

INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS AS “HYBRID MANAGERS” IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY: A REVIEW FROM THE ZAMBIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Purpose:

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the need for information professionals to transform themselves into hybrids capable of performing various roles in the knowledge economy. The paper has highlighted changes that have taken place in the provision of information services as well as focused on the need for changes in training background of information professionals so as to enable them cope with the demands of the knowledge economy.

Design/Methodology/Approach:

A desk review of relevant literature on changes within the information profession and their implication on information professionals was conducted.

Findings:

Findings indicate that there is continual change in the information profession that has necessitated changes in the operational environment of most institutions as well as world economies in general. Not only have information provision institutions realized the need for transforming their services to meet contemporary demands but information professionals have also realized the need to take on interdisciplinary approach to their training and exposure to work environment.

Practical implications

This paper, adds to knowledge on the on-going debate on skills for information professionals in the knowledge economy from the Zambian perspective.

Originality/Value

The paper has value in informing Zambian information professionals on their need to be versatile and remain competitive in the knowledge economy.

Paper type: Conceptual paper.

Keywords:

Hybrid Managers, Information Professionals, Knowledge Economy, Knowledge Workers

INTRODUCTION

In the advent of the knowledge economy, knowledge workers are advocated and highly looked for by institutions as they believe that such employees would enable an organisation achieve its mandate. According to Serrat (2008:1) “a knowledge worker is someone who is employed because of his or her knowledge of a subject matter, rather than ability to perform manual labour”. Using this definition, there is no doubt that information professionals who, according to El-Maamiry (2011:2) include “librarians, knowledge managers, chief information officers, web developers, information brokers and consultants” are also knowledge workers. Although knowledge workers are highly subject-based specialists, in the knowledge economy being a subject specialist does not necessarily guarantee effective performance. Thus, in addition to a subject specialization, knowledge workers still require exposure to training and work that is interdisciplinary in nature for them to perform effectively (Chen, Chiu and Fan 2002).

With this notion highly accepted, knowledge workers should therefore be versatile employees who can perform a number of tasks. According to Skyrme (2008), such individuals are usually referred to as “hybrid managers”. Accordingly, Skyrme (2008) defines a hybrid as “a person with strong technical skills and adequate business knowledge or vice versa”. Considering this definition, Information Professionals are no exception to this requirement. In fact, citing Orna (1999), Shahid (2009) informs that a prediction for the need in change of operational competencies of Information Professionals was a must as we entered the 21st century. To this end, Singh (2007) notes that “in the information and knowledge-based society, information professionals are expected to be more dynamic and competent to deal with the influx of information and manage organisational information resources and intellectual assets”. Recognizing this need therefore entails that information professionals must be hybrids who must understand a number of issues for them to perform to expected standards in the knowledge economy. Thus, in the knowledge economy, it is desirable that individuals prepare themselves to perform multiple tasks in addition to their ability to competently perform functions in their main professional domain. The ability to multitask is seen as an ability of a hybrid employee.

The value of information professionals as hybrid employees not only applies to organizations but it also applies to national economies (Shahid 2009). In fact, the role of information in national development has been well argued. To this extent, some countries have even developed national information policies. In organisations on the other hand, information professionals have even been employed in non-information positions. This situation indeed reflects the versatility of Information Professionals.

HYBRID TRAINING FOR INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS IN ZAMBIA

The need for “hybrid managers” have not only been a feature in organizations but it has also been part of training programmes for a number of years (Skyrme 2008). At the University of Zambia, the Department of Library and Information Science which produces most Information Professionals in Zambia, has not been left behind in the production of hybrid managers. The current degree that is offered by the Department is a double major that allows students not only have a specialization in information management and knowledge organisation skills but also have another subject specialization in fields such as Geography, Public Administration, Development Studies, Economics, Demography and Mass Communication. In addition to the acquisition of a unique other specialization, the Bachelor of Library and Information Studies (BALIS) training programme avails its graduates relevant information communication technology (ICT) skills that are considered crucial for every knowledge worker in the knowledge economy. These skills have made the BALIS graduates “hybrid managers” who have rendered valuable contributions to their employers.

Indeed, there is no doubt that Information Professionals who have graduated at the University of Zambia under the BALIS degree have had hybrid training and therefore have been instrumental in adding value to the Zambian economy through their various appointments in various institutions. However, a lot more could still be done to enhance the interdisciplinary nature of the programme and also intensifying certain skills considered valuable to every knowledge workers in areas such as ICT and business.

INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS'S ROLE IN INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND PROVISION INSTITUTIONS

A number of institutions fall within the category of information management and provision. These include, among others, libraries, information centers, documentation centers and data banks. Information management and provision institutions have, for a long time now, recognized the need to be hybrids themselves in the quest to serve their clients well. This recognition has been fostered by the changing world economies in which information and knowledge have been considered vital resources (Malhotra 2000). Thus, provision of information and knowledge in these institutions is no longer limited to space and time as it is also e-based. In transforming themselves as hybrids and to effectively manage their e-resources found in these organisations, e-infrastructure in form of equipment and content as well as versatile human resources have been put in place (Adolphus 2010; Feng 2005). Accordingly, Feng (2005) argues that these new innovational developments in information services have the following significant implications:

Firstly, the roles of the information specialist and patron have changed. Whereas the patron used to leave the bulk of information retrieval to the corporate librarian, the patron now feels greater competence in doing searches – and therefore, is willing and wanting to own more of the search process. Second, the corporate librarian, as information specialist, must have as much or more ability in these than the early adopters [Information specialist who were able to use computers to receive and communicate information in the early days]. This means that the corporate librarian must not only be aware of these technologies, but be able to implement them in the business setting. In doing so, the corporate librarian adds value and demonstrates worth.

As argued by Feng (2005) above, the role of Information Professionals in information management and provision institutions has indeed significantly changed. The shift has been the move from the provision of traditional library services to services that are IT enabled and centered on users (Patridge 2011). This shift has and will also be effectively reflected in the titles such as Head of e-strategy and development, Electronic resources advisor, Electronic services officer, E-content coordinator, Web librarian, Digitization and copyright officer, Digital projects librarian, and Digitization project manager which information professionals now hold (Adolphus 2010).

Recognising this change that has taken place in information provision institutions, it only makes logical sense that Information Professionals should also, endeavour to re-engineer themselves through training in other relevant subjects and professions such as those related to information communication technologies (ICTs) and business courses such as customer relationship management. This re-engineering of skills should be fostered by the desire to fully offer effective services to clients as well as to remain relevant to both current and prospective employers.

INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS'S ROLE IN CORPORATE AND OTHER NON-INFORMATION PROVISION INSTITUTIONS

Corporate organisations and a number of non-information provision institutions such as the Banks, telecommunication companies and many more others also employ Information Professionals. In such institutions, the roles which Information Professionals have played are wide and depend on the mandate of the institution. While some have been limited to mere information and knowledge organisation in corporate libraries, others have been involved in competitive intelligence activities. Still, others have had their roles expanded to include the management of an organisation's knowledge assets. Further, others despite their professional training background being in information management, they have occupied positions that have nothing to do with information management per se. Whatever the situation maybe, for Information Professionals to remain relevant in the knowledge economy, Skyrme (2004) argues that

Information professionals must consistently connect to corporate "hot buttons" and understand how their output is used to support business objectives and priorities. Simply serving people who make/ request information from you is insufficient. It may even be irrelevant, if there is no clear link to a business outcome. Ignore the strategic thrusts of your organisation and you could find yourself outside it!

Skyrme (2004)'s assertions above are a challenge that every Information Professional must embrace if they are to cope with new trends in operational functions of knowledge organisations. This is more so considering the fact that most organisations in the knowledge economy are now knowledge based with most operations carried out being knowledge intensive. As already observed, Information Professionals as knowledge workers should therefore respond to this intimation by ensuring that they are able to

multi-task. Multitasking in this case implies the ability to understand and offer effective contributions to an organisation's operations in areas such as management, administration, information communication technology, finance, information and knowledge management. In fact, while working under these mentioned functional areas, Information Professionals have held positions such as Director Business Development, Manager Business Development, Head, Systems Development, Deputy Registrar, Senior Administrative Officer, Information Specialist, Research Officer, Lecturer, Consultant, Documentalist and Corporate Librarian.

The participation of Information Professionals in such positions is not a surprise but rather confirms the need to harness the interdisciplinary nature of training programmes in information and knowledge management as a profession. In fact, other professions are practicing similar trends. For instance, despite knowledge management being viewed as a more comfort zone for Information Professionals, most of individuals that serve in a number of positions in the practice of knowledge management come from other disciplines such as finance, information technology and management (Rikowsli 2000; Shahid 2009). Further, the occupation of positions that have no information connotation at all also shows the acceptability by institutions of Informational Professionals as hybrids with valuable contributions in the knowledge economy.

INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS AS “HYBRID MANAGERS” IN ZAMBIA: THE WAY FORWARD

As presented in this paper, a hybrid employee is a knowledge worker capable of multitasking. In Zambia, our economy and institutions need these “hybrid managers” urgently. With Zambia having been reclassified as a middle economy, a number of implications that need fulfilling emerge. For instance, not only do we need more information provision institutions but we also need people who can manage these institutions effectively. Both at national level and in corporate institutions, “hybrid managers” in form of knowledge workers are highly required.

The need for these employees has been necessitated by the fact that the Zambian economy, just like other economies, has become a knowledge economy. Characteristics of a knowledge economy include not only the availability of information communication

technology (ICT) infrastructure but also the availability of knowledge workers such as accountants, bankers, lawyers and indeed information professionals in hybrid form (Elliot and Jacobson 2003; Malhotra 2000). Thus, as presented below in this paper, a number of lessons can be learned and implemented.

1) Embracing Knowledge Management as a Function and Practice in Zambia

The very fact that the Zambian economy has become a knowledge based one implies that knowledge management as a function and practice should be practiced. For this to happen effectively, hybrid knowledge workers should be produced through training, which of course, should not be limited to the information profession. This is because despite a number of Information Professionals seeing themselves as major players in the field and practice of knowledge management, caution should be taken to accept the reality that there are many players involved in knowledge management practice. In fact, Rikowski (2000:231) stresses the fact that “knowledge management is not owned by any one profession but that if librarians and information specialists want to play an important part, then they need to understand and appreciate the contribution that can and is being made by other people in the field”. This counsel is indeed true considering that an effective management of knowledge should consider both tacit and explicit knowledge (Rikowski (2000:229). Expertise in managing explicit knowledge can be easily found among Information Professionals while expertise in managing tacit knowledge is more of a preserve for human resources practitioners. Based on this understanding, it is therefore befitting to compel Information Professionals who are knowledge workers to be “hybrid managers” – people with interdisciplinary training background and versatile enough to carry multiple functions – if they are to remain relevant in the new Zambian knowledge economy.

2) Facilitators of Hybrid Information Services and Competitive Intelligence

Taking this role, Information Professionals in Zambia should be able to provide information services not only limited to traditional approaches but also incorporate contemporary channels such as the use of digital libraries and web 2.0 technologies. As argued by Adolphus (2010), this need is more compelling considering the fact that future

and current tasks of Information Professionals as hybrids in both information provision and non- information provision institutions include the following:

- Managing databases
- Creating and maintaining websites
- Working with digital repositories and developing an information infrastructure that will store , search and retrieval of digitized assets and born digital material
- Carrying out sophisticated searches and so helping in the research process
- Making sure that electronic resources are well described and easy to locate
- Developing online systems and their components
- Liaising with those responsible for other systems within the institution

Further, Feng (2005) views the core competencies of re-engineered Information professions in the knowledfe economy as being those presented in table 1. below:

Table 1: Core Competencies of Information Professionals in the knowledge Economy

Information Enabler	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transferring ownership of searches to patrons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basic knowledge of IT infrastructure ▪ Fluency in web development (e.g ASP. NET, ColdFusion etc 2. Training patrons on deployed applications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to teach; communication skills ▪ Fluency in web development languages ▪ eLearning experience and familiarity (e.g CMS, LMS, LCMS, Breez, Sakai) 3. Information evangelist <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to publicize and increase usage of information resources ▪ Tailoring resources to meet customer needs
Knowledge Creator	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Custom alerting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to retrieve applicable data in a periodic , timely manner ▪ Ability to properly disseminate data to patrons 2. Competitive intelligence

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Awareness and understanding of market and regulatory conditions ▪ Ability to create actionable intelligence <p>3. Improving knowledge sharing methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Awareness of current knowledge sharing technologies (web 2.0, web 3.0, wiki etc) ▪ Ability to appropriately apply these technologies for the end-users
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Source: Adapted from Feng (2005)

3) Diversification of curriculum for Information professionals

The training opportunities provided to Information Professionals should be diversified enough and interdisciplinary to offer varied career opportunities. The thinking therefore should be to have training programs that are not only limited to traditional information management and organization but also offer clear career opportunities in fields such as management (in broad context), information communication technologies, business and to some extent finance. Accordingly, Shahid (2009:136) sums it up by contending that:

The rate of change prompted by the advent of knowledge management is such that we are in a clear danger of being left out as the framework of career opportunities develops and changes over the next few years. Already, some of the most important posts to emerge in knowledge management – Chief Knowledge Officer, Head of Knowledge Management Architecture, Direct of Intellectual Asset Management, etc – are being captured by professionals from management, finance and information technology. There is need for significant changes in thinking, attitude, education and training before we can confidently face the knowledge management future that awaits in many important areas of the information and library professions. The schools of Information Science have a responsibility of initiating and leading these changes.

Consequently, heeding Shahid (2009)'s outcry not only strengthens Information professionals' occupation of positions which have hybrid connotation but also reinforces the view that employers recognize the value played by Information Professionals in various operational functions of an organization. As such Information Professionals should be ready to challenge, without any doubts, for any position for as long as they are competent enough to carry the roles required thereof. Thus, one should be able to get a job in the IT industry, management etc. with ease.

CONCLUSION

As presented in this paper, Information Professionals in Zambia have potential to be hybrid managers and true knowledge workers and compete effectively with other Information Professionals world over. However, for this to be ascertained there is still need to reinforce a number of activities such as the training programmes and an investigation of the practice of knowledge management in Zambian organisations. Further, for Information Professionals to effectively engage in these knowledge economy issues, a number of changes such change in skills sets, mind sets and professional cultures need to be effected.

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