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**Users and Internet Skills:
A Report from Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria**

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Abstract

This study, based on a survey of eighty-one (81) users of a cyber café owned and run by the Delta State University, Abraka in 2005 examines the self-reported level of Internet skills; sources of such skills; the additional skills desired, and preferred ways of acquiring them; and how the Internet has influenced and affected their research. The results show 71% of respondents rated their Internet skills between average and very high; 78.8% acquired their Internet skills either online or through teaching by colleagues or friends. World Wide Web (WWW) skills were the most sought after additional skill (73%). Continuing education and self-study were the most preferred ways to acquire new skills. The majority of respondents reported that they talk less on phones because of their Internet use and that it had improved their teaching and research. This paper concludes that given the current constraints on opportunities for Internet skills acquisition and Internet connectivity in Nigeria and at the Delta State University, the University should pursue vigorously and urgently to completion its current drive (through an ICT department) to install and run a functional and comprehensive Internet and University-wide information system. Thus, the University will ultimately create the enabling environment for Internet and ICT skill acquisition and link the University fruitfully to the seamless World Wide Web.

Introduction

The Internet penetration for Nigeria is still very low. Internet connectivity was only 750,000 subscribers in 2004 while South Africa had 3.1 million by the same year (CIA: The World Fact Book, 2005). It has been noted by the UNDP that:

Developing the capacity to integrate computer (Internet) into the national economy (in order to ensure) intersectional links, depends on skilled people and skilled people are

the product of massive investment in education and training (UNDP Report 2000/2001)

Since the government of Nigeria is not doing this, the nation's capability to partake in the Internet globalization scheme is at stake. Education and learning are now subject to demands of the performance which is more oriented towards the training and inculcation of skills and rather less concerned with what is increasingly denigrated as liberal values and ideas (Obikeze, 2003:9). This means that the modern society is essentially a knowledge society characterized by skills and performance and dominated by information technology, information processing moving towards a generalized computerized global society.

Skill Acquisition Process in Nigeria

Nigeria has been described as a nation with an expanded educational system. Questions have been asked why Nigeria has not developed the relevant skills (Internet and others) for production? The Nigerian education system is still specializing in producing a mediocre work force in the universities by equipping the University graduate with mainly theoretical knowledge (principles). Every educated individual needs both theoretical and practical skills in order to be balanced. There should be skills acquisition strategies for every student in the University in all disciplines to prepare them for work in the 21st century. This will help to transform and modernize the student's career. Skills can be regarded as the enabler of service quality.

There are very few skilled experts to install and maintain information technology networks in Nigeria. The country depends heavily on foreign experts. There is therefore required a policy to ensure that the establishment of Internet networks starts with trained or training of skilled manpower that will manage and maintain them. The Delta State University's Library automation system that was installed in 2001 crashed for lack of skilled manpower to maintain the system. The problems of crashes of Internet networks are very common in Nigerian libraries. The Internet society has been responding to this situation. The Internet society (ISOC) has contributed a lot to Africa in the development of technical expertise. It has organized workshops and training for participants from developing countries (Africa). The training has been in host-based Internet working technology, backbone in networking, technology network navigation services, and national network management.

High-level skill is necessary for all users of the Internet facilities so that they can utilize the service/systems effectively. Delta State University has set up a policy framework to ensure that all students, academic staff, non-academic staff are trained on a continuing basis to help them with the skills to fully exploit the IT in different areas. It is a known fact (also that has been ascertained by this study) that the academic community (both

staff and students) lack the knowledge and skills for the development and implementation of Internet services and systems. So, staff training in the use of Internet (ICT) services and systems, development of Internet professional skills and appropriate project management capacity are of top priority in the Delta State University ICT Policy.

Knowledge and skills have to be developed among end-users in the following areas:

- Use of Internet (ICT) services and systems effectively and independently.
- Establishment and sustenance of effective, efficient application and data management and systems maintenance.
- Contributing to the specification, design and implementation of Internet (ICT) applications.

An academic institution cannot do without the Internet in this era of the information superhighway. The academics and the students must study, research, publish, teach and communicate. With adequate skilled knowledge on Internet facilities Nigeria researchers and scientists will be able to collaborate on the same level with their colleagues in other parts of the world. The local researchers will also know how to generate information better. Skills in all areas of the Internet are very important in contributing to the establishment of global information networks.

Constraints of Internet Connectivity in Delta State University

In its efforts to render Internet services to the University community, the Prest Cable & Satellite TV Systems Limited (PRESTEL), an ISP (Internet Service Provider) was awarded a contract in 2001 by the Delta State Government to install Internet facilities in the University. This was a foreign company with its skilled manpower charged with the responsibilities of installation and maintenance of the system. The Delta State University had only one staff on ground that was properly trained in the managerial aspect. PRESTEL's staff was usually sent for whenever there was problem with the installation since they have an operating office in Benin City, about 150 kilometers from Delta State University. It is very expensive paying a foreign firm to maintain an Internet resource center. The cost of providing Internet services can be made low by training indigenous staff to be skilled in installation and maintenance. The training of indigenous staff will not only bring cost reduction, it will also accelerate Internet connection rate in that there will be more networks and shared connections (Bhatnagar, 2002).

In 2004, the University terminated the contract with PRESTEL because its bandwidth charges were excessively high. A new ISP provider Broadband Technologies was contracted to take over the services provided by PRESTEL. The University is currently

negotiating a technical and commercial partnership agreement with Broadband Technologies for the entire IT system of the University. The partnership will include technical maintenance.

It is suggested that the government and the University authorities invest in staff development for skills acquisition in Internet connectivity and sustainability. Internet connectivity is a means of empowerment and development for the society, especially in an academic community because of its need to study, research, publish and communicate with the outside world.

As was said earlier, there are problems of network crashes and failures. The Delta State University Library, which was scheduled to be fully automated in 2001 with Internet facilities, developed a lot of problems such as:

- Network failures and crashes that affected the workstations and network drivers. After installation; some of the workstation could not access the server. This was due to unavailability of skilled manpower to maintain and manage the systems after the initial installation. To date the problems are still there. The 23 computers are just being used at the moment for word processing. Apart from the library automation that crashed mainly because of lack of adequate skilled manpower to maintain and manage the infrastructure and the software, skills in the following subject areas are also lacking
- Web page design, hypertext mark-up language
- Use of electronic networks
- Use of meta data
- Evaluation of web-based information sources
- Setting up and maintaining subject based information gateways
- Management of electronic documents and collections
- Digitalization of document.
- There is also the problem of electric power fluctuation. Sometimes there are power surges and low voltage. The electric power from the state is very unsafe for computers to function adequately in Nigeria. There is need for skilled electrician and electrical and electronic engineers to be on ground at all times.
- Funds have always been a problem and an obstacle in the developing countries. Internet facilities are capital intensive. The world and foreign organizations and initiatives should help Nigerian government especially the universities to establish Internet facilities to improve and boost the academic community access.

In addition to the University's cyber café (which is being maintained by Broadband Technologies), the University is trying to provide more Internet facilities and skilled manpower to manage and maintain its database systems and network, awarded a contract to Benkwa Technical Solution to network the entire University in 2004. The

University also had established, an Information Communication Technology Department. The ICT Department is staffed with IT specialists charged with responsibilities for managing and maintaining the entire University network, database, Internet facilities and websites, etc.

The ICT Department has presently connected most offices and departments (42 out of 52 department of the University) to the database for onward take off to the Internet. The ICT department is also to rework the University library networks that have crashed. The University’s medical virtual library network with 23 personal computers with Internet facilities will also be maintained by the ICT Department.

Method of Data Collection

A total number of 100 questionnaires (consisting of 20 questions of multiple choice answers) were distributed to first 100 persons using the University cyber café on a weekday. Of these, 81 respondents filled and returned the questionnaires. The responses were analyzed for frequencies, percentages and cross tabulation, using SPSS to organize the data for analysis.

Result and Discussion

The majority of respondents were male (45 or 56%) only thirty-six (36 or 44%) were female. The bulk of the respondents were students (72 or 89%), with staff making up only five or six percent. The others category accounted for four (4 or 5%).

Table 1: Faculty Of Users		
Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Social Sciences	41	51%
Arts	15	19%
Science	10	12%
Education	5	6%
Medicine	1	1%
Others	4	5%
Not stated	5	6%
<i>Total</i>	81	100%

Table 1 above indicates that users from the Social Sciences were in the majority, with the smallest number coming from Medicine. This cannot be interpreted as indicating greater use by Social Scientists. This is because the small sample size and the fact that respondents were selected from only one day's use, makes such generalization unwarranted. That the social sciences have the highest representation in the sample is a reflection of the fact that it has the largest number of students. Medicine has the lowest number probably because it is the newest faculty and has the smallest number of students.

Table 2: When Respondents Started Internet Use		
When Started Use	Frequency	Percentage
I do not use	1	1%
A month ago	1	1%
Less than a year	11	14%
Several years ago	68	84%
<i>Total</i>	81	100%

Respondents were asked when they started the use of Internet. The majority indicated they started using the Internet several years ago. The majority (79 or 98%) reported either several years use or at least less than a year but more than one month. This shows that the academic community is gradually becoming aware of the importance of the Internet and there is need to develop and site more Internet centers in the University at least at the departmental and faculty level.

Table 3: How Respondents Acquired Internet Use Skills		
How Skill Acquired	Frequency	Percentage
Self study (online)	37	45.7%
Trained by colleagues/friends	26	32.1%
University course	4	4.9%
Reading Internet/info tech books	8	9.9%
Multiple sources	4	4.9%
Not stated	2	2.5%
<i>Total</i>	81	100%

Table 3 shows that the majority, sixty-three (63 or 78%) acquired their Internet use skills either online or through colleagues or friends. Only 4 or 4.9% learnt the Internet skills through University courses. This percentage is not impressive because one expected the University to play the dominant role in providing staff and students with Internet skills. The University should organize more Internet-skill courses for the students and staff frequently. In this context, it is significant that all respondents from the Department of Library and Information Science reported that they acquired their skills online.

A more enabling environment should be established in the University for the acquisition of Internet skills. In this connection, there should be conscious effort by government and the management of the University to put in place policies and efforts to contribute to global information development by training the people to be skillful in the use of the Internet. The newly established ICT department should help in this area.

Self Rating	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	11	14%
High	17	21%
Average	43	53%
Low	7	9%
Not stated	3	4%
<i>Total</i>	81	100%

Table 4 indicate that although the majority (53%) rated their Internet skills as average, the vast majority, 71 or 88% rated their skills between average and very high. This high rating notwithstanding, there is need for more skills acquisition training. This is because the majority of them (80 or 98%) indicated that they need to improve their skills/knowledge on the Internet.

Skill	Those who want to acquire it	Percentage
E-mail	04	5%
Discussion group	14	17%
Telnet	13	16%

World Wide Web	59	73%
OPAC	13	16%
Search engine	09	11%
Homepages	01	1%

The respondents were asked what services they would like to improve in their knowledge of the Internet. Only 4 or 5% indicated they want to learn about the email, while 77 or 95% are not interested in email skills. We interpret this to mean that 77 or 95% already have the skill. This agree with study of cyber café by Adomi et al (2004) which reported that 70 out of the 83 respondents in their study indicated email as their reason for using the University cyber café. It is assumed here that majority of them already know how to send and receive email on the Internet. It has also been reported by other writers that email is by far the most popular Internet services (Lazinger, S.S. et al., 1997).

It is revealing that only 14 or 17% want to learn about discussion and news group. This could be an indication that the group discussion on the Internet is not as popular as the email which is research related and social in nature. It can also be an indication that the respondents may not be familiar with this application.

Only 13 or 16% of the 81 in the population studied indicated they want to learn about telnet. This is another area that is not too known in Africa hence the low interest indication.

Majority, 59 or 72% indicated their interest to learn about the World Wide Web (www). Since the majority appears to be able to use world wide web to send email, it may be that they want to learn about more advanced protocols to broaden their knowledge and skills on the Internet.

A very limited number of respondents showed interest in learning about OPAC, Search engines and homepages. This is an indication that users in this University are not familiar with these applications.

Table 6: Ways The Respondents Prefer To Learn Skills		
	Frequency	Percentage
Continuing education course	30	37.0%
Reading books/articles	13	16%

Self study	18	22.2%
From friends	11	13.6%
Other ways	5	6.2%
Multiple ways	2	2.5%
Not stated	2	2.5%
<i>Total</i>	81	100%

Table 6 indicates that continuing education is preferred as a way of acquiring more skills than any other ways. This is followed by self-study and learning from friends.

Table 7: Internet Influence On Respondents		
	Frequency	Percentage
Browse less printed materials	28	35%
Talk less on phone	44	54%
Not stated	7	9%
1 and 2 above	2	3%
<i>Total</i>	81	100%

The respondents were asked how the use of the Internet has affected them. The majority (44 or 54%) indicated that they now talk less on phones while 28 or 35% indicated that they now browse less printed materials. This show that majority of academics in this part of the world are still not used to the Internet. They still tend to rely more on printed materials for research and study. They have not yet explored and utilized to the fullest all that the Internet has to offer. This is despite the fact that, as the next table shows, a majority of respondents (77 or 95%) that the Internet has improved their research and teaching. Nigerians are yet not liberated from the traditional way of using printed materials at all.

Table 8: Ways Internet Improved Research/Teaching		
	Frequency	Percentage
Improved research/teaching	77	95%
Quick update of research/communication	42	52%
Faster publication communication	34	42%

Quick access to databases	14	17%
Time saving	22	27%
Others	17	21%

It is also interesting that 42 or 52% of the respondents also indicated that the use of the Internet has helped them to quickly update their research. Other ways the Internet is reported to have improved respondents research is in the area of speed of publication communication; access to data bases; and time saving.

From the findings it is obvious that there is urgent need for more Internet connectivity in Delta State University. All Departments and offices should be connected urgently so that there could be better access to Internet. There should be workstations at various points with network connections as close as possible to the staff and students work areas that few people share. The present cyber café is usually too congested and grossly inadequate for the teaming population of the University. Networked workstation should be provided in all offices and departments. Internet skill training should be provided for both students and staff because they require high skills in education and navigation in the Internet maze. This can only be achieved through the organization of Internet training courses at all levels.

Conclusion

It is also hoped that the establishment of the ICT department and the employment of skilled manpower will achieve, the maintenance and workability of infrastructures, software, networks and workstations and databases, etc., in the University. This will lead to easy connectivity and Internet access worldwide at very fast rate for every user. This will make this University to become part of the seamless web of communication networks. The need for universities and research institutes to establish and run Internet services is now well recognized because of its importance for teaching and research and facilitation of publication. It has been established that universities in many countries are providing Internet access to their faculties and research staff members and some are already providing facilities to students (65th IFLA, 1999). It is important therefore that Delta State University should create environment for improvement of Internet accessibility and sustainability and be part of the global information system.

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