May 2010

Outsourcing for Effective Resource Management in Nigerian University Libraries

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Introduction

In the late 2008 and early 2009, the people of Nigeria and its government officials came to term with the reality of global economic meltdown and its inevitable implications for the nation's economy. Global economic problems have brought down the price of crude oil, the mainstay of the nation's economy, and have led to the depreciation of the Nigerian currency, the naira, against the US dollar. All these have taken their toll on spending pattern in the ministries, departments, and agencies, who are now adopting belt-tightening measures in order to survive within the limited available resources.

Gross federally collectible revenue for 2009 was put at 5.13 trillion naira, while in 2008, it was 5.87 trillion naira. The average budget price of crude oil was $45 per barrel (pb). It was $59 for 2008. The daily forecast production was 2.292 million barrels per day (mbpd) as against 2.45 mbpd for 2008. The daily oil production and price estimate are lower in the current year. This in essence means that the revenue from gas and oil would be reduced by 1.79 trillion naira, which is 61 per cent. From December 2008 to date, the Nigerian naira has devalued against the US dollar by 36 percent (Omoigui-Okauru, 2009).The future is still gloomy.

As a result, Nigerian federally funded universities have been faced with shrinking financial resources allocated to them by the government, coupled with the need to increase and expand facilities in response to increasing enrolment, the introduction of new courses, and increases in faculty and other administrative, technical, and support staff. There is also the need to improve the quality of service delivery by the university libraries. The dwindling resources of the universities also affect the university libraries. In efforts to cut costs, improve general efficiency, and meet increasing demands for accountability, one option being considered is the outsourcing of some services.

Outsourcing is a controversial issue with redundancy implications for library staff. Outsourcing is a frequently misused and misunderstood term and some disagreement can be traced to different definitions (Appleby, 2000). Lund (1997) used "outsourcing" to mean that someone who is not on the university payroll manages the whole or part of a university library function, employing their own staff and assets. Outsourcing describes how services are obtained. Although the term and its practice have been more prevalent in business, library outsourcing has recently become a persistent and controversial topic among librarians. Outsourcing is a process in which a company delegates some in-house operations and processes to a third party. It is a contracting transaction through which one company purchases services from another, keeping ultimate responsibility for the underlying processes.

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Literature Review

Before the days of online catalogues, librarians bought catalogue card sets from the Library of Congress. Cards are now purchased and copied from databases like OCLC for a majority of new materials (Appleby, 2000). When replacing card catalogues with online catalogues, libraries have hired contractors to convert their records to digital format. Vendors of automation services can be contracted to provide online access to library collections.

Making Decisions about Outsourcing

As with any planning process, there are things to be considered before making major changes. The first step is to assess what is happening in the organization. Reappraise the library's mission and goals. Look at the cost of processes in terms of human and material resources, review long term practices, and consider whether objectives are being met efficiently.

There are issues common to traditional library practices that may indicate the need to consider outsourcing, including high costs, low productivity, poor management, and lack of communication (Appleby, 2000). Outsourcing can improve production by eliminating backlogs, insuring significant cost reductions from staff time, space, utilities, materials, and equipment. Outsourcing may also offer expertise that is not available in-house, and library management can concentrate more resources on activities tied directly to the mission of the library. Outsourcing may improve services that have become unproductive (Appleby, 2000; Ebbinghouse, 2002).

Outsourcing in university libraries is a relatively new phenomenon. Certain library functions have traditionally been seen as essential to the practice of librarianship. Creating and developing collections, and providing catalogues for collections ensure that materials will be organized for easy retrieval. In the past, these activities where done by professional librarians. Today, these functions are viewed by many as non-core library services. While the catalogue remains the primary tool for facilitating access to information, not everyone agrees that the production of the catalogue is a core function. There are many who doubt that classification is as meaningful as it once was or that catalogues work as they once did. Subject headings and controlled vocabulary that have been used by librarians have never been well understood by an average library user. With exposure through the Internet to keywords and natural language techniques, such restrictive access to information is being challenged (Appleby, 2000).

Tsiang (2006) cautions that outsourcing is a controversial issue that could affect the future of the library profession. Those in favour emphasize that outsourcing saves library budgets and speeds up the cataloguing process, helps libraries to get specialized service, centralizes library functions to specialists in the field, and goes along with the trends of privatization and globalization. Those opposed feel that outsourcing diminishes the library profession, lowers the quality of library services, and reduces the job market for qualified library workers. In general, those in favour look at the issue from the point of view of management, and those opposed look at it from the socioeconomic point of view (Tsiang, 2006). Pantry and Griffiths (2004) states that tackling outsourcing successfully will not only ensure that library services are perceived as a strategic asset but will also enhance the user-oriented approach. They recommended systematic planning, which includes an information audit.

Services that Could Be Outsourced

Cataloguing

Outsourcing cataloguing can be a temporary measure to deal with backlogs. Most university libraries are facing the problem of backlog. Based on the size of the backlog and available staff, outsourcing can be crucial in reducing cataloguing backlogs.

Catalogue card production

University libraries that still engage in catalogue card production should consider outsourcing it. Libraries with card catalogues may have a backlog of card production or poor quality work.

Book pockets, book cards, borrowers' tickets

Production of these printed materials should be outsourced. Production of these items is done at long intervals, and it is not worth the expenses and effort producing them in-house.

Binding and book repair

Some university libraries maintain a bindery and book repair unit. Some libraries have had problems with this unit becoming corrupt, using facilities, material, and time to engage in the private business of binding, enriching them to the detriment of the library while at the same time collecting salaries and allowances. Outsourcing is a cure for that kind of corruption.

Photocopying

Most libraries have photocopying services. When the machines break down, library staff must solve the problem. Money generated from this service may be diverted to other activities instead of replenishing the photocopying paper, servicing, and maintaining the photocopier, and buying toner. University libraries should outsource this service. A business partnership should be engaged and allocated space within the library or its vicinity, to photocopy library materials at a reasonable cost to the user.

Indexing and abstracting

Indexing and abstracting are indispensable for navigating complex information. Most libraries do not have the resources to provide indexes and abstracts for their collections of periodical literature and similar material. Due consideration should be given to the issue of outsourcing indexing and abstracting, and the production indexes and abstracts.

Conclusion

Outsourcing is a topic of considerable interest. The relative newness of outsourcing for many institutions is reflected in the difficulty in collecting data about it. The experience of those who have outsourced services seems generally positive, with benefits in cost- saving, reduced staff redundancy, and enhanced user satisfaction. Outsourcing can be a practical and prudent solution to certain aspects of librarianship. Outsourcing may be a good career alternative to a traditional full-time job for librarians. No one can imagine what the future holds in terms of the economy, which is a great determinant of funding the universities and their libraries. No one can predict how technology will change the role of libraries and librarians. Outsourcing some library services may become a more attractive option and will ebb and flow with a particular university library's needs.

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