

THE ROLE OF INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL IN ATTRACTING & MAINTAINING USERS IN THE ERA OF DIGITAL & VIRTUAL SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the roles of Information professional in the digital era, taking a critical look at how we can attract & maintain users following the changes and challenges within and around the Library & Information services in the recent past. Explore opportunities that such developments have brought about in the provision, dissemination, retrieval & storage of information.

Look at the definitions of digital & virtual libraries, and how Information Professionals & Information seekers understand this. Presents the advantages of digital & virtual services illustrate how they can be used to attract develop & maintain the clientele's interests.

Examine resources sharing as compared to group buying, its management & potential maximum use. Continues education & training & the role of LIS schools in the development of the already in the field / practicing Information professionals, possible intervention by bodies & associations that represents interests of Information Professionals and that of the profession itself.

We will look at our competitors, who are they? What are their products, their intended market, what are they capable of? And most of all what makes us different from them? Our strength and weakness, our only ways to enjoy competition & still reach our goals.

Information professionals are easily understood by looking at the kind of services they provide. They are referred to in many terms; however, the basic thing is that they are specialists in information provision.

Adam & Yesha (1996:3) points out the exhibits on today's www, i.e. any individual with access to the Internet has the potential to be information provider by making content available for consumers. An average number of people in urban areas have access to Internet services, therefore information is just a "click" away from them! However, this does not make

them Information professionals, they do not have the skills that we possess, nor they have the time to brows around, they need information. Most of these people operate on a zero time zone.

Information professionals need to capitalize on this, be a link between users & Information, and provide them with what they need in a short space of time! Choo (2000:393) talks of tacit knowledge; saying that Information professionals possess tacit knowledge that is critical to the organization. Expressing that they are not only skilled at selecting and searching information sources, they also have the know-how to articulate and analyze information needs, evaluate the quality of information and most of all package found. This, to me is one strength that really set Information Professional apart.

Matsons and Bonski (1997:4) states that as the design process moves to the system - librarians and technologists have many opportunities to operate on adjustments and enhancement of the systems. They talk of multiple different roles that have been proposed for librarians: kills & competencies such as the following are needed & should be developed by Information Professionals for survival:

- Marketing skills & current awareness services in a pro-active manner.
- User education & training
- Knowledge management
- Organisation of networked information resources, strategic and operational plans.
- Information policy development.
- Electronic publishing and curriculum development,
- As a guru of copyright in the electronic age, of licensing and electronic distribution
- System interface designer

Information Professionals are to be seen as part of solutions and contributing quality education. Looking at training and development needs along the dimensions of technology skills and network management, customer care, media management, storage and retrieval, so much has change, librarians need not change their values and norms profession, these values of service, quality, universal access and co-operation. What should change is

the way in which these values are translated into operation at this era of electronic service provision. For instance, Cataloguing can now be done through copy and paste, however, this need not compromise the quality of work being done, hence development in technology skills and network management is crucial.

Barden (1996:3) stresses that information workers need to develop the kinds of skills, which ensures integration into the increasingly structured architecture of modern business. he are required to be acutely aware of the financial and business implications of their activities, they will need to work closely with their counterparts in marketing, computing, finance and customer services, also acknowledge that they are in the continuing process of reinventing their stream to the rapid changing environment in which they are operating.

What are digital & virtual libraries?

There are a lot written & published already on digital & virtual libraries; through out the literature the terms virtual & digital are used interchangeably to mean the same things. Borgman (1999: 29) define libraries as set of electronic resources and associated technical capabilities for creating, searching and using information. In this sense, they are an extension and enhancement of information storage and retrieval systems that manipulate digital in any medium & exist in distribute networks.

Seamans (1998) says digital library is not merely equivalent to a digitalized collection with information management tools. It is also a series of activities that brings together, dissemination, use and preservation of data, information, and knowledge. This definition is much closer to home, it clearly incorporate aspects that my understanding of Virtual & digital services. However, coming with a clear cut definition does not seem be easy, Sloan (1998:1) observed common thread among the definition to be an emphasis is on resources and an apparent lack of emphasis on human factor i.e. Information professionals and their valuable services. I tend to agree with him, even though this has been dealt with when it became evident that the digital and virtual services will and are dependent on skills possessed by Information Professionals.

Why digital & virtual services?

The main aim of electronic resource, digital or virtual services in libraries are to improve access to information for the ultimate customer. Technology is very powerful and brings imperialistic thrust not only into librarianship but also into every day's life (Matson and Bonski, 1997:3). There is a struggle by librarians to cope with the dynamic changes brought by technology that is very real. According to Spink and Cool (1999:3) at present knowledge is required to produce information or computer professionals to work as digital librarians and digital developers. Libraries and librarians may warrant restructuring of the library and information science and the computer science curricula.

Sloan (1998:1) points out that digital library offers users the prospect of access to electronic resources at their convenient times & places. Users no longer have to be concerned with library hours of operation as well as how to get there in time. If we look at the South African situation, it is mainly those in academic institutions, specialised libraries and public or government libraries in urban areas that have exposure of digital libraries and their operation in full swing. However, it is also crucial for us to note the in-between status which these libraries sit on. The libraries' collection is made up of both print & electronic collection, therefore services are offered in traditional way as well as digitally. Dugdale (1999: 150) refers to this as hybrid libraries, stating that it is becoming a norm.

In a way, the two systems balances the equation, with users demanding access to information around the clock, and libraries still in transitional phase, it becomes manageable to assist different clientele. Gessesse (1997: 94) indicate that users want power to decide when, where and how they obtain access to a library service. With the arrival of digitalized services, their needs were addressed. They talk of "providing information just in time" as compared to "print information which is just in-case".

COLLABORATION: A WAY FOR INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

Resource sharing within the library goes way back. A very common yet good example is Inter Library Loan system. The whole idea of getting into

partnership is to extend the range of services or products that can be offered or made available to customers & still remain cost effective.

Partnership does not have to be between libraries, it can be extended to companies, and more so between faculties and librarians within the same institution. Collaboration has to be as inclusive as possible, participation & partnership should be encouraged from as close as staff members, students and other libraries to as far as suppliers & professional bodies.

Most people associate partnership or resource sharing with service provision, lending of material. If we think broader, we will realise that there is more we can share. Training resources, Training skills, Collection building, as well as cataloguing agreements. Most fortunately for our country, we have come to the realisation of these and more, my question here is are we using or sharing to a maximum limit? This is substantiated by Hiremath (2000:80) who said Librarians seem to have to come to yet another realisation that they need to work together in managing electronic resources & technology developments. This led to development of Consortiums bodies. Hiremath (2000) indicated that consortia membership increases buying power, risk-sharing capacity amongst institutions, collaborative technical expertise and unified lobbying. Suppliers also tend to listen and consider consortiums than individuals in making agreements.

The benefits of consortiums is not news to South African libraries, we already have effective and efficient consortiums achieving great things. My point in this is, we need to detach ourselves from the notion of ownership and move closely into access. Also importantly so, resource sharing does not need to be on reciprocal basis! It should be geared at reaching one goal, which is to meet the need of our customers, which fortunately for us are the same across the board. This can be achieved by realising that even the smallest institutions or libraries do have something to offer.

Let us borrow from the poem written by Max Ehrmann in 1927 *Desiderata* "Speak your truth quietly & clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story". Hiremath (2000:80) uses the Triangle Research Libraries network of North Carolina Choreographed their acquisitions plans to ensure that 70 % of their collection were wholly unique, physically proximate and able to offer both breadth & depth to local users.

This kind of arrangement provided users with more information and resources. Libraries of all kinds have never been in competition with one another; their co-operation improved service provision through the years. The creation of OCLC in the 1960s with its mission to share cataloguing records and succeeded in transforming the act of cataloguing through out the country is a good example that Cupertino goes a long way & can only become better with new developments. SABINET shows that even locally, resources' sharing has always been a primary goal, it has created a platform for communication & resources sharing.

This also eradicates possibility of unsustainable ventures, more so because most libraries receive budget cuts faster than you can say Indiana Jones! every year. In her paper Wise (2001: 2) stresses sustain ability as a key challenge for consortia in the sense that institutions will share cost and benefit equally. So in other words reduction of cost is achieved and we can acquire more with little available. Even the idea of specialising when buying or obtaining access should be considered as an option, especially in more specialised subject fields were in become knowledgeable that certain material is only available from certain service point.

INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL AS MANAGERS

Information Professionals as managers need to get into strategic planning, it helps in that they will be able to stay abreast of the changes in order to make best decisions at any given point in time. Strategic planning is often regarded as a management tool which is used for the purpose of helping organisation to do their job and ensure that members of the organisation are working towards the same goal. Information Services organisation are shifting their perspectives and transforming themselves from stand alone entities to integral parts of cooperation operations, Farka-Conn (1996:9).

Information handling skills, more important for managers for cataloguing and indexing. These aspects that sets our organisations apart from other sources of information providers. Our information is well organised and through technology, access is increased and extended to beyond library walls.

Evaluation skills, for selection of material resources, equipment's to be able to insure quality. Concerns for the customer, Information profession has always been about people & for people, one aspect that as managers it works as an advantage.

Financial planning is also another aspect of strategic management that cannot be ignored, and there has been a huge shift to the information economy. Information professional had to learn pricing techniques and consideration. Old models are disappearing and compering ones are evolving, the question could be, can you gain revenue by giving away information? According to Hawkins (1996:10) this is very crucial for Information Professionals so to survive, if Internet café can make money by providing access to Internet, therefore users should also part with some money to access more than just Internet but organised information. Information professionals need to be trained to be sales agent, negotiation, word-processor, and account or bill collector.

If we look around us, change and transformation is happening very fast, it's an era, in which information specialists do or die. In a city were 10 years ago one library without a computer was enough for the community that lived in it there is an Internet café in every corner.

Another important factor that has implication on Information professionals as manager mentioned by Parida (1999:265) that is librarians occupy one of the most ambiguous positions in colleges and universities. This ambiguity has resulted in an unclear image and uncertain status for librarians and it affects their management styles negatively. However, this is gradually changing as Information Professional is taking strategic positions with the management structure of organisations. Choo (2000:396) states that an organisation's cultural knowledge consists of belief it holds, to reflection about itself and its environment. In this way, an organisation uses its cultural knowledge to answer questions such as what kind of an organisation would be valuable to the organisation worth pursuing - Answer in turn depends on shared assumption and beliefs about what business the organisation is in? What are its core competencies and how it wants to grow over line? The time is now seasoned for Information professionals to contribute to the creation of the organisational cultures.

INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS AS MARKETING OFFICERS

Marketing is a skill that Librarians probably did not require years ago. This was because Librarians operated in a system that provided them with users. The most important thing is that there was no competition. They were the sole providers of information services. If we look around our cities at the moment, you find Internet café in every corner. It's in this era that information professionals should seek and maintain being different. This is intensified by Bell (1998:1) saying in today's information service delivery; Information professional should assume the status of an intermediary. Most users have little experience with basic research techniques, and as a result, is neither searching efficiently or effectively.

The good that come out of this is that consumers or the market operate on a zero time zone, the information professionals need to take advantage and capitalise on its organised characteristics! Provide access & information "just in time". This therefore, indicates to us that we need to embark on vigorous marketing strategies. Those in academic institutions may say, ours is a different situation, our market knows we are there to assist them, which is true, however making them aware of what kind of assistance you are able to provide, & how you do it can only make them realise the more worth your services are to them. Marketing can be done through workshops conducted through out the year. From more general to more specific and specialised.

Show academic staff how the Library can, and is willing to cut and save on their time & finances. Students do not have time to attend to most of their studies needs, as information professionals, marketing our services is the most important and vital drive that can put us on the limelight.

Today there are so many ways to put marketing programme in motion without even having to leave your office or work station. Keeping our on-line bulletin boards updated, display of new acquisitions on the Intranet. Delivers the information to our clients even before they request, use electronic alerts, list serves and current awareness. Use of e-mails to communicate with our users. Information professionals hold the cards of building and maintain the relationship with their users in the palm of the hands! This is where the

mouse spends most of its time in. By just a few clicks a large number of people can be reached.

Libraries are still sending reminders to their users- how about using the same reminders to alert the same user of new and most recent publications. People always feel honoured when they are remembered and their needs are catered for. A personalised note that invites the user to view latest publication on subject s/he specialises on can work wonders.

The other important thing is living direct and clear contacts, users may want to find information but with no person to contact, sometimes its becomes difficult. This could also be done through the creation of User profiles.

INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS AS GURUS OF LEGAL ASPECTS

In every day of services & information delivery, copyright has to be considered. Now with the digital services in places, we talk about licensing agreements. Miller et al (1999: 113) points out that successful licensing agreements results from knowledge of the library's resources and priorities, its user communities, and the services to be provided. To these far, Electronic documents delivery has been discussed & written about from different points of views, possible solutions & limitations identified. I want to draw our attention to skills development, the possibility to train Information professional & equip them with legal knowledge & skills needed to execute Copyright matters, be it print or electronic, to navigate the licensing agreements.

We need to be involved in knowledge creation, have our experiences & knowledge recorded & influences the outcomes and the law around Intellectual properties. This is supported by Johnson (1999: 320) using the example of the UK Information Industry, which employs more than one million people, saying that it can be divided into three sectors: Creation, Delivery & Processing. Traditionally we have always seen ourselves belonging to the Delivery sector, however, that has changed; we are challenged by developments to contribute considerably across the three sectors.

Library & Information science schools, In-service training providers are challenged to reconsider their curricula, to include as much as possible of

legal aspects in the training programs. The necessity of this is visible on the number of Information professionals who are not in tune with these aspects yet are expected to execute them effectively with efficiency. Are we doing justice to our users, our collection, and our budget in this regard? My point here is that if we invest in proper training, we can attain more with less in the end, as Information Professional will negotiate with confidence, will make decision that are viable. Copyright is inevitable, any discussion of electronic document delivery also involves copyright issues, Gould (1995:28), therefore side stepping it only means postponing the destined. Most information Professional find copyright & licensing very intriguing but do not feel confident enough to tackle it, they rather not get involved. This fear can be eradicated & replaced with skills.

Fortunately, the challenge is not facing us only; we have our suppliers, publishers & authors swimming on boats trying to find best possible ways to reach concordance. Therefore, co-operation, trust & common mind is necessary. Gould(1995) refers to Hugenhalts pointing out that in all countries of study, copyright law does not expressly deal with the problem of electronic delivery.

Licensing agreements will draw on our negotiation skills, something that cannot necessarily be formally taught, but developed through knowledge acquired. When Information professionals have the know how, able to understand contracts, small prints, challenge constructively, to negotiate a better deal on behalf of their users & organisations shall be possible. Understanding legal terms such as ownership, access, site, authorised users & uses. To adapt to the fast changes, continues education & training is a norm rather than an exception through the career of an individual, Cheng (2001: 31).

INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL A CRITICAL LINK BETWEEN USERS AND RESOURCES. IT SKILLS

Sreenivasalu (2000: 14) indicates the fundamental role of digital librarian is to act as an intermediary who brings together users and information. At this point in our country, we have hybrid land of libraries; in other words both electronic and print are equally important in our collection. The important

thing is for information professional to adopt the attitude of intermediary and bring together users and information available in two forms.

In order to successfully link the two, we need to acquire certain skills, which to me are not necessarily new; they just need refinement and development. Information or knowledge delivery has been in the libraries for years, we have always been delivering information to our users, the difference is how! We need to be conversant with electronic delivery systems. Information can be delivered through e-mail, portals, digital documents can be exported electronically. We need to make our users aware of digital storage, retrieval & impart the skills to them. Users can be encouraged to send electronic queries and feedback. Electronic communication increases speed globally.

Libraries are the most organised sections that I know of, its easy to find what we have, this is the same even in the digital collection, our organisational skill makes it easy for us to find and direct our users to the relevant documents.

With our traditional set up, we had directives, classification systems, that had shelve marks etc. In the digital era we need access tools -as an intermediary or link between users and information or resources, recognise the move from borrowing to accessing, which allows for remote access & save on time, we need to identify cost-effective strategies for information retrieval, assist users in the publication and creation of new knowledge.

Information professionals need to be IT competent in order to navigate within the collection. This is necessary so when we realise that in most places there are network problems, an information professional with the ability to solve some IT problems with out depending on the IT department will be strategically placed in this era. Therefore IT trouble shooting courses will be an investment for an information professionals.

INFORMATION PROFESSION AS TRAINER.

Library orientation has been conducted in the libraries for years. This was a way of introducing new users to the collection & library structure. In this new era we need to move from orientation to training. In any kind of library today, users feel that they are able to find information for themselves, as

information professionals we need to empower them. Fourie (1999:383) define empowerment as providing people with environment, proper tools, resources. Our libraries today have all the necessities for us to empower our users with skills that they need. Training users to be independent has been emphasised since the beginning of digital and virtual era, the main aim has been to try and ensure maximum use of information provided. More so because digital and virtual services provides remote link. However, there seem to be some resistance from information profession side; information profession could still be confused of what to teach and what to keep to ourselves so we do not lose control.

- Information profession as trainers should have the ability to identify training needs.
- Ability to group trainees according to their needs.
- Have the skill to depart the skill effectively
- Ability to plan.
- Always have a follow up session announced.
- Should have evaluation programs in place

Bell (1998: 1) states that time can be an obstacle in training that training does not occur only on the day it is scheduled. It requires a lot of planning, preparation & advertising. This already put a challenge to us, as information professional is this era of digital and virtual services. We need to put time and efforts in preparing our training materials; users need to realise as soon as the training starts that it's worth their concentration. Taking time to find out the trainees needs and expectations also helps in creating the contents and examples used to be worthwhile.

In the past it was necessary for information profession to find information or answers to our library users questions-our users expected this from us. Things are different now, users expect to find ways on how to find answers or information they need on their own. Noble (1998: 52) points out that the concept of end user instruction is still evolving, but basically it provides opportunities for us to forge alliance with our patrons in new ways. Information profession will be involved with user assistance and information literacy in the virtual library.

Most of our students enters tertiary or leave high school with little or no knowledge of computers as much as they do not have experiences in library usage and resources. That's were our challenge began. These are the clients we cannot afford to let astray, we need to be pro-active, work with them and build an alliance. These can be achieved through understanding where they come from, where there should go, we equip them with skills that will make them confident enough to come back. Again I borrowing from Fourie(19999) saying that empowerment programme is more than just a single training session. It is aimed at gradual growth and development and may consist of a number of sessions.

The important things for information profession is to realise is that there will always be users who needs our services in every generation. In support to this Gessesse (1997 : 95) wrote that much attention is needed in several aspects of personal and professional development.

Therefore, this warrants us to take action geared at equipping ourselves with necessary skills needed to execute training. Also realising that it is impossible to empower someone with skills that I do not possess. When information profession comes to the realisation that developing independent users also gives them time to develop their skills further, training will be done more effectively.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to stress that Information Professionals are in no way going to be extinct. We need to place ourselves strategically with organisations & contribute in measurable manner. The development of digital libraries & services shook us considerably, Garrod (1998: 244) refers to common theme running through the literature that the networked environment requires certain type of person rather than a set of skill. To me this is an illusion, people need to acquired & keep developing skills and knowledge. The digital environment only requires us to be pro-active and responsive to rapid change. What ever approach we take ,it is important to recognise that the basis of development lies in clear strategy which enables one to make progress as and when the need & opportunity arises. There so much written and published in this subject & Information Industry as a

career has much to offer, & the ever changing of resources & systems ensure professional growth & satisfaction for those who dare!

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