

NEW CHALLENGES FOR INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS IN THE PRESENT INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ERA

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of today's world, requires the society around the globe to race against the fast changing technology that affects every single part of our daily life. From Offices to stores, from markets to homes. According to Tan Sri Dr. Othman Yeop Abdullah, Executive Chairman of "Perbadanan Pembangunan Multimedia", the number of internet users in Malaysia is expected to have a rise to 6 or 7 million users by the end of year 2000. This shows that in Malaysia alone the trend towards technology happens so fast. Those who are not able to follow the trend will certainly be left behind and of course the challenges of the 21st Century would be bitter to them. Information Professionals have no exception. 6 major areas of challenge ranging from conceptual development, automation, education and training, social awareness, user education and professionalism are highlighted throughout this writing.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2000 is here; "IT rules the world" this could be the phrase to explain how IT plays a very important role presently in shaping the way we live today. Even farmers in the rural areas are talking about it. Some even know how to surf the net. The field of librarianship has no exception. The impact of Information technology in this field has the greatest effects in the scope of library automation. Since the automation of library, librarian's responsibilities and tasks and the skills required to accomplish those responsibilities have changed as well. At the same time, names given to librarian have also changed to compliment the range of tasks they perform today.

Information professionals has gone through many challenges since the French Revolution. During those years, the challenges they faced were much different than the challenges as of the present Information Technology (IT) era. As information professionals, in order to perform very well we must be able to recognize problems and challenges in the present IT era so that early preparation could be done. Much has been discussed among the society nowadays about the Information Technology and how it affects and will affect their routine daily life. Some are happy because IT makes their daily life easier. Some couldn't care less, and there are still lots of the society who feel worry of the outcomes of the effects. They fear of losing jobs that they do for living, because their responsibilities might be replaced by the computer. Do information professionals fear of this too? Well, nothing is impossible. Before we make any

assumption, let's take a close look to whom do we actually refer to when we are talking about information professionals.

THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

There are many names given to information professionals based on their responsibilities and specialization, to name a few; information specialist, database manager, archivist, automation archivist, records manager, records specialist, librarian, bibliographers, abstracters, information analyst any many others. Their tasks range from performing the acquisition, cataloging, circulation and dissemination. The **four main responsibilities** they do are the same since the French Revolution in 1786, only the medium or way to accomplish those tasks evolve from time to time until today and is expected to continuously change over the time when we leap into the next century. According to *Katni Kamsono Kibat*:

Acceptance of library professions by the society, particularly in Southeast Asia can be achieved only after the publics are made to really depend on the profession the way they depend on lawyers, postal services and police. There is a trend in Malaysia especially among the different members of the society to highly depend on newspaper for information.

(Katni Kamsono Kibat, 1990, p. 279).

Well, this is a challenge. How can we change this traditional perception? This would be one of the many challenges in librarianship that needs to be tackled.

THE CHALLENGES

Over time, technology changes, and information professionals are forced to change too whether they are ready or not. There are many possibilities and challenges waiting for them ahead. I believe, if they refuse to meet the challenge, I am sure information professionals will extinct and be part of the history and **yet they themselves are eligible to be archived**. Library associations will have to play an important role to ensure that information professionals are well equipped to wade through the IT era. At this juncture, what a professional association can be and what its limitations are, succinctly expressed by *Shaffer*.

In order to accomplish its fullest mission any profession must have some nationally recognized organization which can and will speak for the profession as a whole. Its authority is derived from its members and to speak with authority it must include a sufficiently large number of members with a common set of standards, a code of ethics, and a sincere desire to improve the profession in its service to the public.

(Shaffer, 1968, p. 27)

To identify the challenges that are expected to be met we have to look on the current trend in librarianship and where it moves towards. *Zaiton Osman*, in her article entitled “**The Role of the Professional Association in Preparing its Members for New Trends**” which was published in the *New Information Professionals – Proceedings of the Singapore-Malaysia Congress of Library and Information Scientists 1986*, specified 6 areas of current trends.

- i) *Conceptual development*
- ii) *Automation*
- iii) *Education and training*
- iv) *Social awareness*
- v) *User education*
- vi) *Professionalism*

(*Zaiton Osman, 1986, p. 34*)

As my own view, the term “**challenge**” in the title does not specifically or naturally refer to the area of automation only, as many people would tend to believe, but also on the areas of Conceptual Development, Education and Training, Social Awareness, User Education and Professionalism. I would try to link those 6 current trends and the four major responsibilities of information professionals, to come out with a solid conclusion on the new challenge for information professionals in the IT era.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Conceptual development which mostly discuss on overall concept of the Information Professionals is such a challenge in the IT era. Wading through the wave of the IT era without knowing the required skills to survive in the era will only lead to **incompetence**. I very much agreeable with *Zaiton Osman*’s paper that she presented at the PPM-LAS Congress in which she pointed out four types of required skills if we want to be eligible to be known as “**information professionals**”. The terms like “information specialists”, “information professionals”, “information handling” or “information science” are not passing fads but represent new demands made on the role of those who want to be called with those terms or names. The conceptual development suggests that the ability to perform a high degree of efficiency and effectiveness on the four main responsibilities of information professionals in the IT era must **coincide** with the terms they want to use *i.e. information professionals etc.*

AUTOMATION

Automation has the greatest impact on the careers in the information field. The trend towards automation is unstoppable. It happens to almost every field of career. In fact the trend affects from offices to homes. Automation has dominated work processes in all

professions including information professionals. According to *Oli Mohamed Abdul Hamid* a Chief Librarian of Universiti Utara Malaysia in his article entitled “**Library Automation: A Case Study of the University Utara Malaysia**” published in a publication of proceedings of the 8th Congress of SEA Librarians (CONSAL), Jakarta, 11-14 June 1990, he quotes:

In general, library automation programs may be approached in a number of ways... to develop an in-house library system totally using internal resources in terms of computer expertise, systems analyst, programmers and library professional staff.... More often librarians resort to the purchase of a ready-made commercially available library package.

(Oli Mohamed Abdul Hamid, 1990, p. 365)

He stresses, the first option is complex and formidable task and requires total commitment and persistence if the project is to succeed. The second option, which most libraries tend to choose, is easy, but it is costly and may not fully meet with the special requirements of the library. The library will also be continuously dependent on the vendors for maintenance and modifications.

As information professionals in the present IT era, the first option should be their real challenge of all. To be able to perform a high degree of effectiveness and efficiency in their responsibilities, information professionals should be able to work with the library systems, or programs that they can work on with practically easily and they know best, or another words, the library systems of their own. For how long, information professionals must rely on foreign expertise or vendors for maintenance? The time has come for information professionals to come out with their own programs or library systems. The information professionals have to equip themselves with appropriate knowledge and expertise in order to be able to invent their own programs and systems and at the same time able to practice in-house maintenance. *Once again*, this is the biggest challenge for them.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Education and training is the most crucial part because it is the ground base in producing a real competent so called information professionals. Information professionals in present IT era must be educated and trained with proper IT knowledge to get them ready with the respective challenge. **Katni Kamsono Kibat**, a former Senior Lecturer, School of Library and Information Science, Mara Institute of Technology, in his article entitled “**The Information Environment and Its Implication on the Education and Training of Information Professionals**” published in the Proceedings of the 8th Congress of SEA Librarian, Jakarta, 11-14 June 1990, emphasizes the importance of having the proper knowledge and capability:

The galaxy of information and its peripheries offers numerous solutions to human problems. The availability of the present day technology if properly exploited has the capacity in enhancing information processing and dissemination required for research, decision making, business and administration. To achieve this, one element is vital, i.e. the human capability required as intermediary to link the information and its users.

(Katni Kamsono Kibat, 1990, p. 278)

Information professional should be ready and willing to absorb multi knowledge incorporating management, administration, automation, technology, mathematics, computer science etc. due to the rapid change in performing their responsibilities in parallel with the present advancement of information technology.

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Our enthusiasm towards information technology tends to make us forget about to whom do we serve our service, that is the society. In fact, they are one of the important reasons for the existence of the library. What is the use of advanced library systems if no one is to use it? What is the use of having virtual library if no one knows how to use it? What to do if “computer phobias” obstruct the society from coming to the library? These questions should lead the information professionals to realize that apart from the challenges against the advancement of technology, the challenges on social awareness is also getting tougher.

Community Information Services” is one of the strategies used by the PPM (Persatuan Pustakawan Malaysia) to encourage reading and the use of libraries among the community in the rural areas. There are also projects undertaken by PPM to encourage reading and the use of libraries among youths in the Federal Territory. There should be many other strategies to tackle this problem. I would say organizing free-basis courses and talks in schools and organizations pertaining to “libraries” and creating good ties between libraries and schools or organizations would be a good idea. They should also be exposed and literate with basic knowledge on how to use library systems to enable them make full use of the services offered.

According to **Zaiton Osman**, the library association of Malaysia has pointed out 6 areas to tackle in preparing its members or the society for the current trends. They are:

- 1) *Organization*
- 2) *Education and training*
- 3) *Publications*
- 4) *Research*
- 5) *Standards and guidelines*
- 6) *International, regional and local contacts*

(Zaiton Osman, 1986, p. 40)

USER EDUCATION

As per above-said, the society is the user of the library. Before they are able to use the library, they have to be educated of how to use it. Information professionals should aware that library services should be user-oriented and it is expected that libraries are going to be an important center of information for the society in the future. Hence, the introduction of user education programs that will enable the society make full use of the library services is very important and should continuously held to cater the rapid advancement of technology of today.

PROFESSIONALISM

In consistent with the term “information professional”, they should always demonstrate their professionalism in performing the 4 major responsibilities. I believe professionalism starts from the information professionals themselves, only then the services of library will be handled professionally. The challenge is how to keep up with the professionalism? This is important because some information professionals they don't realize that in the present IT era, technology advancement moves very fast. They have to keep up with it. They must always ready to get their knowledge updated, explore more hands-on experience, and develop their skills. The success will be manifested in the services that are up to the standard or higher.

CONCLUSION

Now the scenario of information environment and how it affects the information professionals' major responsibilities is clear. Challenges are here, and challenges are waiting ahead. Information professionals have to leap forward as fast as the technology advancement. Not to say only to follow the trends, but always try to contribute to the trends itself. In another words, to follow the trends is good, but to lead the trends is best.

Information professionals should always be ready for any changes over times, and make sure that the term “information professional” continuously suit their responsibilities and remain valid. As far as automation is concerned, to be having a real highly qualified information professionals is very important up to the degree where they are able to design own library systems. Meaning, education and training should be the main core of the process to reach such extent. The society or the users must be informed of what is going on and they must be provided with the skills to make full use of the library services. Yet being professional will confirm that the title or term “**Information Professionals**” given to them is certainly unmistakable. As to the question brought up in the introduction page, whether or not computers will replace information professionals, I personally believe this will never happen. Information centers will always and continuously seeking

for highly qualified information professionals, simply because human touch can never be replaced by computers.

REFERENCES

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