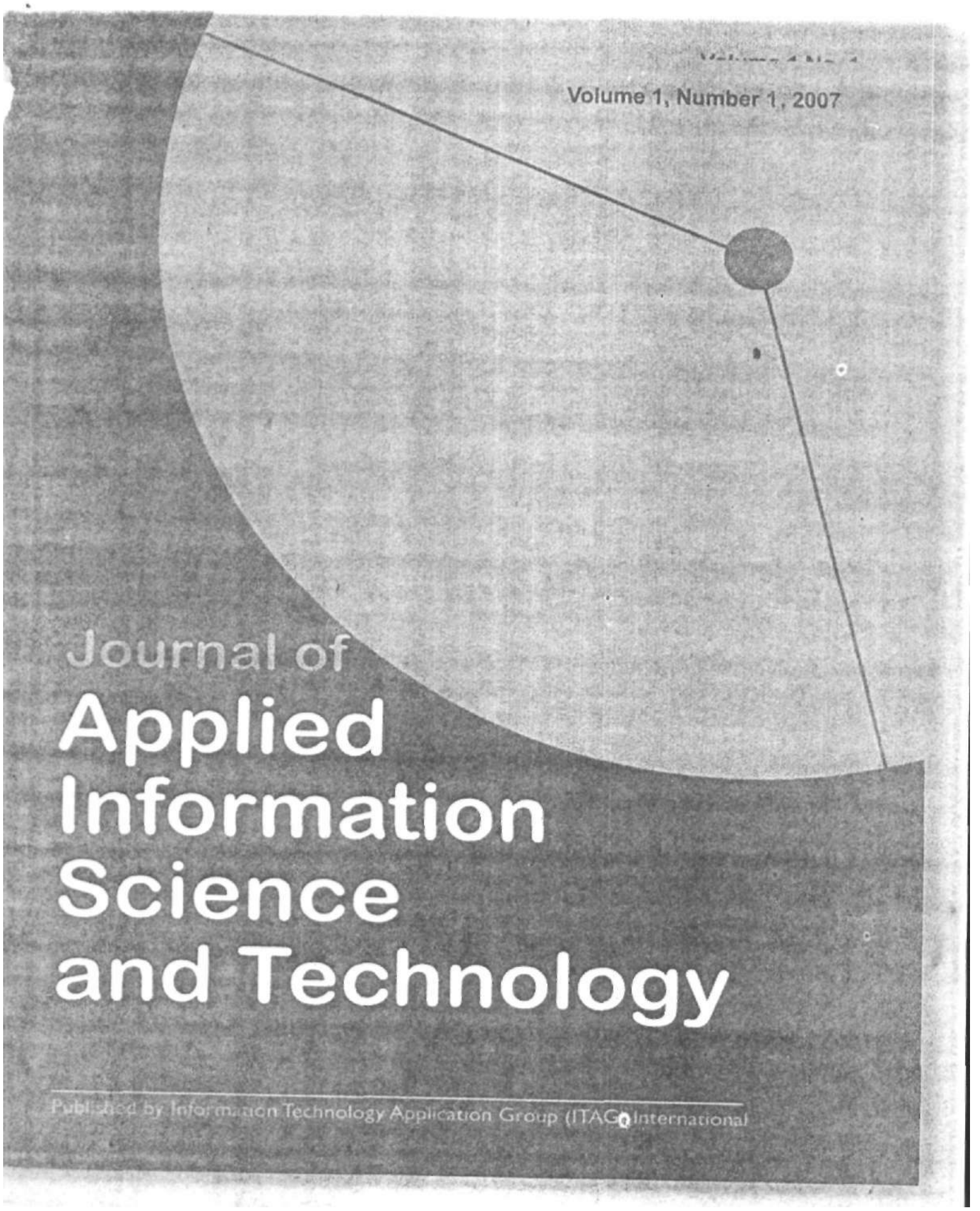

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REPOSITIONING NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES' REFERENCE DESK FOR EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT REFERENCE **AND INFORMATION SERVICE PROVISION**

BY

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Abstract

Purpose: The paper examined the conditions of reference and information service provision in Nigerian University Libraries and proposed a reference model suitable for the new information society.

Design/IMethodology/Approach: Descriptive survey was applied to find out the present conditions of reference and information service provision. A reference model was also conceptualized to transform the present reference desk through redesigned, refocused, reshaped, redrawn and redefined reference staff work process in order to satisfy the current information needs of library users.

Findings: Personnel, time, clientele and reference desk were found to be the factors influencing the types and levels of reference services in Nigerian University libraries. It was also found that the condition of reference service is very deplorable, especially the location and management of the reference desk. To ameliorate this problem, a reference desk model was proposed in order to ensure effective and efficient reference service. The reference desk model was built based on the four traditional groups of questions usually asked in reference service desk which are Directional, Ready reference, General questions/inquires on specific topics and Research. The model comprises Reference desk DI -DIV. Reference desk I (DI) should be strategically located for easy identification by the users. Its staff should have knowledge of general library operations and can be paraprofessional and students on practical. The staff should be familiar with various reference materials such as general and subject Encyclopedia, Dictionaries, Directories, and public catalogue etc. The reference questions asked are mostly directional and ready reference and information queries. Reference desk 2 (DII) requires some technical expertise, well-trained paraprofessionals with at least 5 years working experience in the reference department, able to provide answers to information on specific topics, conduct interview with the users in order to help answer their questions and be able to make use of indexes, Abstracts, Bibliographies and how to use them with the primary sources. Reference desk 3 (DIII) requires a professional librarian who can answer inquiries on information on Research and Research Consultation. He also supervises the services done in DII. Reference desk 4 (DIV) is otherwise called the master desk or the engine of the reference division. It has professionals and paraprofessionals as staff. Technical works are performed by paraprofessionals, while professional staff carry out supervision and consultancy services. The reference librarian is found in this desk.

Practical Implication: The provision of virile and efficient reference services that can move along with the current information dissemination trend of the Information society.

Originality: The proposed reference desk model will no doubt be of immense importance to all that work and will work in the reference division - Reference librarian, Professional Librarians, paraprofessionals and others. It can serve as a guide to their job description.
Keywords: University Libraries, Reference services, Information service provision, reference desks, reference desk model, information society.

Introduction

Reference and information service is regarded by many scholars of Library and Information Science as the core of all the library and information services. It is an undisputable fact that all users of library and information centers have to, in one way or the other, rely heavily at one point or the other on reference Department of a Library.

The provisions of reference and information services are achieved basically through two broad ways: Direct and Indirect. Katz [1974] has defined the direct type of reference and information service as that service involving a person-to-person relationship. In other words, there is a direct contact between the reference librarian and the library patron. It consists of personal assistance provided to users who need information. The direct type of reference and information services is further subdivided into three groups, viz.: - Library instruction; library orientation; and information services. The indirect type of reference and information service is that activity that reference librarian undertakes to provide information without necessarily coming into direct contact with the clientele. These include the compilation of bibliographies, indexes, abstracts, maintenance of newspaper clippings, etc.

Although Reference and Information Service is regarded by all as one of the most important public service in Library and Information Centers, Nwoye and Anafulu [1973] noted with dismay that effective means of stimulating the use of reference service provision have not been fully developed in Nigerian University libraries. Similarly, Alafiatayo [1977] averred that reference service provision is still very passive in University libraries in Nigeria.

It is unfortunate that three decades after Nwoye and Anafulu, and Alafiatayo revelations, Ibrahim [2001] reported that the situation of reference service provision in University libraries in Nigeria has not made any significant change, despite the improvement in reference resources, staffing, facilities and technology. What then are the factors militating against effective and efficient reference and information service provision in Nigerian University Libraries?

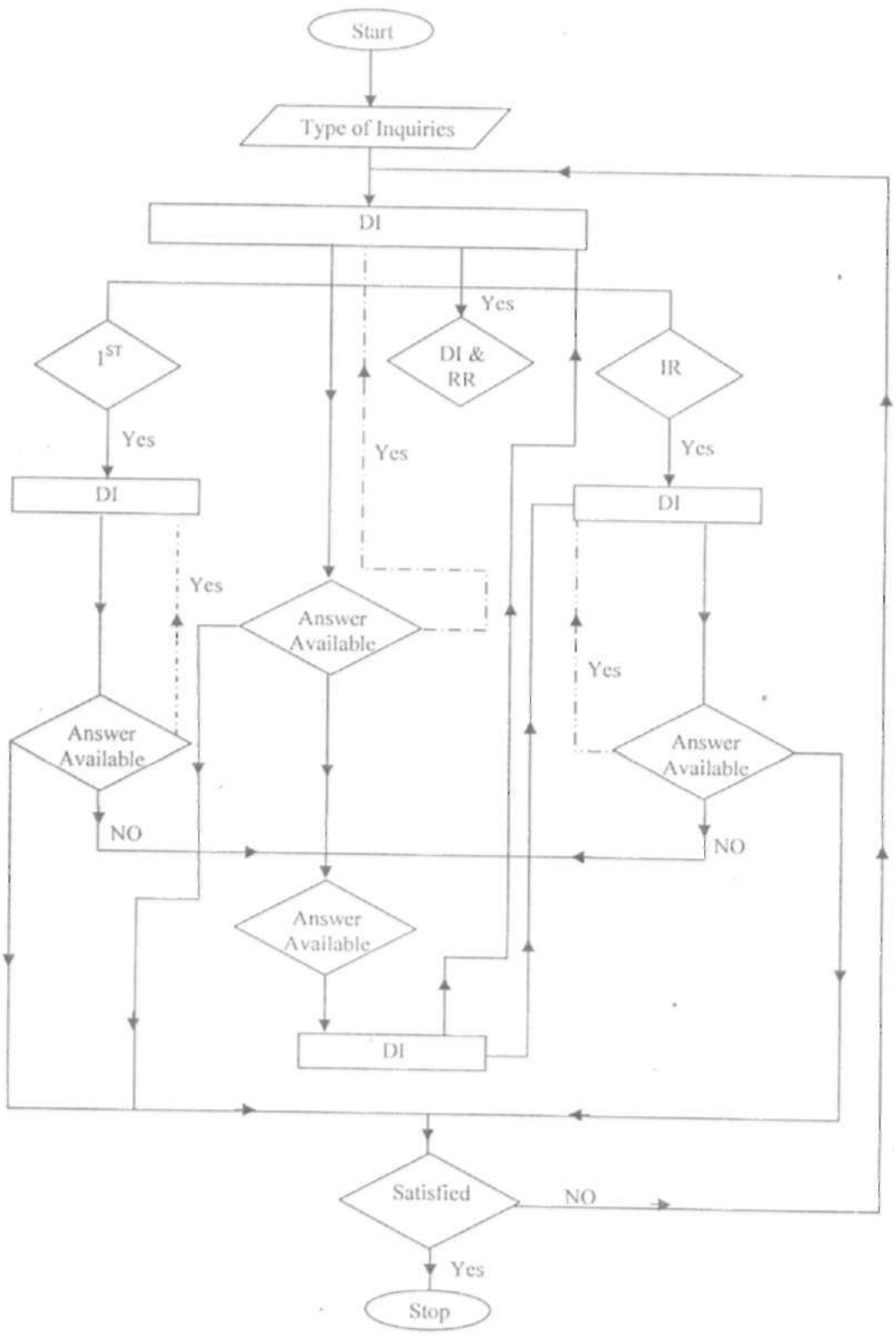
Among the factors identified as influencing the type and level of reference service provision in University libraries in Nigerian are personnel, time and clientele. However, other scholars, such as Swanson [1984] have identified the reference desk as the major factor, arguing that reference desk is the heart of the reference division or department where all reference works/activities take place. Similarly Goestsch [1995] demonstrated the centrality and importance of reference desk to effective and efficient reference and information service provision when he notes that the reference desk represents the critical mass of resources--human, printed, and electronic interaction, so configured for convenient and predictable locations so that the library patrons can find the service and someone to help them secure and access the required information.

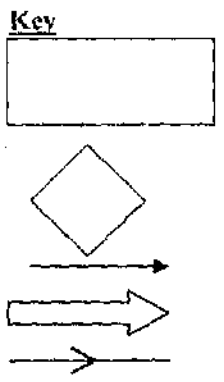
Be as this may, it is observed that reference desk in Nigerian University Libraries are not reflecting the above ideals. In most Nigerian University Libraries, reference desks are manned by unqualified personnel, most often, reference desks are located in secured places and wrongly positioned. As a result of that, no well-designed and articulated reference work/activities is taking place at these reference desks. Perhaps, this seems to be one of the fundamental reasons why clientele in the Nigerian University Libraries shy away from reference and information desks. Yes of course! If they don't know where to go and make their inquiries and if they know that the personnel who are to answer their inquiries are not competent, why should they bother to approach the reference desks?

Unless the reference desk is redesigned, repositioned and refocused, reference work reshaped and redrawn, as well as redefining reference staff work process, reference and information service provision in Nigerian University Libraries will never appreciate to keep up with the accelerating pace of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) changes.

Therefore, it is in the light of the above that this study proposes a reference model in which the reference desk is totally overhauled in line with the above-mentioned transformations. The reference model is aim at rooting out needless work and getting every process in the reference department pointed in the direction of providing desired/versatile, effective and efficient reference and information service, reduced cycle time, user satisfaction and total quality. Figure 1 below represents the proposed model. The model is constructed based on the predicate that whether direct or indirect, Reference and Information Service began with a question. Davidson [1980] observes that, at the heart of reference work is the question. And that the measure of success of reference work is the proper answer. Jackaman [1989] also observe that the primary concern of reference and information services is just in answering questions asked by the library's patron.

Fig 1: Proposed model for the restructuring of reference desks in Nigerian university libraries





Since questions asked by library's patrons have over the years been grouped into four categories, viz.: Directional; Ready reference; General questions/inquiries on specific topics; and Research by such scholars as Bloomberg [1977], Katz [1980], e.t.c, the reference model consists of four reference desks, designated as DI-DIV. Each desk is expected to be manned by a specific category of reference staff that would provide answers to one or more of the above type of inquiries. The detail of each desk is as follows:

Reference desk 1 (DI)

This desk should be the first desk reference patrons should have contact with. Therefore, the desk should be conspicuously positioned in the reference division, as noted by Sjolander and Sjolander [1995] the location of the reference desk, its design and visibility are very important in the provision of reference and information services. Reference desks should be sited in a very conspicuous place or places to enable patrons clearly know that these are the places to go whenever they have problems or they want to inquire about certain information.

In this model, the user is therefore expected to, on entering reference section, approach the first reference desk (DI). He will present his queries. The reference librarian at this desk will then determine the type of inquiry. If it is Directional Information or Ready Reference Information Inquiries, the librarian at this desk will provide answers to these types of reference and information inquiries. In doing so, he is expected to know the detail about the Library; its different departments/sections and the type of Library and Information materials houses by each, history, rules and regulations, e.g. opening hours, e.t.c. He is also to know very well the reference division and the position of each type of reference and information material.

Staff at this desk should master the use of general and subject Encyclopedia, Dictionaries, Directories, Public Catalogue, e.t.c. Other jobs that staff at this is expected to perform includes Liaising with other desks and departments/divisions in order to perform his jobs, shelving and shelf-reading, posting of information and educative materials on the bulletin boards, collecting statistics of reference users and reference and information resources consulted while answering users' inquiries.

To carry out the above mentioned work schedules effectively, it is suggested that paraprofessional staff and at times library and information science students on practical can man reference desk DI. This is because most of the service offer here consists of providing general information about the library—services, opening hours,

and location of various sections, with referrals to other service points or sections for further Information. Ewing and Hauptman [1995] note, and have a long history of researches to back them, that the majority of questions asked are of directional Information or known- item nature and can be handled by well-train paraprofessional staff and, to some degree, student assistants.

However, if the inquiry is of Information on Specific Topic type, the user is referred to the second reference desk (DII).

Reference desk 2 (D II)

Reference desk (DII) is to provide answers to Information on Specific Topics (IST). To do this effectively staff at this desk would need to among other things conduct interview with the users in order to clarify their inquiries, know the types of Indexes, Abstracts, Bibliographies, e.t.c available in the Library and the Reference division and to master the use of the above reference tools very well, be able to link up what is in the Indexes, Abstracts, and e.t.c with the primary sources, liaise with other reference desk and departments/divisions in carrying out their job, assists in mounting of exhibitions and collect relevant statistics.

Because the above services involve some technical expertise, the staff that should provide these services should be what Hunt [1965] called well-trained career Paraprofessional staff that has long (at least 5 years) working experience in the Reference department and by their experience mastered the use of different Reference tools. And if the inquiry is of Information on Research nature, the user is referred to the third reference desk (DIII).

Reference desk 3 (DIII)

This desk is to provide answers to inquiries on Information on Research. To do this staff at this desk is expected to conduct an in-depth interview with the users so as to be able to clarify and identify all their research needs, know the types of Indexes, Abstracts, Bibliographies, e.t.c available in the Library and the Reference division and to master the use of the above reference tools very well, be able to link up what is in the Indexes, Abstracts, e.t.c with the primary sources, select new reference and information materials for the reference department, train junior staff and supervise exhibitions and display activities that may be of benefits to the Library Users and the University Community.

Reference desk DIII, which is meant to answer inquiries on Information on Research or Research Consultation, requires the attention of an expert. This is because, as noted by Whitson [1995] Information on Research require interviewing a client in a systematic way to analyse the client's research problem. This is done with a view to understanding the research problem and to devise a search strategy, and suggest or assist in identifying the most promising reference tools and other resources with which to begin the research process. But the ability to analyse a research problems, apply critical thinking skills to investigating that problem, and exploit information resources through knowledge of information organisation is in the view of Geotsch [1995] the *forte* of the professional librarian. Further more, it is an expert that is more necessary, not less, in the current chaotic environment in which Information technology finds itself.

Reference desk 4 (DIV)

Reference desk DIV will serve as master desk. Here, Indexing, Abstracting, Compilation of Bibliographies, provision of Current Awareness Services (CAS), Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), etc will be done. So, a lot of data and information is expected to be collected and stored at this reference desk. This is because apart from serving the desk itself, reference desks D1, DII&DIII may refer to the reference desk (DIV master Desk) for inquiries, which answers could not be found at their desks. In case the answers to inquiries could not be found either at reference desk DI-DIII or at the reference desk DIV, the reference librarians at all the desks, i.e. DI-DIV may then search the shelves, library or even outside in order to provide answers to the inquiries. Other services that this desk is supposed to provide include organizing Library orientations and Library Instructions, coordinate and supervise the activities at desk D1-DIII and DIV (2) as well as collecting relevant statistics from these desks, Engaging from time to time in the evaluation of the whole reference division, paying specific attention to the reference collection, reference and information services, and staff performances as well as users' satisfaction, and finally to write quarterly and annual reports.

This service point will no doubt be the power engine of the reference division; therefore the desk should consist of a combination of professionals and paraprofessionals. While the paraprofessional staffs are doing technical work such as Indexing, Abstracting, press cutting, e.t.c, the professional staffs could serve as supervisors and consultants, i.e. to be consulted on those inquiries that could not be answered at reference desks DI—DIII. It is among the professionals at this desk that the chief reference Librarian and head of the department is designated

Conclusion

Libraries and Information centers have to continuously device strategies in order to keep pace with the ever changing Information needs of their Clienteles, especially as the journey to digitized information age has just begun. Re-structuring, re-positioning, re-engineering, e.t.c. have all been recommended as a way of making organisations function more effectively and efficiently. It is hoped that this proposed model would be adopted not only in University Libraries but all other types.

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