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INFORMATION NEEDS OF TANZANIAN INDUSTRIES: PROBLEMS & PROSPECTS

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Discusses the importance, problems and prospects of satisfying information needs of industries in Tanzania. Industries in Tanzania being small and medium in size, need a planned industrial information network which will enable them to acquire new ideas central to industrial progress. Major problems encountered in trying to meet industrial information needs in Tanzania, brought up, include; greater emphasis put on agriculture, lack of funds, lack of awareness on the part of decision makers of the important role information plays in industrial development, low status accorded to information units in industries, unwillingness among industries to share vital know-how, complexities of industrial information needs and lack of staff trained in library and information science work. Recommends that information units be established in major industries in Tanzania, identifying their functions.

In library and information sciences, one of the issues which has caused much controversy, is on the definition of the concept 'information'. There is a lack of consensus as to what constitutes information. Farradane [1] defines information as

> "any physical form of representation or surrogate of knowledge or of a particular thought used for communication."

Others define information in a more specific dimension, referring to it as valuable datum in decision making. In its wider sense McGarry [3] argues that information is not limited to facts in documents but it covers a wide spectrum of issues including emotions, facts, opinions, guidance and persuasions.

Recently the empirical study of various user groups has been a fast expanding subject of investigation. However, the concept of need like that of information is yet to receive an adequate treatment in the literature of library and information science. Within the context of library and information science, Line [2] discusses information need as being a rather abstract term fundamentally derived from the existence of problems requiring solutions. He regards it as what an individual ought to have for his work. Because users may not be aware of their information needs it becomes difficult to identify. Information need can therefore be a potential demand.

Studies of industrial information have revealed that industrial information is broad - based, consisting of techno-economic, technological, managerial and financial types. Industrial information seekers include industrialists, consultants researchers from various industries and institutions and prospective entrepreneurs.

WHY STUDY AND PLAN TO SATISFY INFORMATION NEEDS OF TANZANIAN INDUSTRIES?

The role of information in the wider spectrum of social and economic development is now widely recognized. Information is a basic and a key factor in most business, technical and managerial decisions, directly contributing to the quality of decisions and industrial efficiency. Information has become an essential ingredient in all industrial sectors whether research, development, production or marketing. In sustaining any meaningful industrial development in

Tanzania, the nation at large has to underscore the importance of satisfying industrial information needs. The overall industrial production in Tanzania has been falling, a decline partly attributed to the lack of any planned industrial information system. Tanzania being an underdeveloped country, a need for a well-planned industrial information network, comparable in importance to other industrial inputs such as materials and money, is long overdue.

Established at the heart of what is known as information poor societies, industries in Tanzania are inadequately supplied with necessary information. Ensuring maximum utility of available information and establishing effective avenues for steady supply of information necessary for industrial progress from developed countries becomes a priority. The issue of acquiring new ideas from outside, cannot be stressed further but suffice it to say that in Tanzania where most industries are of medium and small size, provision of new innovative ideas vital to industrial development will help them to keep pace with new developments in the world of technology.

However, in the technologically advanced countries the current phase of development is popularly known as information age characterised by information explosion. The sheer volume of information available and the ever increasing complexity of information contained in documents require precision in selection. A well-coordinated industrial information system through its various operating mechanisms will avoid duplication of efforts, time wastage, increase industrial efficiency and attain higher productivity. Elaborating the point of resource wastage; in Tanzania quite a substantial amount of money is being pumped into industrial research and consultancy services. Yet in some cases researches being undertaken may be unnecessary as it may have already been done and probably its findings published. Well-developed industrial information units will be able to solve such problems, enabling firms to make savings, avoid misuse of our meagre resources and make industrial scientists and technologists to speed up the innovation process by avoiding duplication of researches.

PROBLEMS OF MEETING INFORMATION NEEDS OF TANZANIAN INDUSTRIES

Many of the industries in Tanzania are without established information units or libraries while others have inadequate and rudimentary services (greatly underutilized). A number of problems explain this state of affairs.

One very fundamental problem accounting for inadequate provision of information services in industries in Tanzania is the greater importance attached to agriculture than industry generally. Agriculture being the backbone of the economy provides for a livelihood of over 90% of the economically active population. In Tanzania industry is still relatively small. This probably explains why agricultural information system has been better researched.

Tanzania is one of the least developed countries in the world. The major preoccupation of the government is the improvement of the living standards of the majority of the people. Competition for funds by various institutions for projects which are equally important is always stiff. Because of financial constraints emphasis is on cutbacks in expenditure. On the whole information activities get the least priority compared to other sectors competing for these ever dwindling finances.

However, information services get less priority not only because of lack of funds but also because those concerned with decision making in various industries, are not aware of the important role information plays in industrial development. Managers are not aware of the potential of information services as tools of higher industrial productivity; therefore, lend little support to create information structures, aiding information transmission. Information service is regarded as peripheral to the firm because benefits accruing from such services are not easily quantifiable in terms of profits. But as earlier noted this is a misconception because such services can be cost - saving devices. Thus cost - saving services are unwittingly rejected.

Industries with some form of information units or libraries, face one dilemma which seems to stifle any further advancement of industrial information services in Tanzania. These units are accorded very low status organisationally.

In these industries, information units or libraries are often manned by untrained personnel in the fields of library and information science and are located with one of the departments usually within the training or research and development departments. This set-up acts as a formidable barrier to free flow of information in industries. For a successful industrial information system to evolve, such units should not be a part of any single department. They should be independent departments providing information to all departments in a firm. This type of organisational structure will provide for an integrated approach to information provision allowing maximum utility of information resources. The new setup will provide opportunity for active participation of information personnel in the activities of a particular industry, enabling them to plan suitable information services and keep the management informed of its activities.

A substantial amount of industrial information is generated by industries through research, experimentation, surveys etc. Information which is usually regarded as the property of a particular firm, its dissemination outside the firm is at the discretion of the industry concerned. It is not surprising that information relating to various innovations is often categorized as confidential or classified, as firms would not like other competing firms to get hold of such vital know-how. This hampers information flow among industries.

In Tanzania some industries are publicly funded while others are privately owned with different goals and objectives. Consequently this affects the way they are managed and how they can exchange information.

Finally, industry is a multi-faceted complex organisation with diverse information needs. However, in industries where attempts are made in providing information services, this is done mainly in the sphere of technology. Very little effort is directed towards satisfying management, commercial, financial and other types of information needs. Adequately satisfying information needs of various disciplines represented in most industries requires specialist skills in information resource management. Yet in Tanzania this is the missing link i.e. the lack of trained and qualified information specialists in our industries.

TOWARDS ESTABLISHING INDUSTRIAL INFORMATION UNITS IN TANZANIA

Any viable proposal for establishing a network of industrial information services will undoubtedly require a thorough study of information needs of various industries in Tanzania. When undertaking such studies and establishing such services, several factors should be taken into consideration which affect industrial information needs and consequently services. These factors include size of industries, type of work performed by various industrial information users, underlying disciplines, availability and accessibility of various information services, personal attributes (e.g. education) of information users and finally costs involved.

This paper is not an outcome of such a study but rather of experiences elsewhere and my own experiences of industrial information services in Tanzania. Taking these deficiencies into account, I can only make some general recommendations. As a point of departure, it is essential that information units manned by staff with ability to deliver high quality information services, be established in all major industries in Tanzania.

The major functions of these units will be to select, acquire, organize and disseminate information. The units will also process information in a form in which it can be easily assimilated by both technocrats and managers who will normally have very limited time left for extensive reading or literature search.

Industrial information units may consider providing the following types of current awareness services;

(i) document circulation (journals, reports or patents)

(ii) news bulletins (titles or abstracts) announcing new arrivals

(iii) selective dissemination of information (SDI) based on matching document contents with personal interest file.

Finally industrial information units will act as spring-boards, key links or focal points with other industries from within and without in information business.

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