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Article

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) SKILLS FOR HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Amanze Unagha (Ph.D), Oliver Ugocha

Abstract

This paper examines the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills for human resources development in Nigerian university libraries. Information and communication studies are becoming common in Nigerian university libraries and one of the challenges of this phenomenon is the need to provide training in these skills to accommodate modern and latest developments in librarianship. The paper identifies the ICT skills as networking, library software, search tools/engines, programming and software development, security/encryption, and hardware maintenance. The benefits of the training in the ICT skills are discussed. The employees are given the opportunity to grow and develop as employees and individuals, while the library is better prepared to provide efficient services.

Key words: ICT Skills, Human Resources Development, University Libraries, Nigeria

Introduction

The application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to library operations in this 21st century has remained inevitable, incontestable and incontrovertible. That is why university libraries in Nigeria are making frantic efforts to computerize their operations. In the present climate of increasing technology, decreasing budgets and overworked staff, university libraries will have to re-evaluate the programmes and services offered to both their patrons and staff (Gerrard, 2000). And because information and communication technologies are becoming common in Nigerian universities libraries, one of the challenges of this phenomenon, according to Nzotta (1984), is the need to provide training in new skills to accommodate modern and latest developments in librarianship. Librarians need all the necessary skills to provide assistance when something goes wrong with sophisticated information technology

equipment. The most important quality of any librarian is strong public-service orientation, and the willingness to get his hands dirty to resolve problems. For this orientation to translate to meeting users' service demands, it should be followed by the realization that training and development programmes are needed to keep skills current. These will enable librarians to have the right knowledge and skills needed to deliver user focused services in the most efficient and effective way.

Staff training and development programmes may not be seen as high priority for Nigerian university library administration, considering the climate of decreasing funds, yet the environment of increasing technological innovations only makes the commitment of staff training and development programmes all the more critical. In order for staff to deal effectively and proficiently with this newer approach, they must be provided with the opportunities to update and improve their skills. This article explores some of the issues related to staff training and development in Nigerian university libraries, including the benefits of such training and programmes to the libraries and staff in relation to ICT skills.

Conceptual framework

Training is a short-term process of utilizing a systematic and organized procedure by which non-managerial personnel learn technical knowledge and skills for a definite process (Chandan, 2000). According to Ajidahun (2007), the weakness of this definition is that training is limited to the non-managerial personnel, whereas human resource development entails both the managerial and non-managerial staff that need a level of training in the new areas of the practice of their profession. In all organizations or fields of human endeavour, training is the process of learning a particular skill in the improvement of an individual's job or profession.

An established comprehensive definition of staff development that is still widely referred to today was given by Conroy (1978), in which she writes that:

Staff development is intended to strengthen the capability of an organization to perform the mission more effectively and more efficiently by encouraging and providing for the growth of its human resources. Staff development affirms the ability of the individual and the organization to grow and for each to contribute to the growth of the other. Staff development makes for most of the present potential and prepares the individual and organization for the future.

The distinction between the above definition is that staff training is an individualized approach to personal and professional development and may be the responsibility of the individual while staff development focuses on the improvement of both the individual and the library. Staff development programmes focus on the staff component, but they are closely coordinated with organizational goals and current needs (Rosenberg and Sullivan, 1983).

The Technology Skills for Nigerian University Library Staff

All libraries should have some form of staff training and development programme in place. The variety of such programmes can be spread across a spectrum from highly structured and formal staff training programmes complete with full time staff training to very casual, informal training. The point is that there is no one right path to successful staff development. The key is that the libraries recognize the benefits of such training programmes in whatever form they take. Their commonality is that they help nurture a staff so that he will be more productive, more efficient and more effective. Staff training and development programmes, in their various formats must be seen as an investment in the most important resource of the library, the staff. According to Kasperek (2003), computer technologies are becoming a part of many library jobs and the role of technology will expand. When technology will become standard or adopted by a particular institution or library is anybody's guess, but what is certain is that developing good technology skills is essential for the Nigerian university librarians of the future. Therefore training in these areas of ICT is advocated.

Networking: Access to interconnected networks makes the individual independent from the source of the information in terms both of geographic location and time. Acceptance of the Internet and use of the World Wide Web to access it have provided a university acknowledged access strategy. As Nigerian university libraries embrace this internet revolution, there is need for the staff to be trained in the mastery of the use of the technology for efficient service delivery. There should be a cooperative programme between university Libraries and computing centres or Cyber Cafes for practical training of library staff on the use of the Internet. This skill is necessary because Nigerian university libraries should be able to use networks to support distance education and international research collaboration which are the order of the day in developed countries.

Library software: Automation or computerization of library operations is becoming common place in Nigerian university libraries and the most important requirement for automation is the software. Today there are many library software packages in the market from which Nigerian university libraries can select. These software have different menu applications to library operations. There is therefore, the need for staff training in this regard. Staff needs to learn how these software programmes work and therefore demonstrate the ability to use them and offer on-line remote services to the patrons and the library staff. The training should be in form of instruction sessions with software vendors to teach staff on their use.

Search tools/engines: Sophisticated new search tools and engines are now being developed and made available widely via network providers and commercial vendors. Search tools such as Mosaic, Netscape, opera, Mozilla, Windows Explorer, Atavista, Devilfinder are becoming standard network access tools. For computerization of Nigerian university libraries to take root and be sustained, staff should be trained to have knowledge of these search tools and how they can be applied to library operations to provide efficient and effective services to their patrons.

Programming and Software Development: Increasingly, information providers are recognizing the need to build their own software. There are the MARC II communication format for bibliographic description, Z39.50 for search commands, Z39.61 and Z39.63 for interlibrary loan transactions, HTML hypertext markup language to create hypertext links within and among documents, SGML standard markup language for full text layout, display and printing (Eaton, 1996). Nigerian university libraries can send their staff to software developers and programmers to learn this skill. This has become necessary because of dwindling budget. With the training, which may not be as costly as purchasing a software that may not be compatible with the library operations, the staff will apply their acquired skills to develop software and create personalized information systems. This knowledge will help them fast track the retrospective conversion of library materials, which has been the bane of full automation in Nigerian university libraries. Knowledge of programming languages and software development will also help staff design home pages that provide logical interface between the users and their resources. They can load indexing and abstracting databases and full text and make them available on campus network or over the Internet.

Security/encryption technologies:

Because of increased virus invasion and the consequent damage of vital data and information, organizations, including libraries are making frantic efforts in securing their data and information. Since computerization has come to stay in Nigerian university libraries, certain security/encryption measures must be taken. Security systems are provided in libraries to validate users and to determine that they are authorized to use certain services. There is therefore, the need to train staff in the knowledge and use of certain security/encryption technologies in library environment.

Hardware Maintenance: Training in the maintenance of the technology hardware cannot be emphasized. It saves the library the additional cost of hiring outsiders to fix the hardware problems.

Benefits of Staff Training and Development

Training is an integral part of a vocation or career development and it is fast becoming a global and pervasive phenomenon in any establishment. The absence of which spells doom for such an institution and the presence of which determines the success of any enterprise (Ajidahun, 2007). Yesufu (2000) agrees that training of personnel enhances productivity. It improves job performance and therefore, promotes management efficiency. Creth (1986) identifies the benefits of staff development programmes in libraries as increase of knowledge, the acquisition of skills, as well as the development of confidence and good judgment.

To Casteleyn (1981), the benefits of staff training and development can be for the employee, for the library and for the library patrons. The employee receives greater job satisfaction, greater opportunity, as well as personal development. The library benefits by;

- Having skilled and motivated workforce,
- Less turnover rate of employees, and
- This leads to a better reputation for the library as a whole.

Because of all these factors, library patrons also win at the end because they are provided with better customer services. Staff development is a "win-win" situation for the library, its employees, as well as its users. The employees are given the opportunity to grow and develop as employees and individuals, while the library is

better prepared to provide efficient service thus better performing its goals and mission, and all these lead to improved service to the library patrons.

The Success of Such Technology Skills

Although staff training and development programmes should be a continuous exercise, they must also be encouraged at the point of need. Just as Nigerian university libraries are catching the computerization fever, there is no better time to have staff training and development programmes in this area than now. In order for development programmes to have any impact, they must be delivered when the need arises. As Casteleyn (1981) writes, "it is important to remember that the ultimate objective must be to maintain a library service of a reasonable high standard and constantly to try to improve that standard."

Administrative support is another element that is needed in order to ensure the success of a library's staff training and development programme. It is important that the entire organization-particularly the administration department - buys into the library's staff development goals and commits to this effort (Shaughnessey, 1988). Because administration ultimately decides the fate of any staff development programme (through the library's budget), this important group must be aware of all the possible benefits of incorporating such a staff development programme. It is suggested that a training attitude or mentality must be nurtured and developed until training is acknowledged as being beneficial to the library and the staff. Only when the staff development programme is seen as a valuable and essential component of the library by administration, will the programme be a success.

In Nigeria, with budget cutbacks, staff training and development programmes may not be seen as a high priority when compared with library services, yet users want quality service. Even though the cost of technology training is high, Nigerian university libraries must provide technology training because the cost of not providing this type of training far outweighs the cost of training. Low (1991) writes that without training, existing hardware and software may be underutilized, countless staff hours may be devoted to cleaning up errors caused by lack of proper training, staff may become unproductive, or they may feel uneasy and under stress due to lack of sufficient training. Staff development should be viewed as nurturing and enhancing the best resource your library has. While the costs of an effective staff development programme

can be fairly high, it is useful to view them as an investment in the library organization rather than as being another additional expense.

Another success element of such training and development programme is the evaluation. Evaluation is a vital component of any staff development programme that should be done in order to gather, organize and analyze information regarding such programmes in the library. It forms the basis for future planning, determines the extent a programme is or is not achieving of its goals or objectives, identifies programme strength and weakness, determines the costs and benefits of programmes, justifies the investment and answers demands for accountability, and produces documentation that can be shared with others (Conroy, 1978). The results of the evaluation process must be taken into consideration and put into action. Evaluation format may be in form of surveys, questionnaire, interview or focus group, depending on cost, time and type of programme.

Conclusion

The implementation of staff training and development programmes in Nigerian university libraries must be seen as a necessity and not a luxury, as an investment, not an expense. The information explosion, occasioned by emerging technologies, has forced a high learning curve for library employees. Nigerian university library administrators must recognize the struggle that their employees experience on a daily basis. The author joins Krisoff (1998), argues that the consequence of poor training will be that our users will lose confidence in librarians as information professionals. They will think that librarians have joined the ranks of others that have caved in under the weight of emerging technologies, and they will see libraries as another institution that is threatened with extinction, even as new technologies emerge in information provision. Therefore, as innovations continue to spring up technology-wise for the provision of information, it reinforces the essential need for the implementation of staff development programmes in Nigerian university libraries. Training and development programmes ultimately strengthen both the individual staff and the library.

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