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BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION SERVICE MANAGER REDEFINED

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines and redefines the role of information service manager in the light of the new information communication technologies (ICT). It takes a look at the growth of information service and the place of information service manager in the information environment of the 21st century. It discusses the emergence of knowledge management and the consequent challenges of knowledge transfer. It concludes by advising the information service manager to chart a new course suitable to meeting the information needs of the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Information is an essential commodity that is required in all spheres of human endeavours. Wars are won and lost due to availability or non-availability of the right information at the right time. Conflicts are also resolved by building the bridge of information to close up the communication gap. Information is today an important factor in the production and distribution of goods and services.

The World of information has witnessed a tremendous transformation in the last few decades. This transformation is reflected not only in the nature of information resources the information service manager has to organize and grapple with, but also in the manner information is now packaged and delivered to meet the modern day needs of users.

The information demands of users of today require repackaging or special packaging of information. Users are increasingly more sophisticated as more users are becoming computer literate. They consist not only of those in the immediate environment but also of those in remote parts of the world. In the new information age, the world has become a global village. The role of the information service manager, therefore, has to change to reflect the changing situation.

An attempt is, therefore, made in this paper to redefine the role of information service manager within the context of the new information environment.

INFORMATION SERVICE:

Information is an important commodity that is required by every individual and organization in the process of carrying out their day-to-day activities. All human activities, according to Tiamiyu (1999) entail communication activities of various kinds. He described communication as the process of creating, sending, receiving, understanding and using information in various forms. Information was also defined by Alemna (1990) as the "transmission of human experience, a signal or a stimulus, a symbol or a set of symbols with a potential for meaning". Information has great potentials for decision-making. Man's activities are therefore information driven and information dependent.

Tiamiyu (1999) opined that information has a life cycle and identified the various stages which it passes through namely creation, organization, storage, retrieval, transfer, dissemination, use and or disuse. He, therefore, defined an information service as "any activity performed to facilitate any of the stages of the life cycle of any piece of information". Viewed from another angle, an information service "helps to transform or convey information from a specific format, medium, location and/or time into another more valuable format, medium, location and/or time" (Tiamiyu, 1999).

In the past, libraries, archives and museums were traditionally associated with information service. The advent of computer and information and communication technologies has however, expanded the horizon of information service to include those generated and transmitted using the new technologies.

INFORMATION SERVICE MANAGER:

The term 'information service manager' is broad in outlook and does not refer to just a member of a group of professionals. According to Ogunsheye (2000), the term admits of so many groups of professionals involved in managing world's intellectual resources. It embraces librarians, archivists, information scientists, record managers and museum curators. The professional are found in institutions like libraries, archives, documentation centres and museums. These institutions according to Ogunsheye are "centers of collection, analysis, storage, repackaging and dissemination of knowledge and information" and they bear the responsibility of providing "access to resources for education, decision-making, and further research, thereby extending the frontiers of knowledge for man".

Thus, the managers of information service are today regarded as 'knowledge managers'. The emergence of knowledge management, according to Klobas (1997) has great implications, among other areas, for the field of library and information science. What then is knowledge management?

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Knowledge management, according to Klobas (1997), relates to the acquisition, transfer and use of knowledge in an organization. The managers of

knowledge in ancient libraries were themselves scholars (Ogunsheye, 2000). Knowledge, at this time, was concerned with the happenings in man's physical environment, his reaction to these happenings as well as his speculation about the spiritual world. The recorders of these events played a crucial role in the transfer of records and knowledge. The process of transmission of knowledge and ideas was however, greatly enhanced by the production of books (Ogunsheye, 2000).

The industrial revolution, which brought about hitherto unprecedented growth in science and technology created the need for more organized method of knowledge management. In meeting this need, the libraries looked inwards and developed the professional skills that were required to meet the challenges of knowledge management. In this regard, professional organizations took the lead and anchored relevant programmes for formal education of professional librarians. Ogunsheye (2000) cited the example of "the Great Britain Library Association which ran programme for the Associateship of the Library Association (A.L.A.) for the first level professional and the fellowship of the Library Association (F. L. A.) for the managers and administrators of libraries". By the second half of the twentieth century, training for information service managers through the running of first degree and postgraduate programmes had taken root in American and British Universities.

Today, knowledge management entails harnessing and developing the intellectual capital of an organization. According to Klobas (1997), intellectual capital is increased when knowledge is acquired by learning from organizational activities and this knowledge may be from new or existing sources. New knowledge may result from research and development while existing sources of knowledge may be internal or external. Internal sources consist of knowledge held within the organization which may either be recorded or resident in individual staff. Knowledge held outside the organization is regarded as being externally sourced.

Equally important to knowledge management is knowledge transfer. In fact, knowledge transfer processes constitute the key processes in knowledge management (Klobas 1997). Among the processes in knowledge transfer are the sharing of knowledge available within the organization and the acquisition of the one that can be sourced from outside.

For information professionals, knowledge transfer is an important process. While librarians are mostly concerned with the acquisition of recorded knowledge from external sources, information systems professionals, record managers, and public relation managers consider as being crucial the sharing of recorded knowledge internal to the organization. Knowledge management and knowledge transfer process, therefore, form the crux of the roles of information service manager of today.

DOMAINS OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Klobas (1997) identified three professional domains in knowledge management. They are the business content domain, the informational content domain and the information technology infrastructure domain. The key players are business experts, information content experts and information technology experts. Business experts create, acquire and use knowledge to achieve the goals of the organization. Information content experts who include librarians, records managers and database managers acquire, organize and transfer data, information and knowledge for utilization by business experts. The transfer of organizational knowledge appears to be their primary responsibility. Information technology experts bear the responsibility of providing the technical infrastructure required in knowledge management process to meet the organization's needs. Klobas (1997) drew the conclusion that expertise in all these domains is essential for effective transfer of knowledge. There is, therefore, a convergence of experts who have one role or another or a combination of roles to play in the process of knowledge transfer. An information service manager constitutes an important element in this paradigm of knowledge management.

INFORMATION SOCIETY OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The term 'information society' is not capable of precise definition. (OConnor, 1998). OConnor, however, periscopeed it as "a society that uses information intensively and in a way that is not constrained by time or space, a society where transactions of all sorts can be processed electronically, a society whose working and living practice have been modified fundamentally by information, computers and telecommunications technology."

In the information society, information is easily accessible around the globe. The world has become a global village and it is possible through convergence of technologies to have access to information without inhibition as to time and space. Iromantu (1998), however, lamented that there is much more than meets the eye in the present information systems as accessibility is not evenly spread and that this poses great challenges to developing countries like Nigeria. However, it must be noted that a great improvement has been witnessed in the area of accessibility since Iromantu made this observation. This is not to imply that all the infrastructural problems constraining access in Nigeria have been eradicated as the question of digital divide is still high on the global agenda (Mutula, 2004).

The evolution and development of the information society has, in the main, been put in place and sustained by what OConnor (1998) termed technological convergence of three formerly separate business sectors namely the computer industry, the telecommunications industry and the knowledge industry, the telecommunications industry and the knowledge industry. He elaborated on this convergence of technology by emphasizing that:

The information society is growing out of the new opportunities for products, services and markets which this convergence of technologies has created. Technology convergence enables content in any combination of media, spoken word, music, still and moving images, numeric data, and printed word to be built into the packages of information and distributed instantly to users around the world via packaged disks, terrestrial or satellite broadcast media, computer cables or telecommunications infrastructure to telephone receivers, computers or television sets. This represents a wholly new era of economic activity and wealth creation”.

Ogunsheye (2000) identified three main societal developments as having impacted tremendously on the role and functions of knowledge and information managers at the beginning of this millennium. These are: Firstly, the transformation in the lifestyle and user demands of modern library clientele as the information society evolves and the nature of the format in which knowledge has to be repackaged.

Secondly, the globalisation trend in world institutions, processes, operations and structures services, and operations for optimum results, making the world into a global village where it is increasingly imperative that we share, plan, merge and manage the planet earth's knowledge and resources.

Thirdly, the development in the use of computers to store, organize and retrieve information and make knowledge available to users in distant places.

Ogunsheye expressed much concern about the developing world keeping pace with their industrialized counterparts in globalization particularly in the face of overwhelming obstacles and the complexity of their society. They however, have no choice than to keep pace with the development in the new information environment in the interest of their own survival. This poses a big challenge to information service managers who need to put necessary infrastructure in place to meet the varying needs of users at the local, national and global level.

The information services of this era have taken added dimension with the advent of computers. The value of information is better appreciated today than ever before in personal, organizational and national life. This has promoted the development and growth of new information services anchored on the sustained by information and communication technologies (ICT) and the internet (Tiamiyu, 1999).

The provision of information services is no longer the exclusive preserve of archives, libraries, documentation centers, museum and such other institutions which render primary information services for free or fee. Other organizations too whose primary responsibility is not to provide information services render

such services to their members to meet the information needs of such members and to promote organizational development. Besides, there is a growing trend of information provision in the informal sector as cyber cafes maintained by private operators now abound in cities and towns linking more and more people to information available in remote places.

Information services, according to Tiamiyu (1999) range from those emphasizing the creation of new information content such as data collection, desk research, report writing and data creation to those whose concern is the transfer of already created content to end-users. To this latter group belong postal, telephone and Internet services. At the center are others like libraries and publishers who "must create and organize some new content themselves to transfer other content" (Tiamiyu, 1999).

Ward (n.d) examined the growth in published information services from the first printed journal in the 17th century to the developments in access vehicles in the 1980's and concluded that no "library and information service manager can deny the benefits of developments in this area which have enhanced our range of services, upped the volume of work we can undertake, and provide a whole host of opportunities for improving the utilization of published information by our organizations". He acknowledged the tremendous opportunities offered by information technology (IT) revolution to information professionals.

OConnor (1998) examined the place of libraries within the context of the IT revolution and identified two main roles. Firstly, the libraries as providers of content stand on a great pedestal. Access to the technology of information will be meaningless without information to access. Librarians through their collection can, therefore "claim the right to a seat at the information society table". This is in addition to being in possession of the skills required for content development. The second role relates to developing actual and potential market for information products and services. This includes advertising the products and services and giving training to customers on the technology thereby facilitating and increasing access by more and more users.

The most pronounced effect of ICT is the emergency of new information formats. These new formats include floppy disk, CD ROM and Online Database, a fulfillment of Kilgour's prediction in 1994 that "...libraries will evolve from institutions describing and handling books and journals as 'things' to institutions providing data and information contained within books and journal". These are in addition to the traditional formats like books, journal and audiovisual media. Side by side with this development is the emergence of new institutions, which have to collaborate with libraries in the provision and dissemination of information resources. Thus ICT, according to Ogunsheye (2000) "has turned the airwaves into a global vehicle for information and a market place for information knowledge and even transaction". The organization of the new media coupled with the management of facilities in such a way as to promote document delivery

constitutes one of the new challenges facing the information service manager of this era.

NEW ENVIRONMENT, NEW ROLE

The new information environment has created a new role for librarians and other information service managers. Davies (1981) opined that the most important role of a librarian is to function as a 'gatekeeper' offering access to information sources. Two years later, he advocated that librarians "should be encouraged to take an interest in the use of programmable calculators, computer-assisted learning, databanks and expert systems in addition to more traditional services and media". This, according to him would turn the library into "an information hypermarket not a corner shop specializing either in antique wares or space-age toys".

O'Connor (1998) viewed the role of the librarian, and indeed information service manager generally, as having evolved "from being the servant of that narrow elite to the servant and mediator for much larger and more diverse constituencies of information users". For the information service manager of today, the constituency of users is made up of not only organization members, customers and researchers but also remote users in any part of the world who may have no direct dealings with the organization. The interest of all these users should, therefore, be taken care of.

In the course of taking care of diverse needs, the information service manager needs to go into partnership and form alliances with others - information and media specialists, those offering technical services and other libraries and services. These partnership and alliances facilitate fast delivery of information that suits the needs of users. They also cut down investment and reduce the burden of meeting the needs of users, which burden cannot be effectively carried without resource-sharing and reaching out to others through the building of social and informal networks.

Besides, the information services manager of today must be knowledgeable. He must acquire necessary skills in hi-tech information system and be abreast of development in the field of information technology. He must be adequately equipped to be able to, in turn, equip users with necessary information literacy skills that will enable them navigate efficiently the turbulent sea of information networks. He must constantly bear in mind his responsibility to develop efficient and effective ways of transferring knowledge and meeting the needs of users.

CONCLUSION

The information service manager of the 21st century faces new challenges which have been brought about by development in the information field. The information communication technologies have impacted positively on the services which the information manager has to render. In addition to the traditional media,

there are also new information products and services. Users now cut across all spectra of life and are located far and near. Meeting the needs of these users is one great challenge facing the modern information service manager. This has carved out a new role for him to play in the new information environment. It then behooves him to be up and doing and to acquire the necessary training and managerial skills that will enable him cope with the challenges of the new information age.

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