial or business environments, people generally need stimulus and inputs for their work in the form of new ideas, emerging concepts, and current information (Entsua-Mensah, 2002). This, they usually obtain from their colleagues or from libraries and information centers, which are established to take care of the information needs of people. Libraries have, therefore, come to affect the very foundation of research, academic, industrial and commercial activities, for which, the turn-around time for requested information is very essential since a slow response time can prove very disastrous to the researcher, the academician, the industrialist or the businessman. In all cases, it is the demands, wants and the needs of a library's client-base that determine the nature of services offered.

In an era where there is increasing pressure on libraries throughout the world to become cost-effective, today's librarian or information professional needs not only keep abreast with professional issues, but also acquire broad management skills and understanding of new and relevant information and communication technologies. Managing libraries today has become more complex because the world outside intrudes much more than it was time past. In one vein, users are encouraged to make more demands for better services, and in another, those who are responsible for allocating funds are also bent on ensuring that the libraries justify expenditure.

Consequently, there is the need for the librarian to identify the critical success factors of the workplace environment to ensure that a set of management objectives are established and reviewed regularly in the light of changing in-house performance as well as customer service needs and expectations. A likely option is that librarians draw up strategic plans that clearly set out the critical directions along which the libraries should move to achieve strategic priorities. Strategic planning has become a very important component of information resources management. It does not only help to identify the direction and mission of the library concerned, but also helps the library to cope with increasing uncertainties and risks. Again, it provides for dynamic changes and the allocation of limited resources to meet prioritized needs.

This paper discusses the outcomes of a preliminary study of the management practices of a cross-section of the Ghanaian libraries with a view to drawing attention to some of the lapses that have characterized their operations. It lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive study that has been planned for the near future.

LIBRARY AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

Information management means different things to different people. To some, it means librarianship, while to others it means management (Bakewell, 1989). However, according to Cronin (1984), librarianship is a facet of information management, but that information management is certainly not a synonym of librarianship. White (1985) provides a working definition that is apt to the issues being discussed. According to him, it is "the efficient and effective coordination of information from internal and external sources." For the librarian, managing information in response to and in anticipation of the needs of the user so that the information received becomes more relevant is one of the basic marks of professional efficiency and skills.

This is one subject area that has received considerable academic interest with the result that a lot has been written on it. Several opinions expressed in literature assert that the primary responsibility of the information professional is to manage information since it represents a very important resource that needs to be managed effectively (Stromfield, 1991). Unfortunately, what is being taken for granted is that information, which is now regarded as a very important resource like all other resources and has to be managed effectively to achieve organizational goals, is being left unattended (Philips, Gopalakrishnan and Mawalkar, 1995).

The management of libraries and information centers has become more complex because of the image promotion syndrome on the one hand where librarians seek favorable image, and on the other, the issue of product promotion where librarians try to attract more clients into their libraries. According to Gray (1988), all these involve broader studies of user behavior and needs as well as their level of education in information handling skills, if the librarian is to achieve the expected positive results notwithstanding the availability of substantial resources in the form of materials and equipment. Thus, the information professional needs thorough understanding of the clients' needs and perceptions to enable him to conduct forward-looking examination of these needs by searching for opportunities to improve upon them if the desired results are to be achieved.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Using the library as the core entity, the conceptual issues are built around result-based management approach by situating the key success factors within a cross-section of the libraries in the country. This is to help set the context in which the relevant questions are asked and appropriate data collected and evaluated to make for better management decisions on the country's library situation. The framework is built around a result-based management approach that singles out management factors for evaluation, and examines such factors as change management, user analysis, professional attitude, marketing of the information services and professional development.

Certainly, the pursuit of evidence about the state of the libraries vis-à-vis the management issues either through observational or interactive questioning of the information professional cannot be said to be adequate, however, the essence of this preliminary study is to learn at first hand about these key success factors that could form the basis for a more comprehensive study later.

METHODOLOGY

Using the non-participative observation method to ascertain the truth in some of the criticisms that have been leveled against information professionals in the country with respect to management practices, a preliminary study was undertaken over a 20 month period (From February 2002 to September 2003). The rationale for adopting the non-participative observation method was that as a preliminary study, the concern was to eliminate subjective biases as much as possible. Furthermore, the method was found to be independent of respondents' willingness to respond, and as such relatively less demanding of active cooperation (Kothari, 1990: 118). To cross check with the facts on the ground, the method was followed up with discussions on some of the observations with the information professionals to clarify the issues relating to their jobs.

The study covered the 10 Regional libraries and 25 out of 52 district libraries of the Ghana Library Board, three (3) out of the five (5) public university libraries, 16 special libraries of para-statal institutions, and 45 libraries of the second cycle schools across the country. These libraries were located not only in the national and regional capitals, but in the districts and urban centers. For example, all the special libraries were located in the national capital while the regional libraries and the university libraries were located in the regional capitals. However, some of the district and school libraries were located in the urban centers.

During the visits, although the librarians managing the libraries were duly informed about the object of the study, data gathering was done purely through familiarization with the environment and interaction with some of the users as well as through informal observation of the information professionals at post. The views of the information professionals were later sought on some of the shortcomings as well as the management practices that had been observed. The essence of the exercise was to gather some baseline information that will form the basis for a more comprehensive study in future.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The visits and interactions revealed that most of the libraries and information centers, from the public through school to special libraries in Ghana have been denied the requisite resources as a result of inadequate budgetary allocations for service and investment purposes. The resultant effect has been that most of the information professionals have been reduced to mere guardians of out-dated collections and equipment. This was very typical of the public libraries as well as the special libraries which were located within the Ministries and the para-statal organizations. These developments have made it very difficult for the information professionals who hold the key to properly educating and pushing innovations in the area of knowledge dissemination to effectively manage the information resources efficiently.

On the other hand, the university libraries were comparatively very well resourced. In these libraries, was observed a clearly different working environment where the information professionals went about their duties in a well-focused manner. In all the three (3) public university libraries the use of computers to manage information has become part of their daily operations. Furthermore, they all have Internet connectivity that enable them to serve their clients more efficiently.

Managing Change

The ability to change in response to changing conditions is a matter of not only obtaining competitive edge, but also survival. In his book: "Making it Happen", John Harvey Jones (1988), contends that management in particular is not about the preservation of the status quo. Rather, it is about maintaining the highest rate of change that an organization and the people within it can stand.

From informal interactions with the information professionals, it was realized that about 90 percent of them who were in the twilight of their profession had the tendency to resist change out of fear, uncertainty and lack of self-confidence. This was the case with the public, school and special libraries where they had not been exposed to some of these recent technological developments. Thus, in an era where there are a lot of changes taking place in the environment in which librarians operate, some would definitely find it very difficult to cope unless they are exposed to these developments now.

What this means is that if the information professionals are to make any significant impact then they should critically examine some of the opportunities that are consistent with the ongoing changes so that they can develop the required strategies to survive since information management is not all about technology or networks, but also about the ability to exploit information to satisfy organizational objectives by directing information resources towards the achievement of results, solving problems, encouraging innovation and helping people to do better, especially in satisfying their needs.

Clearly, from observations made during the study, it was realized that some of the management practices collaborated what Stuart and Drake observed in 1993, and that was "the librarians seemed to be more concerned with internal processes than perceptions of value or customer service." Most of them continue to describe physical objects with little regard to their content to facilitate their intellectual accessibility. In this respect, one is of the opinion that more emphasis should be placed on content development. By doing that librarians would be seen to be playing a more proactive role as active agents in the information transfer process.

To be able to manage the changes that are taking place in the library environment calls for the identification and interpretation of some of the basic indicators like the attributes of the user population as well as their perceptions in terms of the effectiveness of the service (i.e. whether their needs are being met). For example, the librarian should question whether the non-user of the service has any knowledge of the kind of services the library offers. If the answer is no, then a new method has to be adopted which will help to create a better understanding and awareness of the kind of services being offered. Thus, to achieve positive results, the librarian will have to study the needs of the users and come out with products that would meet them. It is these aspects of the creative management function that facilitates the exploitation of the information materials and products that they are supposed to be in charge of.

Admittedly, the changes to the library and information services as a result of the developments and use of new technologies are complex and involve alterations to working practices, working relationships, attitudes and levels of expertise as well as technical changes to processes and equipment. Consequently, it is important that information professionals should keep reminding themselves that these changes, how-

ever small, would have to be managed since they eventually lead to enhanced services and improved efficiency. Failure to do that could continue to pose some problems that are not only likely to affect staff moral, but also the users and some organizational arrangements.

Relevance of User Needs Analysis

A user's receptivity to, and demand for an information product or service is much more likely to be positive if the design and introduction of the product or service is preceded by careful analysis of his needs and wants (Bellardo and Waldhart, 1981).

Observations made during the course of the study reveal that almost all the libraries adopted a casual attitude to user behavior. Furthermore, all the libraries, without exception, failed to collect adequate data on their users or find out why some of their potential clients are not using the facilities. Their inability to gather such data has resulted in dearth of comprehensive statistics on library users in most of them.

Fortunately, for the university libraries, which were members of the Ghana Inter-Library Lending and Document Delivery Network (GILLDDNET) programme, the project requires that they report on the patronage of the service to the project sponsors, DANIDA. Consequently, some statistics are being kept on the number of people who use that particular service.

Obviously, the inability of the libraries to generate such important data makes it very difficult for one to lay hands on accurate statistics of their user populations. Though basic, this is one of the activities that information professionals have taken for granted and is not taken seriously even though record keeping is very essential for planning purposes.

Ideally, it is important to know who the users are, whether they are one-time, casual or frequent users, as well as their background especially the age differentiation and intellectual background. Again, it is not only important to determine their needs, but also the purpose of usage since this will enable librarians to tailor some of their services to meet these needs. Finally, it is absolutely necessary to know what users feel and think about the quality of services being offered if information professionals are to avoid the danger that the service may be out of touch with their needs. Of course, this can be done by carrying out user needs studies from time to time.

Certainly, in the field of librarianship there has not been shortage in user studies. If anything at all, there has been an uncritical acceptance of the value of such an exercise since it gives the librarian the chance to establish good rapport with the people for whom the service has been set-up. It also helps the librarian and his staff to gauge the reactions of the users to past, present and potential information products and services. Furthermore, it enables them to assess the degree of skewness based on the feedback obtained in determining user dissatisfaction (Sharpiro, 1980).

Unfortunately, since there is absolute lack of empirical studies on the information handling skills and information seeking behavior of users in almost all the libraries visited, there is the danger that the extent of utilization of available resources may be lost on some categories of users whose perceptions are clearly neither known nor fully understood. It is, therefore, very important that librarians should take users and their needs more seriously, and to do that satisfactorily there is the urgent need to develop measurable techniques that can be used to improve upon the library processes and provide management with up-to-date information (Urquart and Schofield, 1972).

Clearly, it is only through such activities that professional librarians can be in a better position to replace the wild and emotive generalizations that some make about the information needs of their clients and replace them with hard facts and real accounts.

Professional Attitude

The nature of the information professionals' work demands that they stand between the end-user and the information products. In this regard, their primary responsibility should be to direct their expertise to the tasks of analyzing information needs and creating the relevant services to meet them.

Unfortunately, apart from some few special libraries and the university libraries where the professional librarians were seen to have positioned themselves to provide efficient reference service, the same cannot be said for the staff managing the public and school libraries. The reason is not hard to find. Most of the personnel managing the schools and special libraries located within the Ministries and para-statal organizations did not possess the requisite skills to enable them to do that effectively. This was especially the case in the school libraries where it was observed that clerks and messengers had been engaged to oversee the activities there. Clearly, it was evident that in most of the public, school and special libraries visited the librarians had failed to maintain the desired level of services.

Again, one serious observation that was made had to do with the reasoning of a greater number of the information professionals with whom interactions were held. The impression gathered was that they tended to assume that the strategy that was used to launch their services had remained appropriate all these years.

Generally, since information professionals are obliged to provide information to their clients, this obligation demands some level of absolute professionalism and positive attitude towards their work. The rationale being that they are not only seen as custodians of the information resources, but more importantly as guides, facilitators, and the people who are to manage the resources for the benefit of the patrons. The bottom-line is that professional attitude goes a long way in enhancing the creation of added value to information service. The challenge, therefore, is to create an environment that stresses customer satisfaction through the encouragement of increased opportunities for user interaction and feedback.

With increasingly knowledgeable and sophisticated library users who now have some direct experience of good, as opposed to average and adequate information systems, users are now demanding with greater clarity what they need. This is especially the case now that information explosion and its accompanying technologies have made it possible for information to be at the fingertips of those who need it without the pain and complexities of the past (Lewis, 1988). The technologies do not only offer new means of serving users of the service, but also present librarians with a number of challenges and difficult problems to resolve. In situations where a professional librarian is not conversant with the operations of these technologies, it is only justifiable that one makes conscious efforts to educate oneself to enable him or her to cope with the demands of the present generation of users.

Marketing the Service

In the information work environment, since the prime responsibility of the staff is to provide a service, the adoption of marketing strategies requires the making of conscious efforts to increase the use to which the available resources can be utilized. Also, it should indicate the librarian's willingness to evaluate the credibility of the services being provided while at the same time relating future practices to the principle that the needs of the user is paramount in the formulation of the service's objectives. Developing the right blend of marketing techniques will therefore help to establish a close relationship between the demand side representing both the existing and potential users and the supply side.

Unfortunately, from interaction with the information professionals in the libraries visited, very little marketing activities of their services were actually taking place. What was clearly established during discussions with the information professionals was that although they appreciated the relevance of marketing their services, they were apprehensive about the path to follow. In actual fact, what most of the libraries have been doing can best be described as user education. This has been clearly established with the university libraries since it forms part of the general orientation programme that the universities have put in place for fresh students. If the concept of marketing is accepted within the library and information work environment, then information professionals are essentially agreeing to a simple proposition that supply is a function of demand, in which case, the service should be developed to meet the needs of the users.

Information marketing as a process is firmly founded on the assumption of effective communication (i. e., users telling the library staff what they want and the staff informing the users what they have). To state that the introduction of marketing techniques will solve the problems of libraries is to overstate the case. However, the concept holds some hope. For, if a library is to exist over time and operate successfully, it certainly has to concern itself with acquiring new users, maintaining and changing usage pattern of current users, and regaining former users for whom the services be-

ing offered are still relevant. To achieve these depend on efficient allocation of available resources for the development of the relevant services to satisfy the needs of the targeted group. To assume that past practices represent satisfactory service and good value is to say the least very unfortunate since the right things must be done at the right time. In this respect, what may be recommended here is that librarians should consider the idea of drawing up coherent marketing programmes and integrate them into their normal operational activities.

One key feature of the information profession is that for the librarian to continue to be relevant she or he needs to introduce periodic changes to various aspects of his operations and try to assess the impact of the service by looking for indicators that relate to:

- ◆ the user orientation of the information activity (i.e. the extent to which the activities satisfy the needs of clients);
- ◆ the information channels used (i.e. the "blend" of mechanism and the extent to which each improves access to information and use of information); and
- ◆ the extent to which performance of staff and other resources are maximized by the way in which the services are structured and managed.

Finally, what the information professionals should do is to try as much as possible to remove some of the barriers to library use by avoiding over-dependence of their clients on them. Here, the guiding principle should be Mooer's law (1966), which states that "an information system will tend not to be used whenever it is more painful and troublesome for a client to have information than for him not to have it".

Thus, if the information professionals are to maintain the services at the desired level, there is the need to carry out periodic audits so as to be in a position to design products to fit the needs of the users. This is analogous to the financial audit that auditors undertake, and it should involve mapping the flow of information with the view to designing appropriate strategies to market the service since such activity only seeks to uncover whether information is managed badly or not at all (Hollier, 1988).

Professional Development

The librarians should realize that as professionals they owe it a duty to their employers and especially their clients to offer swift and value-for money services. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case with most of the libraries visited. What was clearly established during the study was that most of the information professionals, apart from those in the universities, are gradually falling into professional stagnation.

From observation, interaction and discussions with them it was realized that there has been loss of fulfillment from, and enthusiasm for the work they are doing since there has been reduction in motivation as a result of poor conditions of service. The onset

of this grave situation has led to a situation where some of the staff have clearly lost intellectual stimulus with resultant absence of novelty and challenge due to reduction in opportunities for advancement.

Certainly, all these could be avoided if the information professional could place more emphasis on professional development through active participation in professional activities that the national association organizes from time to time. As far as this is concerned, the public library as well as some of the university libraries must be commended for sponsoring their staff for such events. In one's opinion this is one of the several ways that staff could be motivated to ensure that they give of their best.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, the study has really brought to the fore some of the challenges facing the country's information professionals. The issue relating to information professionals being more adept to managing internal processes at the expense of marketing the services they are providing needs to be addressed. At this present time, it is important to let library patrons know what materials are available or where they can get them when they need them than concentrating on the usual working practices. This calls for the libraries to put in place effective marketing strategies to enable them to market their services.

Again, with recent developments in information and communication technologies, it is important that information professionals are adequately exposed to all these developments through well planned capacity building programmes. Although the study cannot be said to be comprehensive enough, it has succeeded in bringing to the fore some of the management issues that should form the basis for a more detailed study to enable the professional association to seek lasting solutions to some of the challenges confronting the profession.

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