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The Non-Technological aspects of Information Management

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[Library/information work is going through major changes because of the new developments in information and communication technologies. It is very important at this juncture for the library/information profession to manage the transition period effectively. Information management is not only about management of the technological aspects of library/information work. Equally important is the non-technological aspects. A balanced approach to manage both these aspects will only lead to the development of an effective library/information system]

1. THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The increasing availability of the new information and communication technologies (ICT) is transforming every walk of human life. It is also affecting the nature of work of every profession with out any exception. The impact of this major change is more on professions dealing with information than on any other profession. So the library and information profession should have a special interest in this area. It is a fact that the library/information profession did not invent or produce these technologies. It did not even ask for these technologies, and even did not welcome whole-heartedly their entry into the "walled garden of library/information work". But now these technologies have been invented and is becoming increasingly available and the profession is well aware of its potential for use in library/information work, it has no option but to "go for it". It is also aware of the risks if these technologies are not accepted/adopted and utilised to the optimum level. After the initial hesitation, we are into it now.

2. ICT IN THE CONTEXT OF INFORMATION EXPLOSION

Librarians were severely concerned till a few years ago about the inability of the systems and tools invented by them and available to them to control the "information explosion". This was the topic for discussions in very many seminars and workshops. We do not hear it any more, though "information explosion" continues unabated and in an increasingly higher speed. The new technologies have been able to exercise control over the problems relating to the organisation of information, identifying or locating the right information most accurately and speedily and disseminating instantly in a medium that is suited to the customers choice. Online access to a very large number of databases located in any part of the world from any part of the world, and the availability of sophisticated search mechanisms to retrieve information from such an information ocean most efficiently and of technology to transmit the retrieved information instantly from any corner of the world to any other are realities we experience every day now. Digital libraries and free access to these digital libraries are not very far.

3. THE CHANGING ROLE OF LIBRARY/INFORMATION PROFESSION

The potential of the new technologies in library and information work is enormous. The more these are applied into library/information work, the role and nature of work of the library/information profession is likely to undergo sea changes. The intermediary role it plays between books/information and users will become redundant. The end user will not need any intermediary to organise or identify information for them. They on the other hand will have instant and direct access to information databases and digital libraries. By using simple and user friendly systems for searching these databases/digital libraries the end user will get the information as and when needed without having to get it through the intermediary. This is beginning to happen: users don't necessarily have to come to the library to retrieve information from any on-line databases or web sites or digital libraries. They can do this from their own work place or home if they have access to the required technologies and some basic training.

4. THE CHANGING ROLE

In an information networked society the library/information professionals are like the bearers in a restaurant offering buffet meals! There they play a role, but a very different

and new role. Similarly, in a digital age or in an information networked society the library/information profession will have a role, indeed an important but different role. The responsibility is likely to become more wider, the role a more co-ordinating one. The technology will take care of the intricacies relating to the acquisition, organisation and retrieval of information.

The wider responsibility is likely to be in the form of "knowledge management" and the role, co-ordinating between the knowledge creators and knowledge users, between the technology providers and end users, between the internal customers and the external customers, between the internally generated information and externally available information. The knowledge management responsibility will also encompass the responsibility of helping the end users from drowning in the information ocean by providing them the right level of training and guidance, creation of contents in the right format from the vast amount of knowledge available, working with the technologists to ensure the development of user friendly technologies, controlling the information market to ensure that what is developed/produced is put into optimum use and also by providing feedback in every direction.

5. SELECTION OF TECHNOLOGY

ICT, more than anything else, is the one single factor that will shape the future of library/information work. Choosing the right technology is as important, if not more important, as putting the technology into use. To select the right technology including software, it is essential to know the various options available in the market and the comparative performance efficiency of these. Even for this, a basic knowledge of the various technologies is a must along with knowledge about the various systems in use in other libraries. Library/information professionals should be able to intelligently discuss the technology requirements, the advantage and disadvantages of the available options etc with the IT specialists/IT managers. Unless we are competent to do these, there are bound to be conflicts and incompatibilities.

6. IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT RESOURCES

Selection of traditional library material itself is a difficult task, which often has not been receiving the kind of attention it deserves from the library professionals. To get this act

right one need to be very up-to-date with the developments in the relevant subjects, fully aware of the requirements of the customers and the use pattern of the existing resources, should have good knowledge about the resources that are available for sharing in other libraries. At a time when the libraries are facing resource constraints, getting the selection process right is crucially important. This is becoming all the more now because of the availability of a large number of electronic information products also to choose from. The options are various: the same product is available in printed format, stand alone CD ROM database or networkable CD ROM database format, as Online database and on web site. Each access format has advantageous and disadvantages. Making a judicious decision is often difficult, unless one is very conversant with these products.

7. COMMITMENT TO RESOURCE SHARING

Very many initiatives are around the corner for the much needed and much talked about "resource sharing". DELNET, CALIBNET, MALIBNET are some examples. The availability of technology has once again provided the mechanism to administer resource sharing. However, more than the mechanism to do this, it is the commitment to resource sharing that would make resource sharing happen. It is a known fact that no library can become self-sufficient and that resource sharing is the only way to meet the increasing demand for information. Commitment of the participating organisations, by way of signing an agreement alone is not enough. Prior to that the library/information profession as a whole should be committed to the cause of sharing resources. Once this commitment is in place, the use of ICT will enable resource sharing happen most effectively.

8. MANAGING THE TRANSITION

The libraries/information centres in India are in a transition stage. Technology application, in one form or other, is happening in every library/information centre either in the form of library automation, creation of computerised catalogues, accessing on-line databases, use of CD ROMs, use of computers for printing and publishing, and so on. Because of lack confidence in the new systems libraries continue doing things in the traditional way parallelly. This is very cumbersome and frustrating for not only the library/information but also for the users of information. When two systems are in operation, the chances are that either is fool proof! Effective management of this

transition period is very important. It is most essential to make this parallel running period as short as possible or atleast to ensure that the users are not affected by this.

9. PILOTING

When implementing anything new, one can not take chances. What is possible in one environment might not be possible in another environment. What works in a particular situation might not work in another situation. Chance taking can sometimes prove very expensive! This is particularly true when implementing expensive projects involving new technologies. Before going for full implementation it is always advisable to organise a test run or pilot. This could offer a lot of learning points and smoothen the full implementation and indeed reduce risks.

9.1 Concern for Quality

Users of products and services are becoming increasingly quality conscious. This is true of library/ information users too. It is a well known fact that library/information service is not seen by most people, as an "essential service". It thus tend to get the least priority in every respect: resource allocation, staffing, etc and most importantly use by customers, who find alternate sources for obtaining information! While everyone acknowledges the role and importance of "information", they don't acknowledge the role and importance of libraries/information centres in the same breadth. At least, this is not demonstrated by the way they use these. One of the reasons for this could be the inadequate level of quality of our products and services. Conscious efforts towards improving quality on a continuous basis alone can result in quality improvement. Take or leave attitude or indifference to quality will result in more users and potential users searching for alternate routes to obtain information.

9.2 Know Your Customers

Good knowledge about the objectives of the organisation, its short-term and long-term goals, and its priorities is essential. Then only one will be able to organise the library/information function most effectively. The nature of the material acquired and the services designed should depend upon these. It is also equally important to have a clear understanding of the customer groups which the library/information centre is supposed to

serve. Once this is clear, the understanding about their "information needs" would follow. Every library/information activity, however small or big, should be tested against the aims and objectives of the organisation, especially to see if these contribute to meeting the objectives.

9.3 Caring for the Customer

The increasing use of technology is proportionately reducing human interface in every sphere, including ours. "Reference librarian" is a post of the past! OPACs and help screens have made many traditional jobs of librarians in helping readers redundant, so also bar code readers and coin operated systems. The need for face to face communication is reducing dramatically. Even in such a scenario, it is all the more important to treat customers with utmost care. This is especially so, when the level of skills to use the technologies is so varied. It is foolish to believe that all customers understand all instructions and that technology will deliver goods if one can follow the instructions! Proper help and guidance will help the users to make the best use of the technologies and get the maximum benefit.

9.4 A New Role for the Profession

Information access skills can play a vital role in one's continuing professional development. The best agency to impart this skill is the library/information profession. The profession will be making a great contribution to the entire education process, or to complete the formal education process, by getting itself into this new area. This training can be imparted at various stages of education and also after the completion of education.