Review

Competencies needed by Special Libraries in the Information Age

Ali, Musa

Dr. Aliyu Obaje Library, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State.

This paper assessed the competencies needed by special librarians in this new age of information. Thus, librarianship is a dynamic and ever-growing field/profession, today as things are changing gradually into a technological and more enhance in nature. Librarians, especially special librarians have to adapt to these changes in order to redefine their position in the evolving new world and re-examine those competencies that will make them relevant, capable and in-tune with the challenges and changes in the profession. The paper also examined the role of special librarians in the information age and expected competencies of special librarians so as to have a clear understanding of the emerging changes and the need for the special librarian to redefine those competencies to meet the realities today.

Keyword: Special librarian, competencies, information

INTRODUCTION

The special library of today has moved from being a traditional print-based resource located in one place to becoming an information service that connects on demand to any research project, marketing value, or any other activity needing specific information. The librarian serves as a link to a broad range of information sources (electronic, print, individual experts). The librarian is an active participant in detecting market place, cues, searching for information, collecting and synthesizing data and making it available in a timely fashion (Prentice, 2005).

This provides a synopsis of the scenario in which a special librarian has to operate. The concept of special library has remain controversial since its origination, like in other social sciences, the concept has no universally accepted definition, however, different authors and scholars in the field has given divergent definitions of what a special library is. Issa (2008) defined special library as a library set up by business, professionals and religions organizations with the primary purpose of serving the companies or groups that establish it. He went further to explain that special libraries are more than collections of books and information because they also provide services to meet the need of their parent organization.

Supporting this, Wright (1967) added that, this kind of library is concerned almost exclusively with the literature of a particular subject area group of subjects. Special library is also postulated as a library serving a particular group of readers which has an existence as a group outside of the readership and whose members direct at least some of their activities towards a common purpose. Accordingly, the Encyclopedia Americana as quoted by Issa (2003) and Akin (1988) stated the following as what

make a library "Special". He added that, library is called special when its collections is of a specialized nature; it serves specialized body of users and has a staff with specialized training in a particular subject matter or methodology as well as offers specialize and usually personalized services.

Furthermore, special libraries are planned on strictly practical lines, with activities and collection carefully controlled size and scope, they are largely concerned with communicating information to special users in response to / or preferable in anticipation of their specific needs. The special library is noted for provision of individual services which reflect the very essence of its existence. For this, the special library often goes to the users rather than waiting for the users to come to it, in other word, the special library operation is hinged on the philosophy of' proactive rather than retroactive service provision, i.e "putting knowledge into work".

Issa (2003) asserted that in any case their parent organization are primarily responsible for determining what their scope will be, however irrespective of where it's found, the special library major objective include provision of information in line with the objectives of the parent organization. In view of this, all its activities and service are tailored towards the overall achievement of the organisation's goals and objectives.

The special librarian in the information age

In this era of information technology, the special librarian and others in the field of librarianship are confronted with some changes or modifications from paper to electronic information resources/media which is now the dominant form of information storage and retrieval. The astounding growth of the internet and the rise of electronic communication and storage media generally have transformed people's work and personal lives. Information overload is an ever growing phenomenon and the special librarians are needed more than before to qualitatively filtered the available information and provide needed information in actionable form (Madu, Maric & Drisu, 2002). The special librarian has today assumed a crucial position in the information age, providing the competitive edge for the knowledge based organizations (special library), especially by responding to critical information needs of his clientele. Information, both internally and externally generated, is the pivot for the survival of the knowledge based organization as it is the most essential ingredient for decision making, innovation and continuing learning. In this view, Madu (2002) defined Information Technology as the science and activity of storing and sending out information by using computers, adding that, it is a generic term to cover the acquisition, processing, storing and dissemination of information in both textual,

numerical, pictorial and vocal. The term is restricted to systems dependent on a micro-electronic based on combination of computing and telecommunication technology.

The special librarian is distinctively different from other librarians and as the world has come to embrace the application of information technology, therefore, it is important that the special librarian brace up and face the new changes in this information age by improving his competency in meeting the challenges inherent in the new development, especially if they want to remain relevant.

The competencies of a special librarian

The competencies needed by special librarians are in tandem with modern day technologies. The contextual variables necessitated the identification of competencies in relation to the peculiarity of this situation. Thus, competency have been defined as the interplay of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitude required to do a job effectively from the point of view of both the performer and the observer (Murphy, 1991). In line with this, Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary (2000) defines competency as having enough skill or knowledge to do something well or to the necessary standard and as a skill that you need in a particular job or for a particular task. The Encarta Dictionary (2007) supported that, it is ability to do something especially measured against a standard i.e. the ability to acquire through experience or training.

In personal career development, competencies cover flexible knowledge and skills that allow the special librarian to function in variety of environment and to render a valuable information services that will be different from other (Marshall, 2003). In this era of information technology, the special librarians require the following competencies in order to fulfill their goals and objectives which include core, professional and personal competencies.

Core competency: The core competency is a synergy of the other two competencies. This competency is a tool for professional growth, recruitment and assessment. Special librarians contribute to the knowledge base of the profession by sharing best practices and experiences and as they continue to learn about information products, services and management practices. More so, special librarians/information professionals are committed to professional excellence and ethics and to the values and principles of the profession.

Professional competency: The professional competency relates to the special librarians' knowledge of information resources, access, technology, research

and management and the ability to use this knowledge as bases for providing the highest quality in information services. According to Abel (2013), professional competency of special librarians can be categorized under the following:

i. Managing information organization: Special librarians manage the special libraries ranging in size from one organization to another. The contribution of the special librarians are intangible in environment whose markets are constantly changing. Here, the special librarian does this by aligning the information organization together with the strategic directions of the parent organization through assessing and communicating the values of the organization, thereby establishing effective operational building and financial management building and leading an effective information service team and contributing effectively to management strategies and decision regarding information policy application tools and technologies for the organization.

ii. Managing information resources: Special librarians in the information age manage the information resources at his disposal including identifying, selecting, evaluating, securing, and providing access to pertinent information resources in whatever formats and recognizing the importance of his client as a key information resource. The special librarian among other things manages the full circle of information from its creation to acquisition through to its instruction. Following this, the special librarian builds a dynamic collection of information resources based on deep understanding of his clients information needs and demonstrates expert knowledge of content and format of information resources including the ability to critically evaluate, select and filter the information as well as develops information policies for the organization regarding externally published and internally created information resources and advices on the policy implementation.

iii. Managing information services: Special librarians are tasked with the responsibility to manage the entire life cycle of information services from the conceptual stage, through the design development, testing, marketing, packaging, delivery and divestment of these offerings. The special librarian develops and maintains a cost - effective, client-valued information services that align with the strategic direction of the organization and client groups. The special librarian equally conducts market research on the behaviour and problems of current and potential client groups, and thereafter, analyses and synthesizes the information into accurate answers for clients.

iv. The special librarian also employs evidence-based management to demonstrate the value of and continually improves information sources and services.

v. Applying information tools and technologies: The special librarian of the information age exploits and harnesses the current and appropriate technology tools to deliver the best services, provides the most relevant and accessible resources, develops and delivers teaching tools to maximize client use of information by assessing, selecting and applying current and emerging information tools and creating access and delivering solutions. He also applies expertise in databases indexing, and information analyses and synthesis so as to information retrieval and uses in the organization. The special librarian also protects information privacy of his clients and maintains awareness of and to new challenges to privacy.

Proactively, special librarians should have foresight and maintain current awareness of emerging technologies that may not be currently relevant but may become relevant tools of information resources, service or application in the future. These are what makes a special librarian to be qualified and regarded as being professionally competent in this information age.

Personal Competency: The personal competency represents attitude, skills and values that enable the special librarian to work effectively and efficiently as well as contribute positively to their organizations, clients and profession. These competencies include being a good communicator to demonstrating the value add of their contribution, remaining flexible and positive in an ever changing environment. In addition to the professional competency, these are some of the qualities a special librarians must possess in order to be adjudged competent. Akin (2008) states that the staff must be competent, motivated and dedicated if the library is to provide the level of information service expected of it. Marshal (2003) outlined some of the personal competencies as:

i. Effective communication: A special librarian must be able to present ideas clearly, succinctly and enthusiastically either verbally or in writing and always in the language of the audience and with an understanding of' their perception and perspective, he/she should believe and equally demonstrate his/her ability to provide information services and relay the message to management staff and clients alike.

ii. Seek out challenges and capitalizes on new opportunities: A special librarian should act actively pursues new roles in the organisation that require an information leader, demonstrate his / her professional knowledge and skill to solve information problems in wide range of settings.

iii. Committed to service: The special librarian should seek out Feedbacks and uses it for continuous improvement, conduct regular users survey by asking

the users the level of satisfaction and he/she also shares new knowledge with others at conferences and in the Special library Association (SLA) journals and other professional literatures, he/she should use the research knowledge base of a special librarian as a resource For improving services and finally taking pride in a job well done.

iv.   Forming partnership and alliances: The special librarian should seek alliance with other units/departments in the Organization example the human resources development unit to Optimize complementary knowledge and skills. Also he/she should form partnership with other libraries or information services inside or outside the Organization to optimize resource sharing and co-operate with other researchers in the field to conduct relevant and practical studies.

v.   Encourage team work: The special librarians should recognize the balance of collaborating leading and following and therefore work as part of a team regardless of his/her level, developing and using leadership and collaborating skill and also keep abreast of current trends in leadership skills and styles, using this knowledge will help the librarians and others to develop the most effective and appropriate approaches in different context.

vi.   Prioritize and focuses on what is critical: Special librarian must recognize in order to use the resources (human, materials and finance) most effectively, careful planning and forecasting of the appropriate approach to take in using these resources is required. He/she should incorporate strategic imperatives into the individual goals and objectives of self and others to ensure long-team plan, drive daily decisions and operation. He/she must realize that he/she is committed to a career that involves continuous learning and knowledge development and therefore takes responsibility for learning and enrichment.

vii.   Recognize the value of professional networking: The special librarian should actively contributes to and participate in professional association such as SLA and other professional bodies in sharing insight knowledge and skill, also contributing towards the building and maintenance of a strong profession thereby enhancing its value in the eyes of colleagues, clients and broader community.

viii.   Remain flexible and positive in a time of continue changes: The special librarian should willingly assumes different responsibilities at different point in time that respond to changing needs, maintain a positive attitude and help other to do the same. He/she should also see to the regular review of plans and policies to ensure the organization is responsive to the new changes in the unforeseen developments.

ix.   Celebrates achievements for self and others: The special librarian should nominates hardworking and

dedicated staff and colleague for awards/honors in the organization and contribute towards an environment where achievement are acknowledged, celebrated and rewarded, knowing that "little thing counts' and encourages mutual support and sharing in the organization and within the profession. This can be a motivating incentives for the staff to put in their best performance because without proper motivation no meaningful achievement can be obtained. This was supported by Akin (2008) that one must stressed the word 'motivated' and "dedicated' because a library might employ the most professionally, academically and technically qualified staff, unless such worker is willing to contribute their maximum to the institution their productivity and standard of performance may fall below those of less qualified staff Who are assiduously devoted to their duties".

Furthermore, Daniel (2009) proffer these as some necessary competencies for special librarians in order to provide a wide range of services currently required in an e-library environment. These include: intermediary with a good knowledge of electronic resources including databases, inventing tools and improved ways to better delivery of the service; enabler-proactively connecting with the information they require and multimedia knowledge of wide range of formats.

CONCLUSION

These are the competencies of a special librarian in information age, living in the present-day even though they have their roots in the past. Special librarians recognize the expanding nature of the challenges that face them in the information age and the range of competencies that are required to meet them. The challenges represented by these competences must be seized 'and acted upon today in order to ensure that special librarians have a viable tomorrow. Also, the following recommendations were made:

1.   The special librarian should have adequate knowledge of contemporary models of packaging and re-packaging information, especially of electronic materials;

2.   There should be training and retraining exercises for special librarians on current skills and trend; and

3.   Parent institutions should provide sponsorship for special librarians so as to acquire knowledge and skill for current improvements.

REFERENCES

Abels, E. (2003). Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century. Retrieved from https://.www.sta.org

Akin J .A. (2008). *Management concept technique and cases*. Ibadan: Julab Publishers Ltd.

Daniel, J .0. (2009). Challenges of providing electronic information resources and books in Nigeria: A Way Out. Paper Presented at the NLA II section held at Ota, Ogun State on 7th May, 2009.

Hornby, A.S. (2000) Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary of Current English, New York: Oxford University Press the Encarta English Dictionary (1999) England: UPL.

Issa, A.O. (2008). *A Beginner's text on Librarianship.* Offa: Wumi Commercial Press,

Madu, E C 85 Marie B. Drisu (2002). *Information Science and Technology for Library Schools in Africa*. Ibadan: Evicoleman Publication.

Marshal, J. E. (2003). Competencies for Special Librarian: Competences for Special Librarian of the 21st Century.