NALISE

ISSUES IN THE INFORMATION PROFESSION: NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVES

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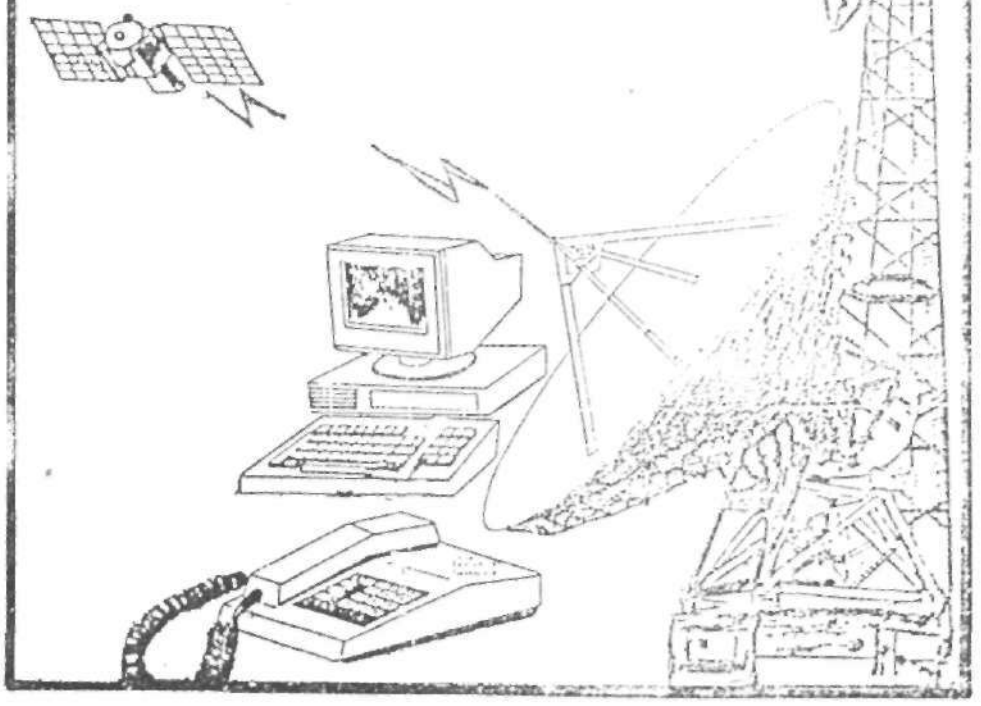


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THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS AND THE SURVIVAL OF SMALL SCALE ENTERPRISES IN NIGERIA

Umar Ibrahim

Introduction

Nigeria has, since her independence in 1960, been operating a mixed economy in which private individuals, corporate bodies and various levels of government participate in the business and economic activities of the country. However, the Nigerian economy like most developing countries is largely dominated by public sector and government activities. The government still dominates not only the large scale minerals and industrial sector such as iron and steel, petrol and gas, and electricity but such purely commercial activities like banking, insurance, etc.

Despite the dominance of the Nigerian economy by the public sector, the private sector still plays a significant role in the general development of the country. In fact there is a growing realisation that the private sector especially the indigenous private sector plays a greater role in the development and industrialisation of the developing countries.

The private sector, large as it is, consists of mostly small scale industries or as they are often called enterprises (SSES). Although there is no correct census of small scale enterprises in Nigeria, Agbenyo (1982:58) in a study of small scale industries in Benue State noted an earlier survey of SSES, made by the industrial research unit of the University of Nigeria Nsukka in 1972. The survey counted 830 in just three district areas of Benue State. He therefore concluded that small scale enterprises form more than 80% of the private sector.

SSES suffers a crisis of definition. The definitions vary from country to country and from time to time. Sometimes, the definition is based on size, the number of

employees and at other times based on annual turnover. Singh (1977:3), for instance noted that in Japan, the term is applied to those industries which employ less than 300 persons in manufacturing and have a capital not exceeding 10 million Yen. While as in Nigeria, Anonymous (1980:5) noted that the term is applied to any manufacturing, possessing ₦150,000.00 in machinery and equipment alone. Thus it can be asserted that it is easier to recognise SSES in practice than to define it.

However, it can be seen from definitions discussed above and elsewhere that all the definitions of SSES are based on three variables: scale of technology, number of employees and capital (funds) size.

So, for the purpose of this paper,the definition of SSES as contained in the Central Bank of Nigeria's credit guidelines will be adopted. The guidelines, thus defines SSES as any manufacturing enterprise whose annual business turnover does not exceed ₦500,000.00.

The third National Development Plan (NDP) 1975-80, provided a long list of enterprises with scope for small scale operations in the country. These industries can be broadly categorised into agro-based, livestock based, forest based, marine based and other industries. This list is however, revised from time to time by the Federal Ministry of Industries.

The Nigerian government policies on SSES

Nigeria attempts to develop SSES as a conscious strategy for industrialisation date back to the early post-independence. Various policies and schemes have been initiated since then. Notably among these policies and schemes are: the former Federal Loans Board (FLB); former Regional corporations; the 1972 Nigeria Enterprises Promotion Decree; the 1980 Nigerian's new industries policy.

Others include the creation of Industrial

Development Centres (IDCs), federal and state ministries of commerce and industries, Industrial Training Funds (ITF), Centre for Management Development (CDM), the establishment of industrial research institutes, such as the Raw Material Research and Development Council (RMRDC), Centre for Industrial Research and Development (CIRD), Project Development Agency (PRODA), etc. and the establishment of Nigerian Bank for Commerce and Industries (NBCI).

From the above, it is evident that Nigeria had not lacked very reasonable and realistic policies, programmes and schemes for the development and management of SSES sub-sector, particularly in recent years.

The need for information unit/centre in SSES in Nigeria

The need for information unit/centre is SSES in Nigeria is more real now than ever. The role of information towards organisational development cannot be over emphasised. Information, it is said, is the life-wire of not only an organisation but a nation. No sector of any economy can function effectively without access to information. Wali (1992:4) noted that information is very necessary for organisational planning, policy formulation and decision making. He further noted that this fact is already evident in corporate organisation, businesses and industries, where information is the vital component not only to maintain acceptable profit levels, but also in order to cope with competitions. Hence the need for a unit or department within the organisation to collect, analyze and disseminate information that will enable the organisation to achieve its objectives.

The importance of information in the development of SSES in Nigeria is equally realised, especially when Usman (1991:) attributed the failure of SSES in Nigeria to four reasons, thee out of which are information bound; lack of technological and managerial knowledge, lack of

common service facilities and lack of information markets.

The creation of industrial development and training centres, research institutes, banks for commerce and industry, etc. have no doubt generated vast information resources. Therefore for SSES to succeed, they need to liaise and collect, analyze, store and disseminate information from these places for effective organisational development.

Successful business today tend to be market-led rather than production-driven and a lot of attention is paid to quantities, quality and regularity of supply (having a reputation of reliability). Thapisa (1994:17) observed that in market led economies, it is imperative to determine what markets exist (potential demand for product) and then produce for those markets. It is also essential, as he further observed, to analyze carefully the strength of competitors, to look for new market opportunities, to recognise opportunities when they occur, and even to help create new markets. This, he noted requires an abundance of up-to-date and relevant information and only an information unit or department of an organisation can do this.

Above all, the global economic crisis and the crisis caused by the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) in Nigeria have forced business organisations in Nigeria to adopt new strategies that would not only ensure their survival but also their growth. Therefore, to ensure growth and viability while coping with increased risk and uncertainty, companies and organisations have to adopt new strategies that are characterised by systematic planning, proactive decision making, synoptic evaluation and decision making based on objectives evaluation as a result of gathering data. The information centre plays an important role in the coordination and integration of the information resources in the organisation.

Similarly, Newsome and McInerney (1990:285)

noted that increasingly, forces in the outside world have a greater impact on the future of an organisation than internal issues. However, for successful planning and for organisation to take proactive decisions, the collection, analysis and management of information from both internal and external environment are necessary because in both cases, useful and effective information may be scattered and the aim of an information centre must arguably be to centralise and formalise the process.

It is sad to note that despite the recognition of the role of information centre towards effective development of SSES in Nigeria, very few SSES have real information unit in their organisation. Even with those that have, the unit is not given the deserved attention.

From what has been said earlier, there is the need for every SSES in Nigeria to establish an information unit and to employ a qualified information professional or consultant to man the unit. This is necessary because when one looks at the progress and development of business organisation in the developed countries as a result of not only the establishment of information unit in their organisation but also in further establishment of information intelligence unit or information surveillance unit. The need for information centres in business organisations in the developing countries, particularly Nigeria cannot be neglected.

The role of the information professionals in SSES

In order for information centres in SSES to become an indispensable tool, for an integral part of and therefore partners to the management of the enterprise, the corporate information manager (CIM), information resource manager (IRC), information control officer (ICO) - his new titles, has to effectively design the goal/mission, objectives, plans and strategies of the centre. Apart from this, he has to not only justify the existence of the centre

but also to demonstrate how the organisation cannot do without it. The corporate information manager can do this effectively by performing certain roles. This paper has identified six roles which are as follows:

(i) Determining the information needs of the organisation:

For the information manager to manage effectively, the information needs of both management and users, he has to first of all determine their needs, he should try to pinpoint the real information needs, determine the scope and discover how quickly the information is needed. To do this, the manager has to understand the structure of the organisation, objectives, products and markets - current and potential markets of the organisation. Armed with the appropriate knowledge of the structure of the organisation and on-the-job training in every departments of the organisation, the information need are of the different department/different groups and people within the corporation, and what the information resources are that can be drawn on, both internally and externally. The job also requires skill at knowing how to provide different levels of services to those with different levels of need and how to measure and promote the value of the services delivered. As facilitator and coordinator, the information manager will be equipped to help many people to put a vast variety of information resources to work.

(ii) Sourcing information for the organisation:

After determining the information needs of the organisation, the information manager has to also determine the characteristic, channels and where and how to source the information. The firm exists within a multitude of overlapping and increasingly turbulent environments - the internal and external. Each of these contains large volumes of information that are highly

useful to the organisation. internal data needs involves a tremendous amount and variety of routine operating documents. These could relate to transaction with customers, production or production schedule, personnel, materials, equipment and accounting. There is also the need for data to be compiled in an information report from which would be used to analyze progress, enumerate policy, solve problems and plan actions for the future. All these will mean collection and processing large volume of information.

The firm must equally generate and use information about the needs of the market in order to produce and sell the right outputs. It must be aware of new sources of supply, alternative raw materials, cheaper supplies, etc. Likewise, the firm must monitor the new products, advertising campaigns, pricing policies, organisational changes and other activities of its competitors in order not to be left behind in the struggle to maintain and increase its share of the market.

Complementing the knowledge of the internal environment of the organisation is also knowledge of the different services offered to SSES by various external agencies, centres and institutes.

As earlier noted, Nigeria has since independence established many programmes, schemes, etc. for the development and management of SSES sub-sector. Industrial Development Centres (IDCs), Industrial Training Fund (ITF), Centre for Management Development (CMD), etc. have been created to take care of training and other managerial needs of SSES. Industrial research institutes, such as the Raw Material Research and Development Council (RMRDC), Centre for Industrial Research and Development (CIRD), Project Development Agency (PRODA) etc. have been established to carry out various researches on raw material, fabrication of tools, etc. for SSES. Also financial institutions, such as Nigeria Bank for Commerce and Industry (NBCI), Nigerian Industrial

Development Bank (NIDB), etc. have been established to provide financial support to SSES in Nigeria.

It is sad to note that many of these SSES in Nigeria are not aware of the existence of these centres, those that are aware of their existence are very much ignorant of the kind of functions and services they offer. This assertion is supported by Inyang (1985:96) when he noted that most of the SSES today fail to survive and achieve a degree of success in their business ventures because majority of them do not know what to do in terms of initial planning and how to solve the teething problems involved in starting and running an enterprise. Such things as managerial and technical know-how are grossly lacking and many do not know where to go to obtain these necessary assistance like financial, managerial and technical which are necessary inputs to the survival of their enterprises.

So, from the above, it can be seen that information professionals in SSES have a great role to play in making known to their parent organisations the functions and services offered by these centres and what their organisations could benefit from. For instance, IDCs provide such services as installation and starting up operation of machinery and equipment, quality control and improvement of the end products, training of small industry technicians, bookkeeping, accounting and cost analysis, while NBCI and NIDB provide small scale industrial credit scheme, equity and loan funds.

Internal and external information are therefore complementary. Hayden (1986:3) noted that although many decisions will be made primarily on the basis of organisational data, there will be many decisions to which external development and the experiment of others can beneficially be applied. He further noted that information from outside the organisation can aid planning and even the solution of specific problems. Therefore awareness of external informational sources is conducive to the

perception of the organisation as part of a whole commercial and intellectual environment.

(iii) Managing information:

To fulfil his functions, the information manager should, after identifying both internal and external sources of information, collect, systematically analyze, store and disseminate to the appropriate level of management, departments, groups and individuals in form suitable for easy transfer of the essential content. The purpose of this information-transfer process is to enable departments, groups and individuals improve their productivity and enable management at all levels to solve problems and to make decisions. The more information, knowledge and wisdom a manager has, then hopefully, the better are the decisions that he makes.

To match the various levels in the company at which decisions are made, different types of information have to be supplied. At the operational level fairly simple data is needed, whereas at the policy making level quite complex correlated information is required.

(iv) Providing information services:

The information manager has the responsibility for providing a dynamic outward-looking information services to the company which employs him. Information services, like almost everything else, have to be sold to both top management and departments, groups and individuals.

The information manager has to remember at the beginning and always that unlike the traditional library, the information centres may not be stocked with books. Only relevant information in whatever forms that is related and relevant to the organisation will be collected. The effective information unit will usually have collections of standard trade literature, patents, annual report, etc. all selected to

match the company's needs. Most of his job will therefore be analyzing, evaluating and supplying information to the organisation.

Therefore, the information manager has to develop dynamic services. Services like current awareness, *ad-hoc* and selective dissemination of information (SDI) services would have to be well developed. Other specially developed services includes indexing of relevant articles from daily newspapers, magazines and business newspapers and magazines, compilation of reports in the area of trade flow, consumption patterns, etc.

(v) Maintenance of effective services and obtaining feedbacks:

Having established information services, the manager has the responsibility of monitoring them, to ensure that they continue to operate in an efficient and effective manner. Therefore, the information manager has to device some ways of monitoring and obtaining feedbacks on services rendered. Techniques like obtaining statistics, regular check, spot checks, survey and even research should be employed. For example, the effectiveness of the information services can only be judged by asking the recipients.

(vi) Qualities of the information manager in SSES:

For information manager, in a SSES to perform the above stated roles and many more, he has to embody certain qualities. First of all he has to be a professional who, has had training in or experience in records management, information analysis, data processing management, systems analysis, business administration, marketing principles, and corporate finance. Like the insurance workers, the information manager should be aggressive, but diplomatic, he should be resourceful,

innovative, and above all productive, loyal and understanding with good public relations. All of these precepts are needed in making a successful business information manager.

Conclusion

In order for SSES in Nigeria to effectively grow and develop, and survive the current economic crisis, an effective functional information unit/centre with a highly trained motivated professional is needed. This has become necessary, especially when we recall Usman (1991:) findings that the failure of SSES in Nigeria is attributed to four reasons, three of which are information bound and Osuji's (1991:44) opinion that the success or survival of a business may not necessary be on how good her product is, but may depend on the way it manages information, or its ability to maintain, control over costs, and on the speed and flexibility with which it responses to changing market conditions. Thus, he noted that, the development of information management capable of providing complete, accurate and prompt information management for effective decision making is very vital for any organisation.

Suggestions

(i) library schools in Nigeria should introduce courses on business information, records management, etc. those that have already done so should provide training in the integration of concepts of records management, data management, information access and analysis, and library management into a corporate information policy;

(ii) special library and information centres courses should include an introduction to the structure of the corporation, with emphasis on marketing, research and development, and the behind-the scenes workings of the corporate office environment;

(iii) the federal government of Nigeria should encourage SSES and other business organisation in the country to establish functional information centre and to employ an information professional in their organisations.

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REDEFINING INFORMATION STRUCTURES AND SERVICES FOR THE RURAL MAJORITY

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Introduction

Library and information services in Nigeria has been criticised at different times for being elitist and urban centred at the expense of the rural majority. We have suddenly realised that for long our services have been focused on the urban elite group neglecting the teeming rural majority that constitute more than 70% of the population in African countries.[1] Therefore, one of the greatest challenges to the information profession today is how to redefine its goals and objectives with a view to serving this silent majority who also need various types of information resources for developmental purpose.

Facing the dilemma of information poverty in the rural areas

The relationship in information utilisation between the rural and urban communities especially in the developing country such as Nigeria can be likened to the international symmetries or imbalances between the north and south blocks when we talk of international politics of information. The north considered as the industrialised countries generate and utilise information in different packages to the disadvantage of the south which is considered the less developed countries. Thus, whole urban communities in Nigeria for example relatively enjoy some form of information overload by being close to the sources of information. The rural communities could be said to experience information poverty because the information sources and resources are very remote from