

Benefits Of Empowering Academic Librarians For Professional Excellence In A Digital Library Environment

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Abstract

The importance and relevance of empowering librarians, especially those serving the very curious, articulate and time conscious academics, to serve with great discretion, promptness and precision necessitated the debut of this paper. At this period of information glut vis-à-vis digital technology emergence, prompt and satisfactory services delivery in academic libraries could only come from a librarian who is empowered. This paper describes briefly the position of academic librarians in an era of digital library environment, which calls for special skills and competencies. It also examines the conceptual framework of the study and the roles expected of the emerging digital librarians, which include educating users on digital information handling, cataloguing and classification of digital documents. Benefits of empowering academic librarians are equally discussed. Such benefits include the enhancement and utilization of the librarians' personal initiatives, motivating librarians, and enhancing user services. The paper examines also the barriers to effective empowering of academic librarians like the administrations' desire to maintain precedents, lack of substantial funding, and utter neglect of academic library services to academic communities. Strategies for effective empowering of the librarians are as well examined. They include the creation and maintenance of a congenial organizational climate and the sending of the academic librarians for coaching and further studies.

Introduction

In the present competitive world of business, the ability to withstand the centripetal and centrifugal forces of any organization must rest on the need to recognize and manage changes before they take control. In doing this, the labour force has to be properly managed and developed in such a classical manner that it will be able to turn any threatening change into a formidable opportunity for growth. In librarianship, the forces of digital technology are radically transforming the role of librarians and their modus operandi. Digital technology provides the critical elements for the conversion of analogue system of communication of human knowledge and experiences into digital form. When these collections of knowledge and experiences are stored electronically in a library, we

have what is known as digital library. According to Yerkey and Jorgensin (1996), “digital libraries are electronic libraries in which large numbers of geographically distributed users can access the contents of large and diverse repositories of electronic objects-networked texts, images, maps, sounds, videos, catalogues of merchandise, scientific, business and government data sets”. They also include hypertext, hypermedia and multimedia compositions. As an in-thing now, digital technology in libraries poses some challenges to libraries and librarians. With unique characteristics, it ushered in information glut that calls for new skills in information creation and management. This demand by the technology is a very overwhelming task that equally calls for new and critical ways of moving librarians forward. It is a massive task that no one can hope to carry through without the full co-operation and enthusiasm of librarians at all levels, especially in academic libraries, where the rapidity and the quick succession in which new technologies and learning emerged casting a lot of wonder, aspersions and doubts among many libraries.

If librarians are to perform their duties creditably and ensure professional excellence in a digital age, there should be a well-intentioned, systematic and successful effort to empower them. Empowering librarians is akin to giving them the power or an authority to act in a certain capacity. It is a way of developing them through judicious application of knowledge, allowance of job control, and effective participation in library activities. Empowerment helps to make requisite use of the existing staff for an enhanced professional excellence. In digital academic libraries, professional excellence is inestimable and indispensable. This is partly because it aids proficient creation and management of information and partly because it enhances appropriate services delivery to an ever increasing number of clientele.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to examine the benefits of empowering librarians for professional excellence in a digital library environment and to discuss some strategies for doing that. In doing these, the paper sets out to define the key concepts, examine librarians’ role in a digital environment, look at the benefits, the hindrances, and strategies for empowering librarians, and it ended up with a summary.

Definition of terms

The concept of empowerment has attracted wide varieties of definitions from experts in different fields of human learning. Some define it from economic point of view, while others approach it from historical, social and/or political standpoint. That the term ‘empowerment’ is so widely used today in progressive management circles suggests not just manipulative intent but an awareness that even in periods of deep recession, the boundaries of workplace control continue to be challenged by workers striving to attain a measure of power, security and dignity (Rinehart, 1999).

Empowering is the act of helping people to have good knowledge and control of issues that affect their lives. It means the provision of enablement to help individuals take charge of their activities without many references to their higher colleagues. Rinehart is of the opinion that the essence of empowering workers is for them to capture through their struggle an enhanced power and dignity. However, it is pertinent to note that underpowered worker tend to be resentful, unmotivated, and unproductive. Empowering therefore, promotes shared responsibility between workers and library managers, creates a working community with a positive organizational culture that leverage an atmosphere of productivity, mutual trust and respect.

This does not, however, mean being independent, neither does it mean an invitation to an unbridled freedom, nor a call to disorderliness. Rather, it is the choices

and applications of a wide range of issues that satisfy and shape human experiences. Such issues include delegation of authority, role definition, availability of resources, provision of feedback, recognition of individual's contributions, and the giving of opportunities for growth and learning. It actually has to do with the giving of encouragements, powers or authority to the people by the management to be able to act in a certain capacity. According to Smith (1996) empowering people is an act of encouraging them to become more involved in the decisions and activities that affect their jobs. She further stated that empowering ranges:

- From simply encouraging people to play a more active role in their work.
- Through involving them in taking responsibility for improving the way that things are done.
- To enabling them to make more and bigger decisions without having to refer to someone more senior.

When individuals are trained, or being prepared for greater skills acquisition, or allowed to have deeper participation in all that concerns their being, they are being empowered. Spreitzer (1995) observed that empowering people has to do with granting them the freedom to express themselves, more self-determination, meaning, competence and impact regarding their role in a society or work place. In his discussion on empowerment, McShane (2004) stated that when one is empowered he experiences freedom, independence and discretion over his activities, cares about what he does and believes that what he does is important. Empowering is the act of allowing individuals to become more responsive to their needs, problems, and opportunities by directly applying their knowledge. It increases their ability to bring about positive change.

Digital library is an emerging area which defies a precise transition definition. On many occasions, it has been used interchangeably to mean electronic library, virtual, and paperless library. However, Sahu (2008) quoted Waters as having identified five elements common to all definitions of digital library:

- The digital library is not a single entity.
- The digital library requires technology to link the resources.
- Linkage between digital libraries and information service to users.
- Universal access to digital libraries is a goal.
- Digital library collections are not restricted to document surrogate but include digital artifacts that have no printed documents.

Defining digital library, Oppenheim and Smithson (1997: 97) observed that it is an information service in which all the information resources are available in computer processing form and the functions of acquisition, storage, retrieval, access and display are carried out through the use of digital technology. It is a library in which a significant proportion of the resources are available in machine readable format (Online Dictionary of library and information science n.d.). In other words, resources of a digital library are electronically stored and accessed universally using digital technologies. According to Panitch and Michalak (2007) digital library refers to a collection of analog materials largely, although not exclusively, from the library's own holdings, that have been converted to digital form and made available online, plus the technologies and services that support those collection.

Professional excellence results where members of a professional body project themselves by exhibiting a high level of skills and competencies in their services to clientele. This is to satisfy their clientele, enhance societal acceptance and maintain a

visionary body that is driven by altruistic services rather than profit motive. Professionalism in library and information science has to do with the whole gamut of the operations within a library workforce intent on uplifting the relationship of the librarians with the library management, colleagues, team spirit, staff development, etc. (Ezeani, Eke, & Ugwu, 2012).

Academic librarians are therefore said to be empowered in a digital library environment when they are capable of utilizing digital technology to enhance academic services and delivery; when they begin to play a distinctive and dynamic role in easy accessing of computer-held digital information like abstracts, indexes, full-text databases, sound and video recording in the digital format. It obtains when the librarians succinctly believe that the library management communicates to them an open and clear direction for the future, that they are working in alignment with the chief executive and library board, that the library cares about them, and that their performance reviews are fair and helpful. This means they must be properly trained and put through so that they can conveniently handle both the ever emerging technologies and staggering number of clientele in academic libraries. The advent of Internet vis-à-vis the inquisitiveness of the library clientele to go digital, have prompted the need for librarians to be more proactive in information handling dynamics, and sophisticated in their services (Ugwuanyi & Ugwuanyi, 2011).

Librarians' role in a digital library environment

The creation and establishment of digital libraries some decades ago have added more fillip and instituted a plethora of challenges and opportunities to the operational efficiency demanded of the modern time digital academic librarians. A digital library is one that provides access to all the types of digital information collections while a digital librarian is one who is versed in the knowledge and utilization of emerging information and communication technologies to process digital information. With the multiplicity of information technologies to process and disseminate information, users of the digital library information resources have risen and quadrupled the responsibilities of the academic librarians. They are, therefore, faced with new roles and greater challenges of being able to master the processes involved in the creation, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information in digital format. They are, as well, being called upon to keep pace with the urgency of services required by their clientele, especially when empowered to operate on their own. The roles of academic librarians in a growing digital library environment are, *Repository Development, Information Consultancy, and User Education*.

Digital librarians engage in repository development and pay less attention to the traditional means of managing information. They shift emphasis to collaborating with computer and other information scientists in designing and maintaining information access systems. They organize and develop digital library repositories, interfaces and networks. In addition, digital librarians act as information consultants and managers of democratic access to information. They provide scholars with efficient and intelligent access to the world's vast array of knowledge. Their expertise in accessing information from and navigating through all the digital libraries affords them the laudable opportunity of being consultants. Digital librarians also educate users on the processes of handling information and management of democratic access to information. Only few of today's library users are effective and efficient in the use of search engines and other user

interfaces in navigating the web. This makes user education in academic libraries a very imperative and continuing process in the future of digital libraries.

Discussing the role of digital librarians, Sreennivasulu (2000, 13) stated that they are required to:

- Manage the digital libraries;
- Organize digital knowledge and information;
- Disseminate digital information from the computer-held digital information;
- Provide digital reference services and electronic information services;
- Provide knowledge mining from the emerging knowledge warehouses;
- Handle the tasks of massive digitization, digital storage process, and digital preservation;
- Provide universal access retrieval of digital knowledge, ultimately access to all;
- Catalogue and classify digital documents and digital knowledge.

Benefits of empowering librarians

In this age of information society and knowledge economy, empowering librarians in their respective work sectors is indispensable. Empowering them is equal to developing, appreciating, and moving them forward using all relevant methods. When empowered, many useful dividends accrue to the librarians, the clientele, the management, and the libraries as organizations. From the minds of the empowered and creative librarians, come the innovative programmes that will enable libraries to avoid future marginalization or obsolescence (Zaid & Oyelude, 2012). These include;

Enhancement of personal initiative:

Empowering librarians gives them a greater measure of autonomy and active participation in the administration of libraries wherein they are working. They consequently become enabled, while carrying out their functions to stand on their own with minimal supervision and control from the authority. An empowered librarian is always desirous of reaching out to clientele to find out their needs and help in making information and knowledge available to them with ease. In this instance, empowering not only makes workers independent thinkers but people who do whatever they feel right and at the time they consider it appropriate so as to meet users' demands and achieve their satisfaction. They do not wait for orders from above. Hence, users of libraries get swift and priority attention.

Motivation:

Empowerment also motivates library workers and heightens organizational performance. Motivation, which includes the acceptance and recognition of workers' worth, performance, and training, is an aspect of empowerment that enables performance to rise under this new dispensation of digital technology. Much of what is done in the library to access information depends extensively on librarians. When empowered through motivation, they develop greater sense of commitment that props up productivity. They would have control over their job and be able to seek and navigate for information among many digital libraries existing on the Internet. Motivation, according to Ugwuanyi (2011), has to do with those psychological processes that cause in a person the arousal, direction, and persistence of actions that are goal-oriented. Without motivation, poor knowledge of digital technology handling, poor services delivery and low-worker morale will result. Appreciating librarians' efforts in this direction by

empowering them will not only enhance worker's productivity and commitment but render them more disposed to help in achieving the over- all institutional objectives.

Enhancement of customer services:

Another benefit that accrues from empowering librarians is an enhancement of customer services. Considering the impact of empowerment on the improvement of customer services, many writers solely define it along that line. Kreitner, Kinicki and Buelens (2002) define empowerment to mean granting supervisors or workers permission to give customers priority over other issues in the operation. To Liden and Arad (1996), it is the sharing of varying degrees of power with lower level employees to better serve the customers. In other words, when librarians are empowered, library clientele stand to be better served. Once the librarians learn to up load and down load information from the Net, they will share the knowledge with the clientele through qualitative service. Empowering librarians brings about value added services (VAS) to all library users. Any library that does not empower its workers stands to lose customers. Moreover, customers are always right, especially now when users are easily impatient or irritated with any little delay in information retrieval or processing. Empowerment makes librarians very knowledgeable and ever ready to take swift decisions that pertain to service delivery.

Job satisfaction of librarians:

Job satisfaction or dissatisfaction among library workers is a resultant effect of the administration's readiness or otherwise to empower workers. The level of satisfaction depends on the extent they are being empowered. The job satisfaction of a librarian reflects the assessment of his perceived work environment, emotional experiences, and job characteristics. Where these are seen to be positive, the library administration is empowering its workers but where otherwise, high and rigid concentration of power obtains. Satisfied librarians have a favourable evaluation of their job based on their observations and appreciation of the locus of job control and extent of delegation of authority. When satisfied as a result of empowerment, workers do everything within their ability to salvage libraries from having disgruntled users. They happily will match the accelerated rate of technological and information growth with their personal development to be ICT compliant and information literate. They care about their work and believe that what they do is important (McShane, 2004).

Self efficacy: Empowerment gives workers the feelings of self-efficacy. This depicts that they are confident about their ability, especially following the training received to empower them. During training, librarians are taught how to administer libraries, digitization processes and other things that aid knowledge creation and management. Usually, what they are taught are scarcely utilized especially when they are away from the corridors of authority. When given a measure of autonomy, work control and decision latitude, they begin to explore and apply them for solutions, using self-directed knowledge. Empowerment emphasizes the ability of individuals and groups to engage with shape and benefit from professional and other development processes in libraries (UNDP, 2010).

Conflict reduction: Empowerment also helps to reduce conflict and frictions between the employees and the library management. Empowerment equips librarians and makes all to be more active and involved in issues that help to upgrade the operational efficiency of libraries. When involved in the control and decision making, there will be

less room for sabotage. Each will assiduously play his role. This is vital at a time when digital technology has brought about information explosion and profuse scholarly publications, whose retrieval for use must be swiftly handled (Edem and Lawal, 1996). Empowerment helps librarians to act fast for clientele who are looking for information, for teaching and learning, business transactions, etc. In all these, the management is saved from the problem of constant consultations that could endanger relationships. With this, services to the clientele are delivered on time.

In their own assessment of the vitality of empowerment in libraries, Ifidon and Ifidon (2007) stated that it:

- Enables the staff to make a more effective contribution to the library's total efforts in its service mission.
- Makes the individual look for satisfaction that goes beyond economic; that is for self-pride, self-respect, and achievement.
- Prepares the staff for the challenge of complex modern technology which requires an integration of activities and persons of diverse and specialized competence.
- Enables the library workers to develop a life of their own outside the library.
- Makes the staff receptive to change and innovation rather than resistant to them.
- Creates a climate where the dignity of employees as human beings, not just as factors contributing to the library efficiently is respected; and
- Prepares the individual for a new different and higher responsibility

Strategies for empowering librarians

Since empowerment has to do with the development and equipment of workers to skillfully and courageously face their future careers with utmost zeal and confidence, there must be ways and means of achieving that. These ways and means are known as strategies for empowering. Some of them are examined here under.

Adequate Information

One of such strategies is keeping librarians adequately informed. Nothing deforms a worker more than keeping him in the dark, especially as it concerns his profession or plans for career progression. Today more than before, information has become the pivotal force for social and economic development, and when appropriately delivered to workers becomes empowering (Wang, 1999). In other words, timely provision of requisite information to librarians is akin to helping them develop self-confidence and independence. The information being passed on to them enables them learn to make appropriate and quick decisions that affect their services, their knowledge, and their relationship with their clientele. When, for instance, the administrators take a new decision, it has to be circulated so that the librarians concerned would be aware of it. To empower librarians, useful and usable information for their uplift and growth on the job is indispensable. The importance of giving out information to workers as a source of empowerment has been supported by Smith (1996) with the following statements.

It confirms that workers are viewed as partners in problem-solving and decision making. It enables people to contribute to continuous improvement; stirs up competition and managers would rather see

performance figures improve than deteriorate; spurs workers to ask questions and prompts the collection of more information; helps people to shift responsibility to the front line and enhances communications between different departments' teams or individuals.

Organizational climate

Another method of empowering is the creation and maintenance of a congenial organizational climate. For empowerment processes to thrive well in libraries, the administrators should try as much as possible to initiate and establish a work atmosphere where workers' worth is recognized and respected. This allows cordial relationships that enthrone experimentation, risk-taking, and capacity building. To properly empower librarians, there must be a good working relationship that proceeds from the administrators' maintenance of unconditional positive regard among the entire staff. This depicts that they maintain unreserved acceptance of the individuals without any evaluation. The library managers have to be very empathic since this would make librarians feel that they are being cared for. Such attitudes increase the morale base of librarians who become ready to get deeply involved in the programme of activities of libraries and willing to help achieve them. In her discourse on empowerment, Smith (1996) maintained that congenial organizational relationships empower workers because they encourage regular and open communication, and ensure that everyone's suggestions are listened to and considered; they also allow people to admit any lack of expertise.

Training

Another way of getting librarians empowered is sending them for further learning. The relationship between human capital and economic growth is highly conditioned by the quality and distribution of education in the labour force (The World Bank, 2008). Since the essence of empowering librarians is to prepare them for the assumption of higher positions and for qualitative performance, library administrators must endeavour to send their workers to acquire new and relevant competencies that suit their future callings. Such competencies include personnel management skills, web linking and publishing, data base management skills, meta data creation of library resources, etc. General management of library resources must equally be given to the librarians being empowered. When properly put in place, staff training aids capacity building (Nwalo and Oguniyi, 2012). After many of the trainings, workshops, conferences, seminars etc., librarians will become more fitting and versatile to every area of librarianship. For proper empowerment in this digital era, librarians must as well have good skills in problem-solving, decision-making and information handling. Today's quality of life as well as prospects for social change and economic development depends increasingly upon information and its exploitation (Sahu, 2008)

Feedback

Other strategy for empowering librarians is the readiness of the library managers to tell librarians what they know and feel about their individual and collective performance or behaviour. This is called feedback. Feedback according to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1993) is information about the results of a set of actions passed back to the person or machine in charge so that changes can be made if necessary. For professional growth and development, librarians need to receive timely and frequent feedback from their leaders on the extent to which they are achieving a set objective or

steadily advancing towards them. As an empowering strategy, feedback provides information that helps correct performance errors. Experts (Kreitner, Kinicki and Buelens, 2002; Walderse and Luthans, 1994) state that feedback serves two major functions for those who receive it. One is instructional while the other is motivational. When a librarian understands what is expected from him and clearly sees the road map to his career success through feedback, he gets invigorated and empowered. For feedback to actually perform its empowering and motivating functions, it has to be credible, frequent, specific and timely. Feedback leverages the librarians' talents, provides new skills and knowledge to allow him perform his job better.

Barriers to full-scale empowerment

In spite of the benefits that are derivable from empowering librarians, many library administrators have not hearkened to the clarion calls for empowering workers in different libraries, organizations and other areas of human endeavour. Many reasons have been advanced for this low level interest on the part of library managers. Some of the reasons are given and discussed below.

Maintenance of status quo

One of such reasons is the strong desire to maintain precedent or the tradition of the libraries. Those managers who are interested in maintaining the statues quo dread launching into a newly found policy without knowing what the consequences would be. They do not trust that humans could be reliable and trusted. Some of the library managers do not believe or trust that empowered librarians would continue to accept their "supremacy or lordship". In terms of empowering their workers, they therefore, prefer to remain undecided and enigmatic. They really prefer to work with established order of procedures to charting new and risky policies that could jeopardize their authority. Even though some may get burned at times while trusting and empowering people but most times they do not (Verburg, 2000). Library managers ought to realize that empowerment with all its benefits requires corporate leaders who trust employees and are willing to take the risks that empowerment creates.

Lack of substantial funding

Lack of substantial funding is another barrier to full-scale and successful empowering of librarians. This factor has often been stated because empowerment has to do with the training of workers and reactivating their ingenuity and making them to be greater achievers. In all these, money is required for sending them for training, workshops, seminars, conferences etc. Many managers see low funding in academic libraries as the greatest handicap to empowerment, especially in places like Africa where politicians are more interested in money laundering than the creation, collection, dissemination, and development of information and knowledge base. If achievements are to be recognized and rewarded in terms of gifts or promotions, fund must be available as leverage. However, fund is not everything. Rather, what is ultimately important empowering is the managerial understanding, will and commitment to trusting, working and improving the librarians under them (Ugwuanyi and Ugwuanyi, 2011).

Reluctance

Moreover, many librarians do not heartily support their empowerment. They dread being overloaded with work assignments by the management under the guise of empowering them. The employees/librarians used to be afraid of acquiring added responsibilities that may overstretch them to a breaking point. They fear the greater pressures and higher accountability to be placed on them as a result of higher decision-making and executive processes shifted to them by way of empowerment.

Understanding

Another primary factor deterring the full-scale empowerment of academic librarians is the low understanding of the means and ways of its operation by both the management and the employees. While some managers may simply sit down and begin to wish their employees empowered, employees also may be wishing to be empowered without trying to earn the trust, respect and confidence of their managers through hard work and obedience. Wishes were never horses. Moreover, an individual's level of expertise, experience and trust, to a great extent, determines the level of empowerment. McIntire (2011) observed that empowerment is the act of identifying the tasks on which an employee is trusted to act independently versus those tasks on which the employee must get input or approval before proceeding. It entails identifying how much responsibility and authority an individual can effectively handle without becoming over-burdened, distressed or looked after. As such, McIntire (2011; 1) drew its analogy thus:

The concept of employee empowerment is analogous to the process of sending power through a light bulb. If 100 watts of power is sent through 10-watt bulb, the bulb will blow up. If 10 watts of power is sent through a 100-watt bulb, the bulb will glow dimly and not achieve its full capacity.

Neglect of crucial services

Apart from the above factors, utter neglect of the crucial services of libraries to the socio-political and economic development of nations is an inhibitor to empowering librarians. Some academic library administrators' think that since libraries are neither revenue-generating nor personal enterprise that the business of empowering librarians is not worth its troubles. They rarely appreciate that with the diversity of tools and techniques in digital libraries, new skills through empowerment must be acquired for academic librarians to remain relevant (Omekwu, 2010). This type of thinking goes against the global call for capacity building through empowering every stratum of humanity. Empowerment in its ramifications has been linked to many development outcomes (UNDP, 2010). Self centred approach to empowering based on poor reasoning is against human development for greater productivity, inclusive participation in decision making, implementation and evaluation. The receptive mind of library managers is indispensable for successfully empowering of librarians for their tasks.

Conclusion

Wherever there is a well-functioning academic library organization, worker empowerment is there. Empowerment is the act of delegating authority from library administrators to other workers based on their capabilities. This is done to enhance the overall control of the systems, improve workers satisfaction, increase and consolidate the satisfaction of library users.

Since the digital library environment is a recent creation, especially in places like Africa, it becomes pertinent that academic librarians should be given the necessary empowerment to be able to demonstrate and maintain professional excellence on their job. This is vital considering the volumes of information and the strength of users that make use of academic libraries, and the urgency of materials. Digital library environment, which works electronically using digitized materials of analog, poses some challenges that require new training, support and acceptance from the library authorities. For librarians to master the environment and improve on their performance, the academic library administrators have to help librarians develop their talents, skills and decision making competencies. These are what will help them to serve their organizations diligently and to the best of their abilities.

All the barriers that impinge on the librarians and deter them from active participation and ability to give out discretionary vision, energy and extra effort needed to invest in work have to be tackled promptly. In empowering librarians, library managers have to remove those impediments to practising and acting out empowerment behaviour; whether they relate to time factor, effective coaching and training, access to meetings and teams, financial resources and support from other staff members. According to Omekwu (2010:2) knowledge professionals must rethink their methodologies in terms of their relevance and responsiveness to the evolutionary trends of an increasingly digitized library environment.

Empowering librarians in a digital academic library environment sounds easier than it is. Empowerment requires a high attitudinal change on the part of the managers and the employees. Total cultural reversals involving tolerance, diligent planning, articulate and stringent implementation are called into play. It involves trust, openness, and authorization, which are sometimes abused to the chagrin and detriment of the academic library administrators.

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