USER NEEDS IN TANZANIA'S ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: This paper examines user needs in academic institutions in Tanzania and how they are being satisfied. It notes that no user needs survey has ever been conducted in academic institutions in Tanzania and argues that user needs are of various types e.g. graduate students, undergraduate students, researchers, administrators, individuals and others. I gives some practical steps in identifying information needs while also arguing that if you identify the needs of your client, the documentation and information service that you would provide to satisfy those needs will initiate action and bring about changes in clients, their outlook and in the organisation as a whole. The paper concludes that user surveys should inform the library's policies and planning.

INTRODUCTION

User needs are of various types. Apart from expressed or articulated needs, there are also unexpressed needs, which the client is aware of but may not want to express.

The changing information environment calls for continuous research to ensure that needs of information users are satisfactorily met, and that information professionals acquire the needed guidance and expertise in order to cope with the management of a wide variety of information resources.

This paper focuses on user needs in academic institutions in Tanzania. To date no survey on user needs has ever been conducted in this area. In this paper, user needs are discussed in a broad sense and the academic institution and University are used interchangeably.

USER NEEDS

Lack of self-sufficiency in information constitutes information needs. These needs represent gaps in the current knowledge of clients. A need is specific and generally time bound and either immediate or deferred. Kunz, et al (1997: 16) distinguish at least four types of clients when discussing user needs, which are:

- Potential user - the one who needs information which might or might not be provided by the specific services of the information facility;
- Expected user - the one who is known to have the intent of using certain information services (subscriber to a specific information service such as an abstracting service);
- Actual user - the one who has actually used an information service regardless of whether an advantage was derived from it or not; and
- Beneficiary - the one who derives measurable advantage from information services.

According to Crawford (1978) information needs depend on:

- Work activity;
- Discipline;
- Availability of facilities;
- Motivational factors for information needs;
- Need to take a decision;
- Need to seek new ideas;
- Need to validate correct ones; and
- Need to make professional contribution, etc.

Similarly, according to Paisley (1968) user/ information needs are affected by a number of factors such as:

- The range of information available;
- The uses to which the information will be put;

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- The background, motivation, professional orientation and other individual characteristics of the client;
- The social, political, economic and legal systems surrounding the client; and
- The consequences of information use.

Apart from the complexities shown above, there are problems in determining user needs due to individual behaviour, since users are also individuals. For example:

- A user may not like to reveal this, as he/she may like to show that he/she knows his/her resources; and
- A user may try to avoid a subordinate becoming informed.

A peculiar situation is faced by library and information professionals in determining user needs. For example, librarians and information professionals cannot prescribe the needed information to their clientele in the way physicians, lawyers, architects and engineers do. This is because these professionals have a final say on what they advise and their authority is accepted by their clients.

Clients of lawyers and other professions seek information in a field they are ignorant of whereas clients of information professionals are in many cases specialists in the areas in which they seek information or professional advice. This explains why information professionals experience difficulties in distinguishing the wishes or desires from the actual needs of the clients. In such a situation the information professional must prepare him/her self in order to create confidence in the users about his/her professional capabilities.

Academic librarians operate within changing academic environments. These have changed partly as a result of developments in information and communication and partly because of developments in science and technology. These developments are shaped by societal and technological push-pull factors. One would expect that user/information needs would be the

pushing factor instead of ICT developments. Today information needs should be key in changing library services and policies.

As noted earlier, information needs are of various types, but they differ in subject/discipline and level of education of an individual. For example, a study on the information needs of academic medical scientists at Chululongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, revealed that medical scientists have three types of information needs, which basically are:

- Identifying up-to-date information;
- Identifying relevant studies and data; and
- Developing research topics (Pimrumpai 1990).

Similarly, results from a survey conducted at the University of Botswana (Fidzan: 1998) indicate that guidance in the use of library resources and services is necessary. It indicates that periodicals and textbooks are the most popular sources of information for course work and research and that students need to be taught how to use the library.

Types of user needs are derived from the mission and objectives in an academic institution: for example, the mission of the University of Dar es Salaam: teaching, research and consultancy. Tanzania has 3 public Universities: University of Dar es Salaam, Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA) and Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and about 9 private ones, with different faculties/colleges and departments. Others are colleges which offer diploma qualifications.

The types of users whose requirements need to be satisfied are faculty, graduate students, researchers, undergraduates, administrators, individual researchers and others, and these groups are not homogeneous. Some user needs include:

- Doing research for a published papers and reading for self-advancement and teaching (faculty);

- Course requirements (students, both postgraduate and undergraduate).

Other user needs may include:
- User-friendly facilities;
- More and cheaper lending facilities, less complicated shelving, numbers, longer opening hours, and study rooms and access to computers;
- For participation in conferences, seminars, etc.;
- To meet the needs of promotional opportunities (faculty).

One likely difference between information needs of graduate students and undergraduate students is that the former prefer to seek periodicals and journals for more current developments in their field/subject of interest whereas undergraduates prefer books. I consider this to be a challenge to both publishers and librarians alike. I do acknowledge the services of the African Book Collective (ABC) for enabling the University of Dar es Salaam to obtain some African publications. Some students are on campus and some off-campus. Also, OUT students are scattered all over the country. All these students have high expectations of materials available in and through the University library.

No library can meet all these basic requirements. Therefore, in particular, the provision of undergraduate textbooks still remains a problem needing a solution.

HOW ARE THESE NEEDS SATISFIED?

There are several methods of satisfying user information needs, apart from books and journals (both foreign and local), that are in respective institutions' collections. The University of Dar es Salaam maintains a Textbook Centre, which caters for the three University campuses. There are additional resources linked to the library for satisfying needs of students and lecturers. All publications

ordered for the Centre are foreign publications. Since its establishment, no lecturer has ordered a book published locally.

User information needs are satisfied locally in a variety of ways such as: Use of ICT in information retrieval.

Nowadays a vast number of electronic information is available which allows a user to access information electronically. The ways of accessing such resources can be via an online search service (which usually costs money), via an OPAC service (which is usually free) or via a CD-ROM database (which may or may not be free).

Computer technology linked to distant database hosts can be used to retrieve information from online databases and online ordering of reading materials directly from suppliers (Russon, 1985). The Internet can also be used for delivering materials for users.

Due to an increased demand for online databases, there are those that offer services focusing on specific fields such as medicine, population studies, economics etc. The University of Dar es Salaam has 58 CD-ROM databases, of which 19 are obtained through donor-funded subscriptions. This has sustainability implications.

Users can access online information to retrieve bibliographic information, abstracts and in some cases full texts. The increase in the number of users, to access and retrieve online information, is an indication of the high demand for such information worldwide.

Satisfaction with online searches depends on the extent to which one successfully retrieves relevant materials for his/her needs. Search skills and the ability to formulate search strategies are crucial for one to be able to access a variety of search engines successfully in specific databases. This can be time-consuming and requires training and ICT exposure. Even though hard copies of bibliographic tools are readily available, they cannot guarantee the provision of required information on time.

In the digital age, however, there is also the problem of intellectual property. Some publishers may be reluctant to release their publications in digital formats because of loss of revenue, thereby restricting users' access to information. A link should be developed between publishers and libraries to ensure that libraries pay for digital information in the same way they pay for printed materials. This will ensure readers access to needed information and at the same time revenue for authors and publishers.

Another issue of concern is funding. Running online computerised services is expensive. Careful planning and availability of financial and human resources to purchase computers, computer services and subscriptions to CD-ROM titles and databases and to fund training are required. At another level is the question of who pays for the service if students cannot afford the specified Internet charges. Studies show that this requires careful planning because it may result in sudden mass protests from students as the case of Oregon State University in the U.S. shows (Webster and Middleton, 1999).

CURRENT AWARENESS SERVICES

Suppose your institution does not have CD-ROM or the database most relevant to your needs but you have e-mail. It is still possible to have current awareness information delivered directly to your e-mail address. This service is offered by a number of companies, one of them being Uncover Reveal Current Awareness Service, in the UK. For a fee of 20 US$ a year, one can select a database of 16,000 journal titles and have the table of contents e-mailed to you regularly (AAAS 1995: 14). You can use your document delivery service to order documents. However very few users, particularly in developing countries, can afford to pay for this service.

DOCUMENT DELIVERY

Access to bibliographic information databases or current awareness without access to full-text literature does certainly defeat the purpose. You can identify or locate some of the articles identified as crucial to your research or project in your institution's library or information centre, but not all of them. Traditionally, academic libraries have used Inter-Library Loan (ILL) schemes, such as the British Lending Library (BLL) to find and obtain books and journal articles that they need, but do not have. Nowadays commercial document supply services are used because they are faster and sometimes more reliable. Prices for such services vary from 10-12 US$ per article, but the price increases when you want it faxed rather than sent by regular mail. Inter-library loans can also be arranged between local institutions, for example between the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and the University of Dar es Salaam Library, and even within the region, especially for journal articles.

Our institutions should focus on effective use of local resources by developing databases of local publications to satisfy user needs such as the Biodiversity and Environmental databases, developed by the University of Dar es Salaam. These store most publications which do not feature in international databases. Also, abstracts of Masters and Ph.D theses could be made available on the Internet.

CONCLUSION

There are policy and management issues that need to be addressed, some of which have been mentioned earlier, including the following:

a) Needs Assessment

Departments, faculties or library staff should carry out information needs assessment surveys in order to:

- Prioritise information resources to be purchased;
- Determine how much support will be required from the library/information centre;
- Prevent purchases that are duplicate in nature; and

- Make evaluation a continuous process to ensure effectiveness and quality of the information received.

b) Training

In business or academic institutions people believe that if they have computers and networks their problems will be solved. E-mail, CD-ROM and others are easy to use, but there are skills which need to be learned. Experienced and novice researchers can both benefit from in-depth training on information retrieval skills using different databases. This would enable users to be more responsible for their learning processes including the development of adequate information skills.

c) No Institution Can Afford to be Self - Sufficient

The issue of sharing resources among institutions is of paramount importance and should be encouraged. This can easily be done through networking with other institutions both foreign and local.

d) While electronic resources have become a fact of life, they are not cheaper compared with print sources. The potential of the Internet is enormous but there are problems of copyright, licensing agreements, maintenance and replacement of equipment, inequality of access and long-standing practices and policies to which publishers continue to adhere. Each institution is looking for the most appropriate sustainable mix to suit its needs: ownership and access. It must be acknowledged that electronic resources are challenging librarians to balance competing demands such as:

- Meeting the needs of many general users versus meeting the limited needs of specialised users;
- Selecting full text databases versus indexes and abstracts;
- Choosing electronic versus print material.

But the ultimate goal of all library/information services is to provide timely access to information to the maximum satisfaction of the users by taking advantage of ICT developments. The ability to make information available in a timely, convenient and cost-effective manner becomes the true measure of a high quality service. But it is only through user surveys that one can determine specific user needs.

Identifying a need is one thing and satisfying it is another. No single method or tool will serve entirely.

Finally, a note on practical steps in identifying information needs:

- Study the subject (discipline and sub disciplines) of interest to the organisation and identify the core, periphery and supporting areas;
- Study the organisation and its environment and prepare a profile of the organisation;
- Study the specific environment of the client;
- Study of the client/user;
- Conduct formal interviews with users;
- Identify and record information;
- Analyse and refine the identified information needs.

In identifying the information needs of your client, the documentation and information services that you would provide to satisfy these needs would initiate action and change in the clients, their outlook and in the organisation as a whole.

Finally, user surveys are an essential element in any successful library's commitment to a customer-driven service. These surveys should not just be a snapshot of user satisfaction but should inform the library's policies and planning.

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