CHALLENGES OF EVALUATING AN INFORMATION SERVICE IN AFRICA

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The objectives of this paper are to:

- Review the current literature concerning performance evaluation of information services.
- Describe methods and approaches applied in performance evaluation.
- Delineate the information services scenario in developing countries especially in Africa.
- Examine the problems experienced by information services in Africa in relation to performance evaluation.

INTRODUCTION.

Over the years, it has been realized that for a library and information system to run efficiently, the manager (librarian or information officer) must know not only how to manage technical services but also, how to provide good leadership to other library information staff members to ensure that library goals are achieved and that users are satisfied.

In support of the above, following reasons have been put forward by Mchombu (1987):

- Increase of public funds. Libraries and other information units have been receiving big amounts of public funds. As a result, the people's representatives would like to see them run efficiently.
- Some of the library and information units are very big and employ hundreds of staff.
- In the information age, information is regarded as a vital resource for national development.

The goal of any library and information system is to provide an organized and accessible collection of information materials sufficient to support the needs of users.

The process of management in a given organization refers to the performance of planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling functions. Controlling isa managerial function which is concerned with evaluating how well the operations are fairing. As a management technique, **performance evaluation** is an important step in controlling the operations of libraries and other information centres.

Performance evaluation is one of the most difficult controlling processes because it is not easy to quantify some of the services provided. For example, it is easy to determine production in the technical services of the library by counting the number of books processed or repaired at a given time. Also in the public services section, we can easily know the number of traffic coming into the library but cannot easily determine how satisfactory the services are to the clients unless more meticulous methods are applied e.g. by devising questionnaires, interviews or observation.

The rising costs of libraries, in particular have become one of the major concerns causing the management of many organizations to require library and information systems to provide evidence to justify their cost using objective data acquired from evaluation of performance.(Van House et al. 1990) as quoted by Kebede (1999).

External funding agencies financing projects, or some aspect of services or resources require progress reports to monitor whether the expenditure is according to the agreed up plan before releasing more funds.

Definition

Evaluation is a systematic measurement of the extent to which a system (for example a library) has achieved its objectives in a certain period of time according to (Mackenzie 1990) as quoted by Kebede (1999).

Evaluation is one of the major functions of a manager in an organization. In management, evaluation is the same as performance appraisal.

Evaluation involves the use of research methods to measure the effectiveness of library and information services and systems. It is also called action research because of its application in assessing the effectiveness of specific programmes or measuring particular skills or approaches (Marshall 1995).

Evaluation should be ongoing and should compare achievements with the objectives of the library and its parent institution. Winkworth (?) recommended that every library should undertake regular evaluation, including occasional formal events.

An evaluation is performed to gather data useful in problem — solving or decision making activities (Lancaster 1988).

Concepts of Library Evaluation

What is to be measured? The measurement of effectiveness is a complex issue particularly in social systems which the library is one. There is a great diversity of approaches, methods and techniques because there are no universally accepted measures, measuring units or methods.(Aslib proceedings No 51, No 7. July/August, 1999)

Generally the following approaches may be used for evaluation:

1. Library input

The level of library input in terms of facilities, organized services, buildings and other resources is taken as a measure of performance. In this concept, the assumption is that the effectiveness of a library is directly proportional to the resources utilized; library

standards and statistics are used to indicate the effectiveness and efficiency of the library and information system.

2. The relationship between pursuit of organizational goals and the required tastes of individuals

The assumption is that the efficient use of library personnel resources maximizes the library performance. Motivational forces, managerial style and other behavioral approaches are considered to maximize the efficiency of staff.

3. Library's interaction with others

The sum of all encounters the user has with the library, including what is and what is not done for the user, is taken as effectiveness of a library (user studies)

4. Impact on society as a whole and it's relation to the outcome of library service
   Successful interaction between the library and its environment indicates the measure of effectiveness (Aslib proceedings, vol. 51 No. 7, July/August 1999)

Library evaluation should begin with the aims and objectives of the library and their relevance to the objectives of its parent organization. The targets implementing the above strategic aim and objectives might include measurable statements such as:

- To provide for 95% of demand for periodicals from the local stock or
- To provide sufficient study places to ensure that 90% of peak demand is met.

Statements such as the above give quantitative terms to make assessment of achievement possible according to Winkworth (?).

In evaluation, one should begin by defining what the system is intended to achieve. These are desired outcomes. The next step is to determine the services (outputs) that are needed to produce the desired outcomes efficiently and economically.

This now leads to identification of inputs necessary to achieve the desired outputs. The criteria used to evaluate these services should predict the extent of attainment of the outcomes that guided their establishment. (Lancaster 1988).

Purpose of evaluation of performance of library and information systems

Evaluation of the performance of the library and other information system is one of the major concerns and intergral part of the manager's job. As observed by Kebede (1999) performance evaluation has become a mainstream exercise in all service giving institutions like libraries in many countries in the world.

Lancaster (1988) has provided the following reasons: -

- To establish a type of" benchmark" to show at what level of performance is the service is now operating.
- To compare the performance of several libraries and services.
- To justify the existence of an information service. This is an analysis of the benefit of the service or an analysis of the relationship between services.
- To identify possible sources of failure or inefficiency in the service with a view to raising the level of performance in future.

The purpose of evaluation literature is well documented. For example, Kebede (1999) has quoted the following authorities on the issue:

- It can be used to assess how well the system meets its objectives or for justification of continuance of service (Bawden 1990:49).
- It can be used to convince the institutions that the library needs the same relative share of institutional budget, even if the budget itself shrinking (Mackenzie 1990: Rodger 1987)
- It may allow a librarian to demonstrate how one's library stands in relation to others (Winkworth 1993).
- It can help the librarian to describe the extent, range and importance of the service being provided and that it is being given efficiently. (Abbot 1994:4).
- It may be used to assess how well. the library and information system contribute to achieving the goals of parent constituents (Pritchard 1996)
- It can diagnose particular problem areas of service or monitor progress towards specification or even compare past, current and desired level of performance (Van House. et al 1990:8)

-   It can identify areas where improvement is needed (Van House. Et, al 1990:3)
-   It can identify what we have yet to accomplish and communicate what we do, how well we do it and what we need to accomplish them (Van house 1995).

Methods of evaluation

There are two main methods for the evaluation of library's effectiveness or the measurements of its performance.

These are the subjective and objective methods.

Subjective methods (or direct methods) involved getting information directly from the user and include questionnaire or interview studies, diary keeping and observational techniques.

Objective methods (or indirect methods) are quantitative and include use of quantifiable objectives. Some sources of indirect data or user behaviour includes, records of circulation, in house use and in inter- library loan requests. (Baker and Lancaster?).

Each of the above methods has both advantages and disadvantages. However, the kinds of the method used depend on the purpose of the exercise and the kind of information expected from the evaluation. (Munge and Otike?)

Major features of library and information systems in developing countries.

A number of authors have indicated that the developing countries have common features that distinguish them from developed countries as follows:

1. Poverty

Poverty eradication is one of the major challenges in Africa today.

Poor economic situations with their population living below standard and low economic development as observed by Adeyami (1991) and quoted by Kebede (1999). As a result, library and information systems in developing countries are in general backward and constrained.

2. Information literacy.

Lack of information literacy in many African countries is partly the cause of underutilization of existing ICTs and information resources (Adam and Wood 1 999).as quoted by Mutula (2004).

3. Digital divide and digital libraries.

Another common feature in Africa is the digital divide which is caused by inadequate infrastructure, high cost of access, inappropriate or weak policy regimes, and inefficiency in the provision of telecommunication network, language divide, and lack of locally created content (Mutula 2004).

The divide creates an environment whereby the disadvantaged groups do not benefit from the advantages of the information age.

4. Poor image

Another obstacle that libraries and information systems face in developing countries is that their role is highly undermined. This is because some institutions do not accord them the same status as other departments.

(Neill 1991) as quoted by Kebede (1999)

5. Cost of information materials

The increasing cost of library and information resources calls for more funding by the parent organization.

It is therefore the responsibility of the manager of the library and information centre to convince the senior management of the parent organization to provide more resources. One way of doing this exercise is through performance data from evaluation.

PROBLEMS OF EVALUATING AN INFORMATION SERVICE IN AFRICA

While performance evaluation is crucial and beneficial to information services in developing countries, it is the least practiced management tool in these countries (Town 1988) as quoted by (Kebede 1999). Although this trend prevails iii the developed countries it is worse in developing countries.

Kebede (1999) observed the following problems in relation to developing countries:

1. Lack of awareness

This problem is common in developing countries because the issue of performance evaluation is little known. Usually no funds are allocated for this process by the management. As a management technique, performance evaluation is an important step in the administration of library and other information systems.

2. Lack of finance

(Rosenberg and Roseroka 2002) as quoted by Mutula (2004) established that the library portion of the total budget of the parent institution was on average of 4 percent compared with the international figure of 6 percent. Even if the importance of performance evaluation is recognized, the cost of implementing the exercise is still an impediment. In developing countries, managers of libraries and information centres do not appreciate the value of performance evaluation.

3. Shortage of qualified staff

In the developing countries, lack of qualified staff especially at the senior management level is not unusual.

4. Lack of evaluation tools

Even when issues of finance and trained personnel are overcome, lack of appropriate tools and methodology persists. The developing countries are unable to use the existing tools and methods because they were designed for a different environment.

CONCLUSION

Library evaluation is an important management function in library and information services. However, the practice is almost non-existent in developing countries especially in Africa due to lack of awareness, poverty, skilled manpower, working tools and appropriate methods. It is now a challenge to the managers and professionals of library and information centres to overcome these problems. For instance, appropriate models and approaches for performance evaluation in African countries can be developed through research in library and information schools at the universities. It is also possible to create awareness to senior managers in libraries and other information centres and also in the parent organizations. Other issues like poverty eradication (economic) and trained

manpower will gradually be addressed as the millennium development goals adopted by the United Nations are realized on or before the year 2015 AD.

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