

Information Management in Academic Libraries - Some Observations

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Abstract

Information management systems include all methods and procedures for collecting and processing information on a particular resource and formatting that data in a manner which is useful for the users. It should meet at least two requirements : to bring the information being looked for and to bring the required information fast. Computers and telecommunication technologies, as information management tools, have brought changes in the organization of information. Different aspects of information management, and future issues are discussed.

Introduction

Information management has been the issue of concern to library & information professionals all over the world. People have adopted various approaches to the information management and there is often controversy and lack of proper orientation.

Information management systems offer a framework within which to accomplish the management of data and information resources in an orderly and systematic fashion. Information management systems include all methods and procedures for collecting and processing information on a particular resource and formatting that data in a manner which is useful for the users.

The libraries are now-a-days more serious towards the management of information resource than in the earlier past. The factor that has greatly influenced the information management are: information explosion, proliferation of documents and extensive use of information handling technologies. The books, journals, newspapers, research reports all have contributed to the flow of information. This has brought some new challenges like economic storage, efficient retrieval and effective use of information. The academic libraries in particular are experiencing difficulties in managing information as they are required to meet the needs of people of varying degree of specialisation and interests.

There is always difficulty in finding the right information. The specific desired information is always somewhere else, it is missing when we need it the most. So there is an obvious need for a well organised retrieval system which will allow us to quickly find exactly what we want. So the information management system should meet at least two requirements:

- to bring the information being looked for
- to bring the required information fast (it has to be a time saving device)

The Challenge

Thus designing a system which can store such a large amount of information and successfully retrieve desired information is a challenge before the library & information professionals. Even if we disregard the financial aspect of transferring, organising and storing relevant information and agree that computer technology is an answer, there are other challenges to be resolved.

Computers might be a part of the answer to our question of how to store and retrieve information but it still remains unclear as to what information we need to store. How do we select what is important to be stored and what is not. This is one of the greatest problems being faced by the academic librarians for the reasons that information need domain of the users are not well defined or loosely defined. What is the boarder line between the necessary information and desired information. We need to have some management tool which will help us not only to organise but also to select information. The selection procedure has to be pre-defined in accordance with our needs. But just realising and defining the problem is half way to its solution. The tremendous increase in literature production calls for rapid improvement in management procedures through the application of new and presently available technology such as computers, networks, imaging etc. Still we have to concentrate on ways to organise the files while reducing its quantity and increasing the usefulness.

Another important tool for information management is the use of information handling technologies mainly computers and telecommunications. It has changed the way we organise information. The computer technology offered an opportunity to reorganise our activities such as the way we store, retrieve and process information. It was left to people to start exploiting this new opportunity. But the academic libraries for one or the other reasons could not capitalise on

this valuable technique to the extent it was expected. But in India few academic libraries have amply used the great capabilities of computers to store, retrieve and process information. The INFLIBNET programme of UGC has motivated the university libraries in particular to start using the computer technology for the management of bibliographic information. It also helped with reshaping the methodological requirements for automated management of information resources. The key to the information management is the document management. The document management had its origin in library concerned with the effective storage, retrieval and utilization of document in organisations. The primary goal of document management is to facilitate access to documents, improve its use and allow sharing of other sources of information.

Data management and electronic data processing are other important aspects of information management. There are related terminology used such as database management or data administration. The management of information as a resource through electronic data processing, communications have received lot of impetus in libraries. The strategic objective for the information management function have shifted away from an exclusive focus on physical control of document and the supporting technologies, towards treating information itself as one of library's key assets. This shift has implied applying resource management techniques like planning, costing, budgeting and evaluating the information resources of the library. Once adopted, this approach has brought an important change to the way information was perceived within the context of available organisational resources of the library. There is of course controversy and agreement over the similarities and differences between information and other resources. The information like other resources is acquired at a cost, it possesses values, its consumption can be expensed or capitalised, accounting techniques are applicable, it has a life cycle and it could be processed. The main differences however are that information is expandable, compressible, substitutable and transportable.

If we look to the evolution of information management in libraries, it has developed through four stages. Stage one is the physical control of information. It was mainly concerned with document management, records/report management, correspondance and mail management. The basic technologies used were paper, typewriter, telephone, file cabinets, tabulating machine and microfilm. A fragmented and loosely coordinated management function was carried out by supervisory and lower middle

managers. The main emphasis was to increase procedural efficiency and physical control of information through indexing etc. The stage two was the management of automated technology and it covered the period from 1960 to 1970's. It was based on technology such as second and third generation computers, electronic duplicating machines, word processors etc. The information resource management came as a third stage. It was predominant from the mid 1970's to the 1980's. This period witnessed the integration of technologies.

The fourth and current stage of information management is knowledge management. It is based on expert or knowledge based systems-decision support systems and intelligent systems.

Future Issues

In spite of technological developments and its application to information management area, there is no information management methodology, only suggested approaches. Information management is an integrative management technique, it has increasingly encompassed management and information as well. The information management should draw on professional expertise i.e. the information studies disciplines by bringing information professionals in the area of information management.

There are certain issues which needs to be developed in the future. Information policies are primary means of managing large and complex organisations and distributing responsibilities for information and information technologies. However in India, there is no defined information policy. So the UGC / INFLIBNET should develop information policy for university libraries as a recognised management tool.

The significant issues concerning management of information relevant to academic libraries are:

- new and better ways for measuring information productivity
- determining the appropriate mix of control, coordination and decentralisation
- increased user accountability
- provision of appropriate access to the information resources
- new management roles and increasing emphasis on user education and support

Further to assure leadership roles, the information management professionals should redef^eine their functions in order to cover the following responsibilities:

- i) Information resource architects (which information processing and exchange activities needs to be automated)
- ii) information resource consultants (listen to clients and analyse their problems)
- iii) information resource educators

Conclusion

The information management in academic libraries has good prospects for development and a bright future ahead, although there are problems and challenges to overcome and issues to improve. The traditional techniques should be replaced with more better modern techniques. The academic libraries should reorient their approach towards information management ensuring a better degree of user satisfaction. As the users approach towards information in academic libraries cannot be crystallised on permanent basis, a information management framework for academic libraries has to be evolved for a cost effective utilization of information resources and technologies. The academic libraries have lot of scope and potentiality in this direction.

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