

Upskilling the Library and Information Science Professionals for Effective Information Service Delivery in the 21st Century Global Economy

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Abstract

The global economy of the twenty-first century have caused a paradigm shift in the role of librarians, moving them from being only caretakers of conventional information resources to suppliers of service-oriented digital information resources. The change increased the demand for Library and Information Science professionals to possess certain skills that would allow them to deliver effective and efficient services. It is against the fore-stated backdrop that this theoretical paper suggests a need for upskilling the LIS professionals to render effective services for the global economy. Specifically, the paper explained the concept of upskilling; analyse the LIS profession and the 21st century, explore the required skills by the LIS Professionals of the 21st-century society; highlight some of the challenges to effective information service delivery by the LIS professionals, state some of the required strategies for upskilling the 21st century LIS professionals and discuss on the need for up-skilling the LIS professionals for effective service delivery in a 21st-century global economy. However, the paper puts forward some recommendations for training and follow-up workshops for LIS professionals, to ensure that they are technologically savvy and remain effective in line with the demands of the complex and competitive knowledge societies they serve in a global economy.

Keywords: Upskilling; LIS Professionals, Effective Information Service Delivery; Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) Sharing.

Introduction

It is a truism that technological advancements have propelled the human race to a pedestal that has never been experienced before in human history. No doubt, the situation has moved the world to continuously experience an increase in an ever-changing demand for advanced skills in essentially all fields of human struggle. Librarianship as a profession, is not exempted from this conflict because the function of the librarian has changed considerably over the past few decades. Available records show that historically, knowledge was typically recorded on clay tablets, parchments, papyrus rolls, etc., but that human advancements have forced information professionals to improve their roles from mere custodians of traditional information resources to providers of service-oriented information.

Singh (2014) believes that the addition of IT, satellite communication systems, networking, the Internet, and intellectual property rights have increased the complexity of the library environment. In other words, the library and information science (LIS) field has been forced to adjust to the advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in most of its procedures due to the information world's rapid change. The development is not unrelated to how ICTs have continued to shape and globalize the LIS field in 21st-century society, creating the current situation, which is characterized by a quick need for upskilling to become a fundamental requirement for the ongoing improvement of institutional effectiveness and the overall performance of LIS practice.

However, it is well known that the human race has gone through various changes in the pursuit of efficacy for human growth, beginning with the traditional, continuing through the industrial, and ending with the current information-based economy. The importance of human capital to an organization's success may not be unrelated to this. Putting it differently, the availability of human capital directly determines whether an organization succeeds or fails. To support the aforementioned, Moghaddam (2009) asserted that "specialized human resources, specifically librarians, are essential to success and dynamism." Because they continue to be solid pillars that support the effective delivery of information services to society, LIS professionals cannot be off the charts in the struggle for upskilling, to enable them to offer effective services.

To "up-skill" means to make a sincere attempt to acquire the current necessary skills that the labour market values most highly. The necessity to upskill the LIS professionals is to offer a window for improved creativity and competence that would constitute the competitive edge for their professional calling because human capital continues to be a highly important and significant asset to organizations. As technology keeps evolving, LIS professionals, like many other professionals, need to constantly refresh their skill sets to maintain relevance in a competitive and globalized industry. Hence, the basis of this article.

The Concept of Upskilling

A skill is said to be the ability or proficiency that is required by an individual to carry out a planned action or task with determined results often within a specified time. As such, a skilled person could be said to be anyone that possesses the required capability to systematically and successfully perform a specific task with limited challenges. However, the term 'upskilling' implies a process of enhancing the skill set of an individual or a team. Digital Finance (2018) stated that: upskilling specifically implies enhancing an employee's abilities who are staying within the same job profile. Further, they stated that unlike re-skilling, which requires an individual to earn a completely new degree or certification, upskilling requires an employee to enhance their value to the organization by improving their current skill set and can be accomplished via:

1. Appreciating your strengths and ensuring that you fix your weaknesses or that of your subordinates;
2. Doing away with bad habits;
3. Learning and adequately utilizing new trends;
4. Reaching a consensus on the best strategy for doing, naming or measuring things to attain best results;
5. Striving to acquire new knowledge to address better opportunities.
6. That notwithstanding, despite this, workers must constantly upgrade their skills because what they acquire today rapidly becomes obsolete. This is especially true in the age of human-digital interaction. In addition, some of the LIS staff lack the skill sets necessary to meet modern client demands. As a result, the need for LIS staff to continually up-skill their knowledge cannot be overstated, especially given that the current society is mired in a rapid pace of information flow and technological changes, necessitating a requirement for the LIS staff to develop plans on how to up-skill themselves to remain relevant to modern demands. In sum, one of the best strategies for LIS professionals to practice is to upskill, so long as they want to remain relevant in offering effective and efficient services to their patrons. This can only be achieved through continuous professional development (CPD) programmes, which can only be accomplished through attending conferences, seminars, workshops, and other training programs, to enable them become more skilful.

The LIS professional and the 21st Century

The global economy of the twenty-first century is thought to have caused a paradigm shift in the role of libraries, moving them from being only caretakers of conventional information resources to suppliers of service-oriented digital information resources. The change increased the demand for LIS professionals to possess certain skills that would allow them to deliver effective and efficient services. According to Quadri (2012), the rapid development of internet applications, the explosion in the quantity and quality of information resources, and the applications of information and technology (IT) in the field of information have forced libraries to accept and adopt new techniques for the organization, retrieval, and dissemination of information.

Critical knowledge of the LIS profession is imminent given the aforementioned. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) asserted that Millerson (1964), Car-Saunders (1933), Etzioni (1964), and Wilensky (1964) have examined various conceptions of a profession; they agreed on some points and disagreed on others. Further, they looked at Millerson's conceptual issue with a profession as follows:

"of all Sociological ideas, one of the most difficult to analyse satisfactorily is the concept of a profession. Perhaps, three basic problems account for the confusion and uncertainty. First, there is the semantic confusion, resulting from the wide and excessive use of the word. Secondly, there are structural limitations enforced by attempts to device fundamental characteristics of a profession. There is the adherence of a static model, rather than the appreciation of the dynamic process involved in professionalism".

Notwithstanding, the Australian Council of Professions (2018) defined a profession thus:

"...a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others. It is inherent in the definition of a Profession that a code of ethics governs the activities of each Profession. Such codes require behaviour and practice beyond the personal moral obligations of an individual. They define and demand high standards of behaviour in respect to the services provided to the public and in dealing with professional colleagues. Further, these codes are enforced by the Profession and are acknowledged and accepted by the community".

By implication, the concept of a profession has given rise to a variety of opinions on what should be the fundamental components of professionalism. As a result of the above exegesis, it can be argued that the LIS profession is a body of disciplined individuals that possess special knowledge, certification, technical information-seeking, organization and provision skills that are governed by ethical codes of practice.

Required Skills by the LIS Professionals in the 21st-Century Society

Anyone who makes a living executing tasks that necessitate a specific level of education, ability, or training is considered to be a professional. However, people who act as vital middlemen between information sources, information systems, and information users are information professionals (Feather, 2004). Further, Feather argued that the information professional is involved in gathering and processing of information, maintaining information sources, services, and systems, as well as disseminating information to users who are interested in it.

For LIS professionals to survive and thrive in a competitive economy, they must have the required modern professional skills and technological competencies. This is because the world is experiencing fast-paced technological progress that is constantly ushering in new developments that were once considered to be futuristic. Li (2011) averred that breakthroughs in information technology have been a real key factor for LIS programs worldwide to absorb more computing and information system courses. The development created a need for a curriculum reform that would improve the standards of the LIS sector. Such reforms must have a bias towards computing and I.T utilisation. The bias is not unconnected to utilizing the Internet platform as libraries across the globe are competing to set up web-oriented information resources and services i.e. Ask-a-librarian, bibliographic instructions, computerized library catalogs, information literacy programs, Inter-library Loans (ILLs), virtual references etc that are often created by Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and Extensible Markup Language (XML) documents.

Since routine tasks like administration, data collection and collation, etc are now being performed by digital tools, it becomes imperative for LIS professionals to be proactive in up-skilling themselves to remain professionally sound and relevant to contemporary demand. In affirmation of the above, Yadav and Singh(n.d.), stated thus:

"Library professionals, depending on their work, have to work and act as information managers, information systems analysts, documentation officers, information scientists, information officers, knowledge managers and analysts, cybrarians, information brokers, corporate information managers, webmasters, network navigators, information mappers etc. Each of these positions has a separate specialized set of duties, functions and responsibilities along with the general duties, functions and responsibilities of a professional librarian. To perform the different functions related to these various roles, library professionals must possess different skills and competencies".

However, Satpathy and Maharana (2011) averred that LIS professionals must possess sufficient knowledge of new skills such as library automation, e-resources management, content management, organization of information on the Internet and Intranet, developing and maintaining digital libraries/institutional repositories, web-based library services etc. Citing the National Knowledge Commission India, Kumari and Gowda (2014) in Bhat, Rao and Pai, stated that the skills required fulfilling the changing role of libraries are: Library and information handling skills, Service orientation, ICT knowledge skills, Communication and training skills, Marketing and presentation skills, Understanding of cultural diversity and Knowledge mapping skills.

Similarly, Kaul (2017) believes that the skills of LIS professionals may be categorized as Classification skills, skills for selecting quality content, Cataloging/ Metadata Creation skills, ICT skills, Management skills, Skills to serve users, Generic skills, Personal skills and Training Skills while Yadav and Singh (n.d) noted that the job competencies for the digital environment consist of various fields as information and communication technology skills, management skills, communication skills, leadership skills, research skills, job and

employability skills. This is because the 21st century has brought about some technological advances, leading to new pedagogical opportunities that require continuous professional development through upskilling, to be abreast with current developments in the digital environment.

Perceived Challenges to an Effective Information Service Delivery by LIS Professionals

The difficulties that libraries and information centers confront in providing services are characterized by several barriers. However, some of these difficulties are not universal because the issue at one library or information centre may differ slightly or significantly from that of another. However, some fundamental obstacles to the delivery of quality information services can be divided into two categories: those that LIS experts can address and those that are too difficult for LIS professionals to handle on their own. For instance, a decision that is made by library staff if someone breaks a rule is an illustration of the first type. The need for library automation, inadequate teaching and research materials in terms of both number and quality, ethical concerns, insufficient seating capacity, unskilled employees, shortage of materials, and manual procedures are all examples of the second group.

A major impediment to effective LIS provision and delivery especially in developing countries is automation. The problem is a result of the fact that the processes are still at an infant stage, leading to most of the library operations being performed manually. More so, erratic power issues, of adequate space, failure to up-skill, inadequate manpower, inadequate funding, lack of equipment etc. are some of the barriers to effective information service delivery by LIS professionals.

However, Gillingham (2017) stated that at a meeting of the North American Customer Advisory Board, librarians were asked about some of the challenges they faced; that they would like help with and subsequently, the following ten (10) impediments were realized. They are:

1. **Setting up access to content so that it's easier to find and use:** Access routes and all the various vendor platforms are a complex landscape for both readers and the librarians who need to make sense of it all.
2. **Understanding *how* that content is used in their institution, and by whom:** Librarians want to understand usage beyond what the current counter reports deliver, eg. They want to know which articles are being read, in what disciplines, by which type of patron, and in which faculty.
3. **Understanding their institution's usage vs peer institutions:** Is the usage of their content getting 'good' or 'bad' versus other institutions with a similar profile? What should be done to make it better?

4. **Demonstrating how the content they've bought has impacted the outcomes of the institution:** How can the library prove that it helped to produce a better student, bring in grant funding, make a discovery, and secure a patent? Demonstrating the value proposition to those that hold the purse strings is critical.
5. **How they can best present the critical data of licensing models to their patrons and upper management:** Digital licensing models are complex and explaining these can be difficult for those who are not well versed in them.
6. **Embedding their services fully in the researcher and student workflow:** To do this successfully they also need to intimately understand the needs and behaviour of their users and the point of interaction with the library service. How do you deliver relevant information at the point of need with a service which makes a real difference to people's daily lives?
7. **Supporting author/researcher education, especially early career researchers:** Librarians are increasingly acting as knowledge consultants within their organizations and are called upon to deliver training to early-year researchers which goes beyond the normal research skills training. This might include training on understanding copyright, how to write a grant proposal, how to get funds and include them in grant applications, how to get published in the best journals, etc.
8. **Developing their role with research data management tools:** Is the library best placed within the institution to support the data curation and research management behaviours of the communities, departments and or the labs they support? If not libraries, then who?
9. **Evolving their roles and capabilities as librarians:** Supporting the mixed economy of subscriptions plus Open Access and delivering on the expanding knowledge consultancy needs of their organizations requires a re-configuring of librarian roles in a time of tighter resources.
10. **How should they reconfigure library policies to accommodate the mixed economy and the new realities:** If they buy e-books should they also buy print? How much should be apportioned to demand-driven acquisition? Should they be buying textbooks at all? All these new issues are still being worked out and there is plenty of experimentation still going on.

In addition to the aforementioned issues, there are also the following: a lack of current and pertinent information materials; poor working conditions; unfavorable structures not built from the ground up to accommodate library services; lack of competence in customer service support; poor teamwork; insufficient funding for the purchase of computers, printers, photocopiers, tablets, and other smart devices; failure to meet the demands of an ICT-driven era; fear of emerging technologies; lax policies; lack of passion for the field; lack of motivation; and noncompliance; etc are some of the major challenges that usually inhibit efficient and effective service delivery by LIS practitioners, especially in developing economies.

Some Strategies for Upskilling the 21st -Century LIS Professionals

Since the beginning of time, acquiring a skill has been considered one of the most valuable traits of the human species because it elevates the skilled individual in the eyes of others. Due to the fact that processes are continually evolving and being improved, it is imperative to take proactive steps to better understand the abilities that will give us the competitive edge in providing excellent services. The measures listed below should therefore be taken into account as LIS professionals work to upgrade their skills.

- a) **Identify a needed skill gap:** It implies a careful assessment of the required skill gap that a library professional may require before ensuring that he/ she attains such knowledge/ skill.
- b) **Plan carefully:** It requires mapping out a realistic plan on how best to achieve the desired success after a skill gap has been identified. Some important elements that should be considered include but are not limited to the budget, the quality of the trainer, the content of the training to be offered and the nature or kind of training to be offered (practical, theoretical, online etc.).
- c) **Identify measurable outcomes.** Regular evaluations of workforce capabilities and production are key. Marked improvement in workforce performance should be realized.
- d) **Attend regular training programmes:** The LIS professionals of the 21st century need to engage themselves in a variety of training programs i.e. workshops, seminars or conferences. By so doing, it would enable them to learn new skills from experts.
- e) **Acquire quality training materials** – Such professionals need to lay their hands on quality training materials. Such materials would make them understand more at their convenience.
- f) **Assess the skills and capabilities of a particular workforce:** This is for the library management to forecast and ensure that they train their professional staff on what they believe would be of value to their libraries in the future.
- g) **Take the bull by the horn-** The smart LIS professional of the 21st century would have to develop a continuous learning mindset. In other words, such kinds of professionals don't rely on their employers to finance their upskilling-related activities.
- h) **Encourage collaboration:** That would go a long way in bringing together like minds to ensure that cross-fertilization of ideas is been shared.
- i) **Align training to individuals:** Try to ensure that specific content is tailored to a specific category of persons. In other words, minimize dishing out a particular training to the entirety of your employee.

The Need for Upskilling the LIS Professionals for Effective Service Delivery in a 21st-Century Global Economy.

It is the result of the trend of development activities that typically emerge regularly that the modern society is experiencing a great deal of advancement, which makes it crucial for not only LIS experts but the entire human population to up-skill their talents. With a focus on the LIS industry, the necessity for upskilling has grown to be a crucial requirement in LIS practice since it gives the up-skilled professional a sustainable competitive edge. From an organizational standpoint, it makes more sense to invest in the experts a library already has by enhancing their skills (upskilling) rather than searching for or even hiring a new group of qualified staff. By doing this, library employees would become more adaptable, feel better appreciated by the library, and develop certain qualities of openness to good changes since they are more likely to see the potential of new roles and opportunities that are likely to come their way.

In spite of the above potentials that are brought by upskilling, several practising library professionals in the public and school libraries lack the required skills to adequately render effective services especially in developing nations like Nigeria and Zimbabwe. The situation may not be unconnected to the fact that the 21st-Century society places much premium on up-skilling. The aim is to maintain ample relevance in a competitive atmosphere. Else, other professionals are likely going to encroach or even push the LIS professionals out of business. It is a critical issue that necessitates the call for up-skilling the LIS professionals as it builds an atmosphere for the up-skilled workforce to further think creatively. Any failure on the part of LIS professionals to upgrade their skills in this ICT-driven era is likely to lead to inefficiencies. In other words, such employees are not only likely to fail in providing their clients with effective services, but they are also prone to lose their standing to individuals who are highly skilled in how to efficiently gather and provide some timely and reliable information to interested persons.

Another issue that undoubtedly necessitates upskilling by the LIS professionals is that of the failure of some higher education institutions' to review the curriculum content to be in line with current realities. Such problems typically stem from the theoretically based activities that institutions typically carry out. To put it another way, many library schools lack the cutting-edge equipment that is necessary to help students receive the practical training they require, to practice effectively in a 21st-century culture. Some of these institutions may be having financial difficulties, while others may simply not have updated their curricula to reflect the skill sets needed for 21st-century LIS practice. Nonetheless, the need for some proactive measures, among which is upskilling, remains of high significance to remain relevant in quality service provision by the LIS professionals. This is because many changes in user needs have continued to increase as a result of user awareness of innovative ways of accessing information via several technological tools.

Conclusion

After a careful observation of the multitudes of advances in technology, which has led to various education reforms by many countries, societal changes and corresponding

expectations from a variety of information-literate persons, it becomes clear that a gap is left open that calls for critical changes in the way and manner in which libraries and librarians operate. By implication, 21st-century librarianship is a kind that must be significantly different from the earliest form of librarianship because it requires those with not just certifications but also, adequate skills. Therefore, the need for a proactive and strategic effort on the part of relevant stakeholders in the LIS sector to formulate policies that would encourage upskilling strategies for the attainment of effective service delivery must be seen as a critical requirement for the advancement of LIS practice.

Recommendations

Based on the critical importance that is attached to the need for upskilling the LIS professionals, to enable them to render impeccable services to a technologically advanced and globalized society, the paper recommends that the following strategies be followed to foster some robust LIS professionals that would remain relevant to the contemporary demands of the 21st-century global economy. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Librarians should rise to the challenges of ICTs because traditional librarianship has no place in the information age.
2. Libraries, especially in developing nations should join the bandwagon of automation. Since it is a process, they should start somewhere to arrive at the desired destination.
3. Library policies should be made in a way that would encourage automation processes.
4. Timely and adequate training and follow-up workshops should be organized for the LIS professionals.

If diligently followed, the fore-stated recommendations would go a long way in ensuring that the LIS practitioners of the 21st century are effective and in line with the demands of the complex and competitive knowledge societies they serve.

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