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One Among the Twelve: How Library Professionals Constitute a Serious Challenge to the Provision of Library Services in the 21st Century

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Introduction

The rapid developments and innovations in information and communication technology (ICT) have changed the work done in the library worldwide. These technological-driven innovations have transformed library services. New concepts such as hybrid library, digital library, virtual library, Internet public library, paperless library, etc., have emerged.

Bradley (1999) has identified the characteristics of 21st century library:

1. The use of information professionals and subject experts in collecting and organizing web-based information resources.
2. The use of technology-compliant criteria in evaluating or selecting library resources.
3. The provision of current and value-added information services.

Sherwell (1997) gave the characteristics of 21st century library to include the following:

1. There is no corresponding physical collection. An example is the NUC's Virtual Library Abuja, Nigeria.
2. Availability of documents in electronic form.
3. Documents are not stored in any physical/ geographical location.
4. Accessibility of documents from any workstation linked together.
5. Retrieval and deliverance of documents as and when required.

6. Availability of effective searching and browsing facilities (e.g. search engine).

Fabunmi (2009) described a 21st century library service as:

“a well selected collection of units of documentary resources spread everywhere, accessible always, where individuals and groups such as authors, publishers, vendors, and readers are linked through hyperlink technology, across the global electronic network to relate in different ways, documents that are fast and easily obtainable and available in their full version in view of satisfying multiple cultural exigencies”.

Libraries are no longer what they used to be. This implies that librarians are also no longer who they used to be. This evolution or revolution has led to the evolution or revolution of librarians' roles all over the world, and Nigeria is no exception. Nevertheless, librarians in the developing countries (Nigeria Included) are lagging behind the changes brought by advances in ICT. Many librarians assume that a 21st century-library means a collection of MARC records, CD-ROMs, and other physical collections. However, that has already been displaced by virtual libraries. Meanwhile, only a few libraries in Nigeria are 21st century libraries and only a few librarians are 21st century librarians. There are a number of reasons for this trend. One important one is the librarian him- or herself. Edem (2008) states that a major challenge facing the 21st century library is not underfunding, but the poor performance of librarians and information professionals in developing countries as a result of poor ICT skills.

This paper was designed to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To identify the librarian-based factors that poses challenges to service delivery in 21st century library.
2. To discover how librarians pose a serious challenge to service delivery in the 21st century library.
3. To reveal that it is not always funding that hinders service delivery in the library.
4. To make recommendations in light of the challenges identified.

Librarian-Based Factors That Challenges 21st Century Library Service Delivery

Corruption

On October 11, 2010, LISNews (www.lisnews.org) reported that the Deputy Chief of Sierra Lone library, Sallieu Turay, diverted 46,650 books donated to 300 schools in Sierra Leone by Children International and sold them in Guinea. The same man blamed the problems of African libraries on underfunding. There are a number of types of corruption. They are discussed below.

Imposition of library contractors on the library

Common sense tells us that the quality of service is dependent on the quality of staff, and the information resources acquired by the library. The quality of the materials acquired is dependent on the quality of the materials that the library can lay their hands on. The selection process is aimed at critically evaluating information resources from a wide range of suppliers' lists and other selection aids. However, this process is violated when a given contractor is presented to the library without due process. This is usually the case when a person making such a decision has a special personal interest on the contractor. And when it occurs, what happens is that unreliable suppliers emerge. The result is low quality material, which of course leads to poor service delivery.

Inflation of costs of items

The truth is that library materials are not as expensive as librarians portray them to be. Inflation of the actual cost of materials stems from conspiracy between librarians and suppliers on one side, librarians and colleagues on another side, and between librarians and any other person or persons that has hand in the approval or release of funds. All departments of the library acquire things, as such, no one department can be exempted. The act usually takes the following forms:

- Alteration of original prices in stock lists
- Over costing of items used in one's department
- Conspiracy with suppliers to build in certain percentage for the affected library official and his/her conspirators

When prices have been inflated, most at times, they become unaffordable, and the library resort to buying low quality materials or items and in fewer quantities too. Bear in mind that low quality materials or technologies can only facilitate low quality services.

Embezzlement

According to the Encarta World English Dictionary (1999), to embezzle library funds means to take for personal use library funds or materials which have been given on trust to a library official by financiers, without their knowledge and permission. Permit me to state here that so many library projects which funds have been approved and released, are in their present states owing to embezzlement and not lack of funds as always alleged. Some monies approved for library development (especially for ICT Projects) have been diverted into personal accounts. Some book donations from overseas have been diverted to book markets or even to private libraries. When this happens, the library lacks the power to ask for money hence the one that has been released could not be properly accounted for. In essence, it is the library's services that suffer.

Bribery

Bribery means to offer monies or other incentives (in cash or in kind) to persuade somebody to do something dishonest or illegal. When a librarian is offered something or the librarian offers something to somebody to achieve illegality in the library, the consequence is adversarial to library services. Most times, bribe is offered when one is not qualified to obtain what is being pursued, and in that case, bribe produces unqualified librarians, promotions, positions, etc., leading to poor service delivery.

Misappropriation

When money is expended for projects which they are not meant for, it is called misappropriation of fund and it is punishable by law. When libraries are given money to improve internet services and they are channeled into book acquisition, it amounts to misappropriation. Misappropriation does not only hinder library services, it also discourages budgeting authorities' from allocating more funds to the library. In fact, it even leads to management interference on library matters.

Lack of Skill/ Personal Development

In every field of human endeavor, personal self-development is the key for

continuous relevance. It is no longer a secret that most librarians lack basic and fundamental skills of using ICT to deliver services. In fact, some librarians are in the habit of asking users for help when they are searching the internet. To me, this is an abuse to professional ethics.

A large part of librarianship curriculum has been subsumed by modern approaches. Also, traditional knowledge of service delivery in the library has been displaced and replaced with 21st century technologies. In the 21st century, experience without compliance is irrelevant. Librarians without a well developed ICT skill cannot render effective services in the 21st century library. Thus, lack of skills among librarians constitute a major obstacle to service delivery in 21st century library.

Attitude

Attitude influences behavior. Ogbebor and Egbule (2006) stated that if you think that something is exciting, you are likely to embrace that thing whole-heartedly. Thus, if you think that the use of ICT, which is the driver of the 21st century library, is exciting, you are likely to deliver effective library services using ICT.

Attitude can be defined as a combination of feelings, beliefs that predispose you to respond in a certain way to people, objects, or events. There are a number of dimensions of attitude problems.

Fear

It has been observed that many librarians are not familiar with the use of the 21st century technologies. Why? Because of fear of the changes ICT will bring into service delivery. Some are afraid of becoming irrelevant and possibly losing their source of livelihood. Instead of allowing the technology to thrive, they rather become resistant to it in any capacity they are permitted to. Once one is afraid of utilizing a given device, he can not make good use of it.

Bias, Stereotype, and Prejudice

What you don't like, you cannot harbor, and you can't offer it. Similarly, what you can't afford, you avoid. Some librarians have negative beliefs about ICT. Some librarians who lack ICT skills always feel offended whenever it is brought to the front burner. How can someone who has hatred or phobia for ICT render effective service in the 21st century library?

Dogmatism

Most traditional librarians are guilty of this. Due to their wealth of experiences acquired over the years, coupled with their orientations, the sudden eruption of 21st century technologies became a challenge rather than a solution. The truth is that they are not used to it, and beliefs are not easily changed, and new skills are not easily learnt. They hold strongly to their old beliefs that libraries must follow their approach and that there is no need for change. Dogmatism kills innovation, and 21st century library service cannot be effective if dogmatism thrives.

Ageism

Ageism is defined as discrimination or prejudice against people because of their age, particularly in the work environment. It has been reported that between 2010 and 2020, 45% of librarians will reach the retirement age of 65 years old (Lynch et al 2005).

Chu (2009) stated that young librarians face age discrimination, including disrespectful treatment in the workplace, and unrealistic expectation of performance. Ageism in the 21st century libraries result to job dissatisfaction and loss of retention for these young and ICT-compliant librarians. Bureaucracy and resistance are sources of discontent in the workplace. In other words, when a young librarian is not encouraged, optimum services cannot be delivered and these are the hub of 21st century service delivery.

Additionally, young librarians report feelings of isolation and disrespect by ageing librarians who feels that they should do things the way they have always been done. Chu (2009) said that this results to superiority- inferiority complex, intimidation, lack of cooperation and poor service delivery.

Conclusion

This paper has established that the library professional poses a serious challenge to the deliverance of services in the 21st century library. In other words, being a librarian is not enough qualification in the 21st century library. It was revealed that the current LIS curriculum is no longer adequate for training the 21st century librarian. The librarian-based factors that hinders the 21st century library are those that have to do with acts of corruption such as inflation of costs of items, embezzlement, bribery, misappropriation etc. other challenges are lack of relevant or compliant skills, fear, bias, dogmatism, and ageism.

Recommendations

- There is the urgent need for librarians to develop themselves by undergoing self-sponsored ICT training/ skills acquisition.
- The librarians who have access to non-self sponsored ICT training should take full advantage of the training and develop themselves rather than abscond from conference venues after registration.
- Practical demonstration of skills should be accorded priority in engaging and retaining librarians in the 21st century library.
- There is the need to review the LIS curriculum to facilitate the inclusion of the 21st century advancements, to avoid churning out librarians with obsolete skills.
- Librarians should handle library finances conscientiously without acts capable of defrauding the library. Transparency, accountability and probity should guide how libraries spend their funds. Fraudulent librarians should be made to face legal sanctions.

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