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### Developing Competencies of Library & Information Professionals: The Foundations For Dynamic Information Services To Distance Learners

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#### *Abstract*

*Distance education has been moving very fast from correspondence education to online education or Web-based delivery of education. Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is significantly different from learning in the previous years. Open and Distance Learning has emerged as a popular approach for ensuring access, equity and quality education in a cost effective manner. Provision of library and information services is one of the essential support systems involved in any distance education program. The traditional roles of Information professional have changed with the advances in Information and Communication Technologies. They are expected to be academics of higher order with competence to work in a hypertext, networked, digital environment. Hence, the information professionals should have the necessary skills that will help them cope better in their services to distance learners in this digitized world. This study tends to examine holistically the tenets of distance learning and the core competences of librarians for provision of effective library services to distance learners in a digitized environment.*

**Keywords:** *Information professional, Distance Learning, Library Services, Competency*

#### 1.1 Introduction

Competencies have been defined as the interplay of knowledge, understanding skills and attitudes required to do a job effectively from the point of view of both the performer and the observer. The unique competencies of the librarian include in-depth knowledge of print and electronic information resources in management of information services that meet the strategic information

needs of the individual or group being served (Haavisto, 2008). At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, information professionals are experiencing the consequences of three major paradigm shifts which according to Diaz (2012) are:

The transition from paper to electronic media as the dominant form of information dissemination, storage and retrieval, is the first shift.

Convergence of different media, such as text, graphics, and sound, into multimedia resources, has direct impact on this transition.

Increasing demand for accountability, with focus on quality customer services, performance measurement, bench marking and continuous improvement is the other shift. Shrinking financial resources for providing quality library and information support services have direct bearing on this shift.

New forms of work organization such as end-user computing, work-teams, downsizing, re-engineering, outsourcing etc, is the result of the third shift.

Based on this backdrop, information professionals can enhance the productivity of those engaged in knowledge creation and its dissemination by playing a more proactive role rather than passive one. In this changed dimension, information professionals will have to assume the role of analyzers, synthesizers and interpreters of knowledge and information, rather than be content with acquiring, organizing and providing information when asked for.

Furthermore, the role of traditional librarianship is changing into 'cybrarianship' of which distance librarianship equally comes to play. In distance librarianship, a cocktail of modalities have to be used to take library services to distance learners. Library services must be available to distance learners regardless of their location. Libraries provide access to resources as well as instruction on locating, accessing, evaluating, and using resources successfully. These resources should be sufficient to fulfill assignments, support curricular needs, meet teaching and research needs, and facilitate the acquisition of lifelong learning skills. Distance librarianship is a dynamic service oriented

organization supporting a diverse clientele with a wide range of sophisticated information, learning and teaching needs and this possess a challenge to the information professionals for the identification and development of their competences for effective information services to distance learners.

## **2.1 Literature Review**

### **2.2 Perspective on Distance Librarianship**

Distance education is a method of study that is pursued by students who are physically separated from their tutors and institution of instruction for the greater part of their study. The distinguishing characteristic of distance education from other forms of education is the physical separation that exists between the students, their tutors and the institution of instruction. This separation has been termed the "tyranny of distance" within the literature of distance education. This factor of distance redefines the role of libraries in distance education and leads to the specialization in distance librarianship (Watson, 1997). In traditional library services students go to the library to access the range of information services that they need to satisfy their learning needs. In distance education, a cocktail of modalities have to be used to take library services to distance learners. Thus, the tyranny of distance applies not only to education but also to the ability of those who study at distance to access library services.

Libraries are vital components of academic institutions. CLA (2000) indicates that use of library services contributes to academic success and student retention. For students learning at a distance, library services become even more vital since local access to resources may be unavailable. The rise in the number of institutions participating in distance education reflects an increasing demand for distance library services. The College and Research Libraries (ACRL)

section of the American Library Association (ALA) released its revised Standards for Distance Learning Library Services. The standards are built on the principle of Access Entitlement whereby “Direct human access must be made available to the distance learning community through instruction, interaction, and intervention from library personnel” (ACRL, Bill of Rights section, 2008).

Library services must be available to distance learners regardless of their location. Libraries provide access to resources as well as instruction on locating, accessing, evaluating, and using resources successfully. Libraries in striving to meet the information and research needs of its distance learners ensure that the distance learning community has access to library materials equivalent to those provided in traditional settings (ACRL, Resources Section, 2008). These resources should be sufficient to fulfill assignments, support curricular needs, meet teaching and research needs, and facilitate the acquisition of lifelong learning skills. In support of distance learners, libraries provide rapid, reliable, and secure access to electronic resources such as full-text catalogues and databases of scholarly journals, books, dissertations, newspapers, and e-books. Document delivery and inter-library loan services are available where full-text access is not, allowing distance learners to receive their information in a timely manner.

Additionally, distance librarians help learners identify local libraries from which they may receive service. Resource availability is only part of what libraries are about. A major component of library service is ensuring users can effectively access and use these resources. Distance libraries provide the human side of resources referred to by Ross (1999). Supporting students who never or rarely visit a physical library can be challenging. The “Libraries without Walls

Conference" in 2005, recognized that library services for distance learners are often pushing back new frontiers and that helping students utilize electronic resources is a crucial role for distance learning libraries (Liu and Yang, 2004). In general they have identified four key areas that are crucial when supporting distance learners:

Collection building: providing students with access to a wide range of reading materials.

Information Literacy/Library instruction: Building up student's knowledge of the library collections.

Providing document services: This includes providing services to distance learners such as document delivery and inter-library loans but also includes accessing electronic resources from off campus.

Providing timely student support for queries and problems they encounter while using library resources.

### **2.3 Overview of Competence Development**

For every business, task and work, competencies, skills and training are needed for efficiency. Such competencies are learnt, developed and sustained through training, practice and experience. Beck (2002) even equate them by saying, a competency can be another term for skill. According to Onasanya (1999) competency refer to a form of specialized skill aimed at providing the trainee with a specialized knowledge, skills and attitudes which are necessary for effective performance in a given position. In consonance with this, Xasa (2010) confirms that high level competencies require engagement, persistence and above all, practice. In an analysis of competency, Mabawonku (2004) considers it to be the ability to carry out a given task effectively. Needham went ahead to identify a range of

skills including ability to work in group, ability to work independently, ability to perform manual operations, ability to make calculations, ability to communicate, ability to follow written instructions, and many more. In the same vein, Corbin (1993) and Oladokun (2002) explained competencies in terms of skill-oriented behaviours and observable actions, measured against qualitative standards. In other words, one's competence is judged on the basis of whether or not learned mental and physical tasks can be performed.

Competency which is commonly referred to as skill refers to the ability to perform well in a task as a result of exposure, training or practice. It is not innately acquired as one must go through training, exposure and experience to acquire it. That is why a person who has undergone some extensive training on a particular job and mastered the activity through length of experience is referred to as a competent or skilled person or grouped under the category of skilled labour (Nnachi, 2007). Determining sets of competences is vital for the continuation and success of the profession, (Libowitz, 1997). Jurrow (2004) asserts that competencies are identified by three tests which he stated as follows:

- It provides a long term strategic advantage
- It contributes to customers' benefit
- It is difficult for others to imitate.

### **2.3 Competences needed by Distance Librarians**

There is no doubt that all distance librarians must develop competency in their work. This is for their survival and marketability of their resources. The ACRL (2008) affirmed that changes in higher education will require that librarians possess diverse skills sets. In the technology-enabled distance learning environment, librarians must be innovative, creative, flexible and accessible in new ways. Watson (2003)

named five critical success factors for librarians supporting distance learners: interpersonal communication skills, library research and reference skills, information organization skills, information technology skills, and knowledge of customer subject domain. The competencies which distance librarian must possess have also been identified and are summarized by Corbin, (1993), Bates, (1998), Giesecke, (1999) as:

#### **i. Information Management Competencies**

These types of competencies are the most basic among traditional librarians; it is very common for them to have cataloguing, classification and indexing skills. But these competencies are labeled with different names in the digital environment, and even if they are called by the same names as always, some aspects of them change. For example, on a digital environment, it's not that necessary to classify documents, because that's not vital for document retrieval, but in change, a digital librarian must know how to construct ontologies, which is a conceptual representation of an area of knowledge, defining relationships between concepts. Another example is that instead of talking about cataloguing a document, it's more common to see the term metadata, which in the end is more or less the same as assigning words to the descriptive fields on a traditional document.

#### **ii. Analytical Skills**

Giesecke (1999) described this competency thus: 'it is the ability to recognize pattern, draw logical conclusions, make recommendations for action and use a well ordered approach for solving problems and sound judgment in making decisions despite obstacles or resistance'. Bates (1998) added that distance librarians must be persons who can go through the result of a search, pull out the most useful materials, organize them, write up an executive summary and polish the



final product so that it looks like a report and not a data pull dump. Information analysis and evaluation skills are the skills in determining the precise information needs of library users, summarizing or translating the needs to strategies for identifying and locating needed information and analyzing and evaluating the retrieved information to determine whether or not they meet the needs of the clientele (Corbin, 1993).

### **iii. Communication Skills**

The communication competencies were described by Giesecke (1999) thus: 'listens effectively; transmits information accurately and understandably; actively seeks constructive feedback'. Bate (1998) stressed that distance librarianship needs librarians who can make presentations and teach users how to find and use information. Communication skills also include possession of teaching skills, and the ability to listen effectively and respond to others with clarity, ease, warmth, openness, patience and empathy. They are essential to providing quality services.

### **iv. Creativity and Innovation**

Distance librarian must embrace change. They are expected to be the people on top of what is happening in information industry. They must look out for opportunities to apply new and evolving ideas, methods, designs and technologies. This implies that they must regularly watch out for and recognize new trends. In addition they must be curious and willing to try new approaches to locating information or investigating new possible sources of information. Corbin (1993) also advised that distance librarians must view failure as an experience to learn from.

### **v. Expertise and Technical Knowledge**

The competencies of expertise and technical knowledge demands that distance

librarians possess the ability to demonstrate broad in-depth and up-to date knowledge of relevant fields and current technology (Giesecke, 1999). He further posit that they must know how to adapt to change in technology and keep up to date with new practices, trends, standards in the field of reading, attending professional meetings and conferences, holding discussions with experts, looking for opportunities to use and expand knowledge, skills and experience, and not the least, be willing to embrace new technologies and implement practical applications (Weech, 2007).

### **vi. Flexibility and Adaptability**

The competencies involve the ability of academic distance librarians to perform a wide range of task, respond to changes in the direction, priorities, accepting new challenges, responsibilities and assignment. Bates (1998) added that distance libraries need librarians who can wear a number of hats – researcher, counselors, planners, managers, assessors, team members and problem solvers.

Flexibility is needed to adapt to the variability between the information needs of different clients, between different ways of identifying, locating, transferring information and between the changing requirements of users.

### **vii. Interpersonal/Group Skills**

These competencies imply the need for distance library to build strong work relationships with sensitivity to how individuals, organizations and cultures function and react. It also includes ability to establish partnerships at all levels and across departments and functional lines in order to achieve optimum results (Oladokun, 2002). Corbin (1993) had said on interpersonal skills: 'one must with grace and ease equally serve people with differing information needs, level of background and knowledge,

communication abilities, mental and physical abilities or disabilities. As team players distance librarians must assist members to learn, develop and grow in their abilities to contribute to result (Bates, 1998).

#### **viii. Service Attitude/User Satisfaction**

One of the competencies in service attitude and user satisfaction of distance librarians, according to Corbin (1993) is a sincere and enthusiastic desire to help others in the quest for information. It is also the ability to be unselfish with one's knowledge and talents in the effort to assist others in identifying, locating, receiving and evaluating information that meets their needs. This implies that the distance librarian must take reasonable risk in satisfying user needs, balancing expectations and needs of various stakeholders and remain professional and helpful with users.

### **3. Implementing competency development among Information Professionals**

The role of the academic library in student success assumes new dimension in the distance learning environment. Innovative strategies are essential in order to provide comprehensive library support to distance learners. Librarians make extensive efforts to ensure adequate services to distance learners through virtual reference services, electronic access and delivery of resources, online information literacy instruction, course management systems, librarians as online constructors, and technological applications such as instant messaging, e-mail, chat, blogs, wikis, and RSS feeds (Morgan, 1996).

The librarian is ever present, supporting faculty and students in distance learning course. In addition to working with the instructor to identify discipline-related resources and integrate information literacy objectives in the course, the librarian actively participates in the distance learning course on a regular basis. Haavisto (2008) referred to a

wide range of skills distance librarian must possess, including moving beyond traditional references, collection development and construction skills to competences with technology, copyright, resource licensing, time management, collaboration and communication. He predicted a need for a more proactive and creative approach to distance learners and encouraged librarians to purposefully develop and increase their skills towards effective service delivery to distance learners.

Wordsworth (1997) said that librarians need not go back to library schools in order to acquire these competences. He however, recommended methods of acquiring the competences which include self-education and experience on the job. Other potential sources include formal education and training programmes, on the job training, apprenticeship experience and continuing education. In-house training can be used to teach the competences in post-graduate programmes. Other methods include outside workshops and on-line training. Simonson, et al. (2004) identified eight major advantages of developing competencies in distance librarianship as:

- Better human resource planning
- More effective training programmes
- A list of critical technological capabilities
- An opportunity for strength and weakness analysis
- Helps in outsourcing options
- Guidance for development or change
- Innovation

### **Conclusion/Recommendation**

From the above, it may be summed-up that Information Professionals equipped with the competencies as outlined in this paper will be fully geared to discharge their role, not only as gatekeepers of knowledge, but managers of the same. A need is felt to

expose information professionals to newer concepts, dimensions, approaches through the organization of multi-tier short-term/continuing education, teaching and training programmes. This article has identified continuous learning opportunities for distance librarians to develop new skills and competencies to reflect changing user expectations and shape the future of higher education and society. The following as recommended by (King, 2008), are made to enhance the competency of library and information professionals in distance librarianship:

Librarians should strive to keep current with skills and competencies to expand their knowledge base. Enhanced skills and competencies support the distance librarian's immediate work with distance learners in undergraduate and graduate programs, and expand the foundation for anticipated future responsibilities and professional advancement.

One consideration in participating in skill development opportunities can be funding for conferences and webinars. Libraries may allocate monies on an annual basis for this purpose. Other sources include grants sponsored by the librarian's college or university, state library associations or government library agencies, and scholarships offered by the sponsors of a particular conference or webinar.

This article equally recommends continuous learning opportunities that were chosen to meet distance librarians' time and workload commitments as well as personal learning preferences. These opportunities include conferences, short-term webinars about current topics and innovative approaches, blogs, and discussion and interest groups for networking with colleagues about best

practices, leadership, and serving academic populations.

Professional journals for reflective reading and self-directed learning are essential parts of continuing education and professional development. The multitude of choices help engaged practitioners, whether newly hired, mid-career, or senior, address continuing education needs for professional and personal learning in a rapidly changing environment. The selections are intended for distance librarians, but are relevant for all practicing librarians.

It was important for distance librarians to network with other librarians by conference attendance, serving on committees, and through participation in mail lists.

Librarians should also try to keep informed of new technologies.

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