

Challenges in Automating Tanzania Academic Libraries

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to establish the cultural challenges of automating academic libraries in Tanzania. It is evident that many libraries, especially in the developed countries are using automated libraries to retrieve data, hence save space, time and increase efficiency in their daily activities. While there are some automated libraries such as that of the University of Dar es salaam, majority are still operating manually. This paper starts with introducing the paper and defining academic library, automated library, and automated librarian and moves forward in identifying some eight cultural challenges that act as a stumbling block to the automation of Tanzanian libraries. Amongst those are poor reading culture, inadequate capital, availability of services, poor infrastructure, lack of ICT skills, lack of management support and the donor – funded dependency syndrome. It ends with a conclusion on how best to overcome these stumbling blocks.

Key words: Academic Libraries - Tanzania, Academic Libraries, Library Automation

1. Introduction

In discussing automating Tanzania academic libraries, stumbling blocks in various forms surface, including social, cultural, academic, economic, and infrastructural, to mention a few. As for this paper however, it is intended to highlight the cultural challenges facing the automation of academic libraries. It has to be noted that there are twenty – eight academic libraries across Tanzania, in both public and private universities (TLS, 2012). Most of these libraries are operated manually, with few partially automated. Kasulwa (2008), stated that 15 Universities are already in the process of automating their libraries. Out of those, only the University of Dar es salaam seemed at that time to have completed automation in its library. This paper tries to address the cultural challenges and provides recommendations on how to overcome these challenges in order to move to a more futuristic library.

Depending on the nature of the task that the student or user in general has for the library, an academic library offers both, a quiet study place and in some libraries, a discussion area. In North America, Europe, and other parts of the world, academic libraries have become more automated. As a result, users have a variety of choice in selecting their reading resources between printed and digital information as per need (Dowler, 1997). In many libraries, academic institutions have subscribed to electronic journals databases, providing research and scholarly writing software, and usually provide computer workstations or computer labs for students to access journals, library search databases and portals, institutional electronic resources, internet access, and course- or task-related software (i.e. word processing and spreadsheet software). They are increasingly acting as an electronic repository for institutional scholarly research and academic knowledge, such as the collection and duration of digital copies of students' theses and dissertations, heading towards what we call: the futuristic library (Anunobi et al, 2012).

Tanzania is making an effort in automating the library services in all its libraries through training, aiding libraries with computers and building the capacity of staff and other stakeholders. The Tanzania Library Association supervises these activities and facilitates them through welcoming paper presentations, hosting workshops and training.

2. Defining the Automated Library

2.1 The Automated Library

The term “automated library” can be used to describe a library where all tasks are carried out automatically. Computer programs substitute for the intellectually demanding tasks that are traditionally carried out by skilled professionals. These tasks include selection, cataloguing and indexing, seeking for information, reference services, and so on. The common theme is that these activities require considerable mental activity, the type of activity that people are skilled at and computers find difficult.

A good example of automated library is that of the University of Chicago, that has spent over \$80 million on the Joe and Riko Mansueto Library that is unique and handy to its end users and staff. Instead of filling the library hall with books and journals full of dust, the Mansueto library houses its contents fifty feet below the ground. Students and anyone who wants to check out a book, searches the online catalog for the item and fills out a request form. A library attendant then tells the system to retrieve the book, prompting the robotic aspects of the library to take over. The books are retrieved by a robotic arm which returns the storage bin containing the book or item.

This is different, in that it reduces lounging around in the library here, everything’s much more efficient and quick – making a request and picking up the book can often take less than 10 minutes, depending on where the student is on campus. View the video below to get a better idea of how the Mansueto Library does things differently. It’s another very smart usage of robotic technology, one that wouldn’t be out of place in Japan, where new robo-tech gadgetry seems to make waves every other day.

2.2 The Automated Librarian

A librarian, the person who looks after the storage and retrieval of information was previously professionally trained and educated to deal with information in a wide variety of formats and settings” (WordiQ, 2010). Today, in the automated library, the librarian is expected to help users to navigate into the voyage of internet and evaluate information efficiently. Librarian offers a helping hand for users to find out the required piece of information and to use it for personal and professional purposes (BLS, 2011). Due to the advent of Internet, World Wide Web and proliferation of online catalogue, the role of librarian has been changed. Now he is more efficient and has new roles as intermediary, facilitator, end-user trainer/educator, web organizer & designer, researcher, interface designer, knowledge manager/professional and sifter of information resources (Rao & Babu, 2001). Librarian should be knowledgeable in a variety of information sources and follow the new trends and advancements in computers, media and publishing (Careeroverview, 2011).

3. Cultural Challenges in Automating Tanzanian Libraries

The challenges of automated libraries vary from country to country, while in some instances there are some similarities. Kamba (2011) identifies challenges in Nigeria as being ICT illiteracy, ICT awareness and lack of ICT framework. Muller (2005), identifies challenges facing special libraries in South Africa as being trend change, adding value to the special library, inadequate education on library information service, lack of or inadequate proper benchmarking and lack of succession plan. As for cultural challenges in Tanzania, this paper identifies six major challenges as discussed in the sections hereunder:

3.1 Poor Reading Culture of Many University/College Students

A survey conducted by the daily news paper in 2011 at the St. Augustine University of Tanzania, reported a poor tendency of individual reading at the library, which resulted to poor assignments and research reports and in some instances even duplication of research reports. It revealed statistics of 60 percent of students enter the library for assignments and research, and 85 percent of those who do visit the library study books that are relevant in their respective courses only. As a result, the language proficiency is low, the research papers have low quality and the theory of 'I can read' has preceded 'I do read.' According to their survey, some students complete their three years in college without having visited the library at all. While this is an example in one university, experience reported in research and surveys reveal that the case is almost similar in many other universities across the country.

3.2 Inadequate Capital

This comes in four forms such as inadequate economic, cultural, social and institutional capital. The economic capital is in terms of financial implications in an attempt to get connected, purchase of a computer, train responsible staff and student's, build a user friendly infrastructure for the automated library and the likes. Cultural refers to knowledge acquired through cultural expression learned from the family socialization and education institutions. With these statistics, the uneducated outweigh the educated, posing a serious challenge on how the former influence the later in decision making and studying habit. Social means the social networking and relationships benefits one can get from participating in certain library networks and databases related to lending books, journals, papers and research. As for institutional capital, they include issues that mediate all of economic, political and social life. These include bodies that enable and support the initiatives to bring the Internet access. Inadequate capital results into poor libraries with minimum automation, poor staff with little qualification for automated libraries and poorly developed students with limited resources for their education.

3.3 Availability of Service

In their survey on service providers, the Tanzania Communication Regulatory Authority (TCRA), showed that by June 2010, only 46 (67%) out of 68 ASLs were found operating, 20 of them (30%) were not traced and 2 (3%) were not operational. Out of 46 operational licensees only 38 (83%) of them provide internet service. As a result, availability of service to end user is limited, often unreliable. Hence, even if libraries were to use

their services, the library services' quality would still be in jeopardy. Uncertainty in availability of services acts as a stumbling block in learning, using and communicating in an automated library environment.

3.4 Infrastructure Barrier

Infrastructure includes a shared, evolving, open, standardized, and heterogeneous installed base and by as all of the people, processes, procedures, tools, facilities, and technology which supports the creation, use, transport, storage, and destruction of information, Pironti (2006). The notion of information infrastructures, introduced in the 1990s and refined during the following decade, has proven quite fruitful to the Information Systems (IS) field. It changed the perspective from organizations to networks and from systems to infrastructures, allowing for a global and emergent perspective on information systems. Information infrastructure is a technical structure of an organizational form, an analytical perspective or a semantic network. If some of the component of the automated infrastructure doesn't operate the way it should, then other parts are affected. In Tanzania, if the staff are not well equipped, then they are in no good position to assist students, while if the students don't understand on how to use the infrastructure, then the staff and equipment will not be of any use. Should the staff and students understand the computer and automated equipment, but lack computers and or electricity, then that acts as a stumbling block. Should everything be in order but the service provider are on and off, again it affects the operation of the automated library. Unfortunately, in most of the academic libraries in Tanzania, one of the above mentioned or more are off-order, hence acting as stumbling blocks to the library.

3.5 Inadequate ICT Skills

Most of the ICT staff and end users lack the proper know-how in usage of ICT equipment. Shortage of computers and low computer – student ratio, lead to some students not touching computer for all the three years in their academic endeavor. As a result universities find themselves with graduates who have no skills. Even the staff lack adequate environment to display their talents and use their talents.

3.6 Lack of Management Support

Though the library is at the center of any academic institution, the management has not been supportive to modernizing and automating their services. This is often a result of minimal funds, low enrolment, never-ending priorities and ever increasing competition, resulting to investing more in marketing, bettering remuneration and modernizing buildings.

3.7 Donor Fund Dependency Syndrome

By definition, donor funded dependency syndrome also known as aid dependence, which can be defined as a situation in which a country cannot carry out its activities without the assistance of funding and expertise. It is a national pandemic and has spread in all sectors of the country, academic institutions are not exempted. Wait for donations from sister-colleges for computers, printers, books, experts, construction, tools and laboratory equipment act as a stumbling block. This kills creativity on how best to utilize available resources and work on automating their libraries hence save space, time and increase efficiency.

4. Conclusion

The significance of automating academic libraries can never be overlooked. The heart of the academic world lies in the library and if that is not updated, operated in an efficient and professional manner, the quality of the product from the local universities will be jeopardized. Running campaigns on significance of automating libraries, providing ICT training to librarian, academic staff and students and building a user friendly infrastructure that can facilitate the smooth running of an automated library will place Tanzania in a better situation academic wise and will assist it to work hand in hand with other universities across the world.

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