

BUILDING PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS: THE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of Library network and networking is not a new phenomenon in the Library and Information arena. Invariably, the term has gained currency with the advent of information technology (I T) and rippled implications which are far reaching in today's world of global village. Ordinarily, the term network refers to any kind of formal cooperative arrangement which allows exchange of library materials and Information resource sharing. For example, the traditional inter-library loan and the tedious compilation of Union Catalogues are the humble beginnings of network that allows participating libraries to exploit the resources of member libraries for their mutual benefits.

Today the shift of focus is on Information Superhighway and specifically on the Electronic Library System or the Virtual Library or for want of appropriate euphemism "Library Without Walls" where libraries are linked for fast access to resources. Collection Development and Bibliographic Control are becoming redundant and obsolete and accessibility and connectivity are the norm and myriads of acronyms that are mind boggling span the wealth of library literature. Indeed the expansion of electronic networks or internet linking libraries and their resources makes possible easily accessible information

for library users around the world.

In this paper an attempt would be made to postulate the theoretical basis for networks to enable us have a deeper perspective of the various scenarios that have emerged. In addition there would be an exploration of the wealth of literature on the topic; which suggests that it is an on-going development with the computer configuration and telecommunication facilities as the pacesetters.

For this reason we cannot predict the last bus-stop. In this regard it would not be out of place to examine the variable management issues such as challenges, policy analysis, strategic alliances, existing capacities, materials and financial resources, researches, and the commitment of the professional association

THE RATIONALE

The "Information Explosion" phenomenon has remained with us for far too long and become endemic, and for this reason librarians and information specialists have not found an antidote for it and thus manage the disease as our counterparts in the medical profession who take consolation in "managing" or "controlling" incurable ailments like hypertension and diabetes. This in no way implies a failure in the profession but a posi-

tive approach to solving a problem. The usage of the term information is commonplace that most people fail to appreciate its connotation. Generally the term information refers to gathered data that has been put into a meaningful and useful context and communicated to a recipient to make a decision.

In management circles information is a critical and crucial resource for decision-making. Since management is about decision-making at the right time and place, it is important for us to recognize the value of information; be it in the cabinet meeting, surgical theatre, science laboratories, manufacturing industries etc. Information therefore is likened to the life-blood of every system and it is of paramount importance that we accord it its true value in order to make life go on.

NETWORK IN LIBRARIES

Librarians network in order to find the right information and sources for their users. Libraries are every man University where information is exploited to support the knowledge base of the individual. From the libraries, the individual acquires the intellectual capacity to meet the needs of society. These may range from government activities, business, agriculture, health to sports. The library therefore satisfies society at large and stands in a very competitive posture to compare with other agents of national development.

This premise is an analogy derived from Porter's (1985) value chain concept which advocates that discrete activities performed by an organisation whether big or small are inter-related and that scope exists for exploiting the inter-linkages between different value activities. Indeed the means for exploiting

these opportunities is attributed to information technology whose development and achievement are linked with the use put to it by libraries as partners in technological change. This is better understood when illustrated with library functions and processes like cataloguing indexing, abstracting, database creation, literature searching with the internet etc. that are linked to information technology. Thus the term networking is the genetic technology which enables libraries to realize their full potential. Simply put, libraries are the cooking pot from which the delicious information meals are served.

MANAGEMENT ISSUES

The field of network and networking is very challenging and its practice is fraught with management problems which must be addressed. In fact from the developing countries standpoint, a different scenario would be anticipated because although we are dining at the same table with the developed world, the playing field is not even for the developing world. The developing world is plagued by the basic necessities of life as propounded by Marslow and the privilege few who dine with the developed world have to carry their sour crumbs back home with undesirable recipes. In other words, although we may learn the theory and application of information technology with the same infrastructure, back home we are faced with non-availability or inadequate human and infrastructural resources to manage our libraries and information technology. The combination of these unresolved issues pose management challenges.

CHALLENGES

Library networks involve the use of both in-

ternal and external facilities from telecommunications and service providers in order to derive the full benefit on the Wide Area Network (WAN) and much less on the Local Area Network (LAN). In Ghana for example, these are catered for by Ghana Telecom, Network Communication Systems (NCS) and Africa on Line, to mention a few. Elsewhere like the United Kingdom (1994) and France, data networks such as PSS, TRANSPAL, OCLC, JANET etc. are entirely run privately to support these specific networks.

Although Ghana is at the infancy stage, it is necessary that adequate provision is made for these infrastructures to be put in place in order to sustain our enterprise in networking. Coupled with this, it is important that we get acclimatized to the network protocols. They are essentially the rules that govern the exchange of data between the devices. It is reckoned that delays in document delivery and non-response to searches being experienced by some major libraries in Ghana are partly due to failure or inability to cope with the demands of the protocols. Indeed the frequent breakdown of Telecommunication links, computer faults and lack of technical expertise are ostensibly responsible for the blanks we experience on our screens.

POLICY ANALYSIS AND NETWORKS

Policy formulation is the bedrock of efficient management planning. In Ghana, although the Ghana Library Association has championed the cause for a National Information Policy for some time now, Ghana does not have legal legislation for a national information policy to harness and coordinate infor-

mation systems and needs of the country. Ideally a national information policy must meet the development needs of society. UNESCO (1985) has laid down a blue-print for developing countries namely:

1. Planning an organisational structure to co-ordinate services for maximum use;
2. Passing the necessary legislation;
3. Introduction of the necessary technology;
4. making adequate financial provision.

The paradox of UNESCO's blue-print is the response of the developed world.

It does appear the need for national information policy is alien to the developed world because most institutions and organisations like the British Library Association and American library Association (ALA) have influenced information systems to the extent that their Governments would not have the need to legislate on these. The parameters for operation are clearly laid down and there is no conflict of interest. However, in our kind of world where our problems are unique to our environment because some decisions are politicised, it is important that organisations such as the Ghana Library Association should take a professional stand by promoting a policy that delineates the Library Information scenario from that of the Ministry of information and the Press Media. For this reason, it is increasingly becoming evident that advocacy or lobbyist approach is taken to influence government decision at certain levels.

Indeed advocating and lobbying have been used synonymously to doctor or massage decisions affecting various groups. There is

E. Cabutey-Adodoadji

no discrepancy in this kind of arrangement because it is becoming a norm in today's world order as an acceptable strategy in very sensitive situations. Perhaps our representation on the newly inaugurated Media Commission is a signal for the many good things to come our way.

Linked with policy formulation is implementation. It is desirable that methodologies and standards are established to streamline the implementation of networks from the Local to the Wide Area. Apart from the protocols as mentioned earlier, it is equally important that every library manager operates within a certain minimum standard in order to device cost effectiveness in the exchange of materials. Our home-page may be small but very rich in contents and originality. It is also noteworthy that international institutions willing to network with us are normally in dominant positions and will dictate whatever standards and methodologies used in preparing their software. By this comparative advantage, it does mean that we would necessarily have to adjust and adopt their standards or work within acceptable limits of the protocols.

STRATEGIC ALLIANCE

Strategic management studies advocate for a future planning in order to achieve set target objectives. Therefore in a networking environment which involves a considerable capital outlay in terms of purchasing and sustenance of equipment, it is desirable for every Library Manager to study critically the financial implications before adopting any computer hardware and software. Experts in the computer world have not minced words in stating that computer paraphernalia need updating in every eighteen months.

With economic constraints glaring at our an-

nual library budgets, how do we persuade our authorities to allocate a portion of the meager resources for maintenance and replacements at regular intervals? Here again the Library Manager would have to employ informal strategies and advocate or promote a crusade that has a bearing on a national economic development. Library managers would necessarily have to market their wares to convince those in authority that without information valid decisions cannot be taken.

EXISTING CAPACITIES

The economic reforms influenced by the World Bank have revealed that lack of both physical and human capacity to sustain socio-economic development are the source of our problems. Similarly our national library infrastructures for networking lack adequate facilities. It is sad to note that the Ghana Library Board and some few special libraries have not made any headway in acquisition of computers, let alone training in computer literacy. Amekuedee (1995) writing on the state of the library automation in Ghana addresses this point. Coupled with this problem, is the lack of hands-on experience for professional staff. The one day seminars cannot achieve proficiency. At best they are orientation programmes which end by the close of the day. The profession must aim at developing a Training of Trainers Core Group to visit libraries, giving professionals one to one coaching. These trainers must be economically motivated so that we can achieve desirable results. In this way we would be enhancing our existing capacities to meet the challenges of the time.

MATERIAL AND FINANCIAL RESOURCE

Most Ghanaian institutions have been saddled with unsolicited donations of rejects.

Both books and computer paraphernalia that have outlived their usefulness in their countries of origin are repackaged for the developing world and these are the equipment we possess. These computers have small memory capacity. They are slow and oftentimes malfunctioning. This is only noticeable when the poor library personnel sits behind the keyboard striking the HELP KEY in desperation until the screen goes blank. Such is the state of frustration and disappointment many professionals face with nobody ready at hand to remedy the situation.

The constraints on financial resources is world wide because of shrinking budgets due to cuts in government subventions. Financial controllers are buried in their debit-credit chores that no amount of persuasion at budget defence can make them review their decision to defer important but expensive purchases. In fact deferment is fast becoming a panacea for unbalanced budgets to balance to the detriment of work output. The work suffers and stalls without question.

Current service charges are incurred from the bills of Telecommunication and Service providers. Because some of these are in hard currency for the payment of subscriptions, any deferment of payment is bound to collapse the networking system. These no doubt pose financial problems which must be handled strategically. It was gratifying to note that a few companies provided gratis service to the Balme Library on its maiden searches with the CD-ROM but the question to ask is: Will that service be a permanent gratis facility? Certainly no. This writer is of the opinion that the Professional Association must present a united front to both

the Telecommunications Company and the service providers to consider discounting or drawing non-commercial bills for libraries. Such bills can easily be accommodated in our budgets and be sustained permanently. In this way, library managers can continue to provide uninterrupted network service without strain to users.

RESEARCHES

Research is the key element for development in any human endeavour and in our kind of profession, which harbours uncomfortable marriage with academia, the need to promote research cannot be overstated.

The statement that information is the working capital of academia is so valid a point that we must be proactive and at the cutting edge of innovation. Library Managers have to build their capacities to collect, analyse and disseminate new knowledge to mankind. Currently our research capabilities are hampered by lack of motivation and current and inadequate literature that do not allow us to push the frontiers of our profession to be at par with the developed world.

Today, thanks to the internet innovation barring cost of acquiring hardcopy, library managers are hopeful to be abreast with the times. Closely linked to research is publishing of professional journals. This has been difficult because of lack of funding and apathy on the part of professional librarians. At the recent International workshop for the Library Associations held in Harare at the Zimbabwe Bookfair in August 1997, it was suggested that professional journal publications must be categorised into three levels; namely Newsletters; Ordinary journal; and Refereed jour-

nals. The rationale essentially is to inform, educate and market the profession. Newsletters and Ordinary Journals must appear more frequently and include even exchanged articles from other published journals. In other words, professional associations must liaise and network in order to repeat published articles of other national professional journals in their home journals. Refereed journals must maintain their *status quo* in order to enhance the scholarship image of the profession.

COMMITMENT OF THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

Networking thrives on professional commitment. Very brilliant ideas can be formulated but if there is no total commitment from the professional body we cannot achieve our stated objectives. Professional commitment as pointed out by Alemna (1995) begins with simple things like willingness to pay membership dues, willingness to serve on committees, voluntary participation in other professional activities etc. These are the basic ingredients that make great impact on the image of the profession.

The professional body as mentioned elsewhere must be proactive and consider forming a pool of consultants. It is important to build capacities of local library consultants equipped with professional expertise and able to meet expected performance standards. Capacity building is therefore essential if the Professional Association members are to qualify to benefit from consultancies such as those offered by the World Bank.

CONCLUSION

The management perspective of building pro-

fessional networks by library managers is a formidable and challenging task. The value for information through networking is a truism that cannot be debated to the contrary. The electronic library or the internet facility offers many advantages in literature searching thereby facilitating an increased awareness of research already done. This no doubt helps to avoid unnecessary duplication and exploit current research to the maximum. In the ideal sense, the electronic library may not actually contain any collection at all. The important thing is to provide organisational and technological structures for accessing collections held elsewhere. The challenging issues are managerial where financial resources, legal, cultural and professional commitment are real and pertinent. The discussion is to stimulate interest for further debate so that library managers in our kind of environment would run faster to join the developed world before the next millennium begins.

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