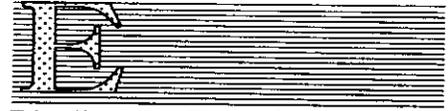


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**THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN ENSURING
CONTINUOUS EMPLOYABILITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY**



Abstract

Libraries play a critical role in the provision of information to citizens. It is through these institutions that information is disseminated to society at large. This starts from basic life skills information to entrepreneurial information. Through knowledge derived from these libraries, the world is capable of improving human lives and as a result strengthens economies of the world. New developments and inventions are realised because of the availability of information.

This paper deals broadly with the role played by libraries and information services in ensuring continuous employability and entrepreneurship in the knowledge economy. The focus is however, on the role of libraries as disseminators of information. This role is expressed in terms of the libraries' value with regard to return on investment and their contribution to human development. Such development include among others, literacy and lifelong learning. Libraries, from public to national, are central points for information access. The significance of libraries in the development of African economies is viewed within the context of the current enabling political environment.

I. Introduction

1. For the last two hundred years, neo-classical economics has recognised only two factors of production: labour and capital. Knowledge, productivity, education, and intellectual capital were all regarded as exogenous factors. Following from the work of economists such as Joseph Schumpeter, Robert Solow and others, Romer proposed a change to the neo-classical model by seeing technology (and the knowledge on which it is based) as an intrinsic part of the economic system. Knowledge has not only become the third factor of production in leading economies but is now the mainstay of today's economy. (Romer, 1986; 1990 cited in Ernst & Young, 1999).
2. As noted by Brinkley (2006), the ability to store, share and analyse knowledge through networks and communities using ICTs allows businesses to exploit the unique properties of knowledge to gain competitive advantage. Libraries are critical in this process of creating a knowledge economy. The implication of this is that there must be knowledge creation sharing and life long learning.

II. The knowledge economy

3. Fritz Machlup is attributed with having coined the term 'knowledge economy'. According to Machlup the USA had evolved into a 'knowledge economy' by 1960 based on evidence which showed that:
 - a) The main and increasing share of gross national output was accounted for by 'knowledge industries' – including knowledge intensive services e.g. finance and business services, education and R&D as well as knowledge intensive manufacturing production like ICT, media and publishing.
 - b) The main and increasing share of national employment and income was accounted for by 'knowledge workers' – including professional, managerial and scientific and technical occupations.
4. More than thirty years later the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) adopted a more generic definition of the term:

(A knowledge economy) is one that encourages its organizations and people to acquire, create, disseminate and use codified and tacit knowledge more effectively for greater economic and social development. (Clayton, 2006)

5. According to OECD, the term knowledge economy can be traced back to early 1990s. The OECD report issued in 1996, indicates that it is an economy directly based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge. It further states that on the way to the knowledge-based economy, a radical paradigm transformation is occurring in economic and social systems. 'Advances in high technology areas are changing the basis of economic growth. The easy and inexpensive availability of massive digitized data and information has been instrumental in creating new products and services. The knowledge revolution is the process of paradigm shift on the way to knowledge economy. As the term "revolution" implies, the process and its related labour pains will touch, globally, all aspects of human life' (OECD/GD 1996).

6. According to the United Kingdom Department of Trade and Industry, "A knowledge-driven economy is one in which the generation and exploitation of knowledge play the predominant part in the creation of wealth" (Ernst & Young, 1999). It can be argued that knowledge is and has become one of the important determinant factors in improving the quality of life even more than land and other natural resources. Knowledge production, sharing and its utilisation has great potential to enhance the quality of education, intellectual capital and overall national productivity

III. Libraries as custodian of knowledge

7. To understand how knowledge relates to libraries, it is imperative to make some distinctions between information and knowledge.

The two terms "information" and "knowledge" tend to be used interchangeably, though there is a slight difference between them. A lot about the conceptual differences has been provided in the literature (Debons et al 1988, Miao 1998, Dick 2002, April & Izadi 2004). A pyramid-like model, in which data is at the bottom, then information, then knowledge, and finally wisdom or intelligence at the summit is commonly known. This simplified model shows that knowledge is a part of information, but not all information can be called knowledge (Miao 1998). The rapid technological progress in information processing and the better understanding of both concepts reveal a need to separate knowledge from information (Miao 1998). This need can be seen in the distinction of the further two categories of knowledge, namely codified and tacit (OECD 1996).

8. Codified knowledge is sometimes called explicit and focal knowledge (Sveiby 1997). It is normally embodied in media, and can be transformed, transmitted and taught. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, may be in the mind of educated people, or in the form of skills and know-how needed to handle or improve codified knowledge. People can process knowledge which is explicit, embodied and codified much easier and more cost-effectively than knowledge which is tacit. The access bottleneck has therefore been moved to that knowledge which is intangible, invisible and only in one's mind. The principles and regularities of this kind of knowledge flow are, to a large extent, unknown to us. Information is often referred to as data about data.

9. Various types of libraries exist in order to provide same service, that is, provide access to information and knowledge to users. This is done through their engagement in:

- a) Storage and dissemination
- b) Cross-pollination of ideas
- c) Supporting skills, lifelong learning and workforce development and
- d) Providing access to resources through the use of ICT
- e) Information provision and support for business research

f) Contributing to regeneration, community cohesion and social inclusion

10. Top business executives in advanced countries have long recognized the value of library services in maintaining employability and innovativeness, as can be seen from the statement of Youssef Nasr of HSBC Bank who in a speech stated that:

“Information is the currency of the new economy. It is the key to success in education, learning job skills, and adapting skills to new challenges of the market. While demands for an educated workforce intensify, millions of New Yorkers have no access to the information they need to meet that demand. And the institutions that can address those needs—libraries—are in serious need of repair and modernization.”

—Youssef A. Nasr, President and Chief Executive Officer, HSBC Bank

IV. Careers/ skill requirements in the knowledge economy

11. As economies move from bases of manufacturing industries to information and ideas industries as a result of the knowledge economy, a number of radical changes in preferred work skills, business and service models are accompanying this transformation (Urban Libraries Council, 2007). New jobs and career options are being created while current jobs are being transformed. Jobs that are being created in the knowledge economy require highly educated and technologically-skilled workers. As such workers need to acquire the required new skills to remain employable. Workers also need to have a willingness to pursue continuing training to remain competitive in the face of a constantly changing work environment. Rapid shifts in the workplace mean that people must anticipate frequent career moves and take responsibility for their own career progression (Urban Library Councils, 2007).

12. Skills and knowledge are the engines of economic growth and remain critical to social development. Evident to this is the establishment of labour centers geared to the training, skills development and education of people in most countries. Such assistance is imperative to the improvement and sustainability of productivity and an increase in income opportunities in the workplace. Skills development, training and education are seen by International Labour Organisation (ILO) as tools to enhance people’s mobility in the labour market and offering the potential for increased career choices. Investing in human resources, as noted by ILO enables enterprises to improve productivity and compete more successfully in increasingly integrated world economies.

V. The role of libraries in ensuring continuous employability

13. Libraries provide employability and entrepreneurial knowledge by providing knowledge-based services such as skills enhancement, learning and knowledge sources for the maintenance of the enterprise and economic well-being. Libraries act as magnet for businesses and enhance the quality of life in communities.

14. In the face of changes being brought about by the knowledge economy, there are several programmes offered by libraries that are aimed at supporting continuous employability. These include job information centers, access to technology and technology training and learning and skills provision. In the US public libraries are providing greater workforce support with enhanced job information resources, workplace literacy programmes, improved technology access and staff dedicated to employment services (Urban Libraries Council, 2007).

V.1. Job information centres

15. Libraries are in a position to keep abreast with workforce trends. They can track what the hot employment sectors are and what skills are on demand. Understanding these trends help libraries advise people accordingly on where to search for job opportunities and on what skills to acquire in order to increase their chances of being employed in the knowledge economy. They also provide information on where the skills can be acquired from.

16. Libraries also provide career information resource materials, from newspapers with job advertisements, online access to job sites to books on how to prepare curriculum vitae. As job search and application information are now also available online, libraries are expanding training opportunities which focus on using and building technology skills. Thus the library contributes to job readiness and worker “retooling” (Urban Libraries Council, 2007). Some libraries with resources have staff available to provide one-on-one assistance on issues such as crafting cover letters, curriculum vitae as well as preparing for job interviews.

V.2. Learning and skills training

17. Libraries provide learning and skills training in areas aimed at enhancing employability. These include basic literacy skills, ICT skills and some job related skills. As ICT is driving the knowledge economy, people hoping to get employment or to retain their employment, need to have ICT competencies. ICT skills offered in libraries include basic computer appreciation skills, accessing the Internet, use of email and also use of specific software packages such as for word processing and spreadsheets. Other specific job related training such as communication skills are also being offered. Basic language courses e.g. English are also being offered in libraries.

V.3. Access to technology

18. Library computers are in high demand as they serve as the main source of access to computing technology to a great number of people who would otherwise not afford access from anywhere else. Results of a recent study found that 70% of people using computers in libraries reported the library was their only way to get a computer (Urban Libraries Council, 2007 p14). People use library computer facilities for accessing the Internet, sending emails and word processing among other uses. In Africa, access to computing technology is still beyond the reach of the majority of the population making the library the only available access point.

V.4 Information resources

19. Libraries provide access to information resources in the form of books, journals, magazines and online resources. These are consulted by people who are trying to acquire skills for employment purposes or those trying to upgrade their skill to ensure continuous employability.

20. With rapid changes in employment markets and skills, communities are scrambling to build workforce capacity. Public libraries are contributing many resources to workforce development strategies. The combination of public access technology, enhanced workforce collections and training gives public libraries a unique position as resource to community-wide workforce development efforts (Urban Libraries Council, 2007).

VI. Entrepreneurship

21. In his address on the UN Millennium Development Goals to the United Nations, the former Secretary General, Kofi Annan noted that:

‘It takes time to train the teachers, nurses, and engineers; to build the roads, schools and hospitals; to grow the small and large businesses able to create the jobs and income needed’ (UN Millennium Development Goals 2006).

22. The former Secretary General was alluding to the fact that for the world to achieve the Millennium Goals, access to information and knowledge is critical for development.

23. An entrepreneur can be defined as an individual who owns in whole or in part, and manages and controls, for the majority of his income a business enterprise in the private sector of the economy (UNECA, 1995).

24. An entrepreneur can also be defined as a person who undertakes and operates a new enterprise or venture and assumes some accountability for the inherent risks. Entrepreneurship is often difficult. It entails a complex and challenging enterprise whereby a great deal of risk has to be managed in order to avoid the failure of new ventures. In the context of the creation of for-profit enterprises, entrepreneur is often synonymous with founder.

25. Most commonly, the term entrepreneur applies to someone who creates systems to offer a product or service in order to obtain certain profit (Wikipedia).

26. Libraries form the basis for entrepreneurs and businesses to plan their businesses, find financial resources and increase employment and in the communities. They provide the business resources and databases that businesses rely on to be established and to flourish.

VI.1. Entrepreneurship in African economies

27. The world over, SMEs are increasingly regarded as vital for diversifying economies through creation of employment (Mutula, 2006). The small-scale sector has been recognized as having a considerable potential for creating low-cost employment and developing a pool of skilled and semi-skilled workers to meet the requirements of future economic and industrial expansion. Thus the development of entrepreneurship in small-scale sector has been recognized as an essential element for accelerating economic development in Africa and especially in responding to the social distortions created by unemployment.

28. Many African countries have assigned an important role to the small-scale sector in their programmes for socio-economic development. Measures have been taken at the national level to enhance the development of local entrepreneurship. At the regional and sub-regional levels African countries have put a special emphasis on the development of entrepreneurship in the programme of the Second Industrial Development Decade for Africa, 1993-2002, adopted by the tenth meeting of the Conference of African Ministers of Industry in Dakar, Senegal, in July 1991 (ECA, 1995).

VII. African Union (AU)

29. The African Union was established as a result of a dire need to unite the African continent and improve the lives of its citizens. The African Union has a powerful vision which is positively driving Africa into a bright and glorious future. The vision of the African Union is that of an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa driven by its own citizens, and a dynamic force in the global arena.

30. In order to achieve this vision and to translate it into tangible realistic action, seven missions have been clearly defined. They are

- a) Building capacity of integration players
- b) Ensuring coherence of the programmes aimed at speeding up the integration process for example harmonizing and rationalizing the regional economic communities
- c) Organizing brainstorming and institute strategic watch tower on key issues affecting the future of Africa
- d) Assuming a dynamic information and advocacy role for Africa in the global arena
- e) Playing a leading role for promotion of peace, human security and good governance in the continent
- f) Stimulating economic growth, social and cultural development throughout the continent and
- g) Establish a standing evaluation and follow-up mechanism to ensure that AU achieves its objectives

31. These ideals have been enthusiastically articulated, debated and discussed by Africans themselves in several, national, continental and international forums.

32. Our viewpoint from the knowledge profession side is that in order for Africa to attain this powerful vision and for these concrete missions to be realised, citizens of the continent need to produce, share and effectively utilize knowledge in all aspects of socio-economic development. Already some of this wealth of knowledge is available in libraries and related information centres. Library and information services are therefore critical in Africa's development. Knowledge is a strategic resource for development. A challenge to the African knowledge professionals, despite the constraints and complexities of entrepreneurship in the knowledge economy, the future of the creation of an African knowledge economy is dependent on us and it is incumbent on us to take the challenge to chart a roadmap and an agenda for Africa's development. The challenge is: practical utilization of knowledge as a strategic resource for the development of our communities. One of the significant moves that epitomizes the strong will to make a new and fresh turnaround for Africa in order to further the objectives of AU is the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) programme.

VIII. New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

33. This is a strategic framework for Africa's renewal. NEPAD was adopted in July 2001 concurrently with the launch of the AU. This coincidental launch of NEPAD and the AU clearly indicates the seriousness and determination of African leaders to bring a fresh turnaround for Africa. NEPAD is designed to address the challenges such as escalating poverty levels, underdevelopment and the continued marginalisation of Africa.

34. The main primary objectives of NEPAD are to:

- a) Eradicate poverty;

- b) Place African countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development;
- c) Stop the marginalisation of Africa in the globalization process and enhance its full and beneficial integration into the global economy; and
- d) To accelerate the empowerment of women in Africa's development.

35. The central principles underpinning this programme are the following:

- a) Good governance as a basic requirement for peace, security and sustainable political and socio-economic development
- b) African ownership and leadership, as well as broadening and deepening participation by all sectors of society;
- c) Anchoring the development of Africa on its natural resources and also the resourcefulness of its people;
- d) Partnership between and amongst African countries and its peoples;
- e) Acceleration of regional and continental integration;
- f) Building the competitiveness of African countries and the continent as a whole;
- g) Forging and actively promoting a new international partnership that could ultimately change the unequal relationship between Africa and the developed world; and
- h) Ensuring that all activities within NEPAD are linked to the attainment of the Millenium Development Goals.

36. The NEPAD programme is an African programme, designed in Africa, by Africans for the development of Africa.

37. Libraries and information services are critical for the success of this ambitious programme. A knowledge-driven economy will significantly contribute towards the successful attainment of the NEPAD programme. Sustained employability and entrepreneurship in the knowledge economy should make a contribution in the following NEPAD's priority sectors:

- a) Agricultural development, food processing and food security;
- b) Human resources development development with special reference to health, education, science and technology and general skills development;
- c) Building, improvement and maintenance of infrastructure, including Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Energy, Transport, Water and Sanitation;
- d) Promoting diversification of production and exports, particularly with respect to agro-industries, manufacturing, mining, mineral beneficiation and tourism;
- e) Accelerating intra-African and extra-continental trade and improving access to markets of developed countries; and
- f) Environmental sustainability

38. Employment and innovative knowledge economy in Africa will enable and empower us to mobilize resources by increasing domestic investment and attracting foreign investment, improving Africa's global trade, and enhancing credibility in the management of public expenditure and revenue.

IX. WSIS (World Summit on Information Society) Outcomes

39. The leaders of our countries committed themselves to build a people- centered, inclusive information society where everyone can create access, utilize and share information and knowledge,

enabling individuals, communities and people to achieve their full potential and thereby improve their quality life in a sustainable manner. Production, access, and sharing of relevant information and knowledge is an inevitable necessary condition to achieve these outcomes. That is why the President of IFLA when addressing the WSIS in Tunis on 18 November 2005 indicated that Libraries (are) the Information Society in Action. IFLA as a global voice for the library and information profession issued an **Alexandria Manifesto on Libraries, the Information Society in Action**, to indicate the critical role of libraries in the creation of an information society.

X. The role of libraries in entrepreneurship

40. Libraries provide various services that support enterprises and businesses. New and growing businesses use libraries to stimulate creativity and intelligence and more effective management. The scope of the services offered by libraries include a broad range of critical activities:

XI. Information provision

41. One of the major factors that influence the success of small and medium enterprises has been identified as the availability of information. However, as few small and new businesses are in a position to meet all their information needs, libraries therefore play a critical role in ensuring the success of small and medium-sized businesses through the provision of various information resources. Although there is so much information available in the knowledge economy, the challenge is ensuring that entrepreneurs have the right information at the right time to enable them to make the right decisions that will enable them to run profitable enterprises. Libraries provide basic business information which includes the information that libraries hold in both hard copy and online (Clayton, 2006). These materials include business directories, tax and legislative information, standards and information on how to start and run a successful business.

42. Access to current and comprehensive business product, supplier and financing information is a big traditional barrier to small business success (Urban Libraries Council, 2007). Libraries are the source of new and online business databases that entrepreneurs can use to access business information. Researchers have found that when libraries work with local and state agencies to produce business development data, workshops and research, market entry costs to prospective small businesses are reduced, existing businesses are strengthened and new enterprises are created (Urban Libraries Council, 2007). Libraries also provide information on new business opportunities that are being brought about by the new knowledge economy.

XII. Training provision

43. Training for new and small business owners is a rapidly growing area of library programming (Urban Libraries Council, 2007). A wide range of training is provided through public libraries. The training provided include:

- a) Accessing business information – libraries provide training on how to access relevant business information including Internet access and how to make use of online resources.
- b) Business planning/ startup – libraries with capacity provide training workshops on how to start and run successful businesses. These workshops will include topics such as financial management, marketing, human resources management etc. Some libraries partner with other business support organizations in developing and delivering the training programmes.
- c) Basic ICT training – this may include training on the use of the Internet, email, word processing, accounting packages and even on how to set up company websites.

XIII. Provision of computing technology

44. A lot of information is now coming in electronic format, hence doing business in the knowledge economy requires access to computing technology. Many small and new businesses do not have resources to acquire their own computing technology required to participate in the information revolution, including e-commerce. Small businesses thus use the facilities in libraries to conduct their businesses. This may include using the Internet to communicate with clients or preparing documents using the computers in the libraries.

45. Library support to entrepreneurs therefore results in:

- a) Reduced market entry barriers and costs for prospective entrepreneurs through the provision of business planning workshops and access to current online and print resources
- b) Reduced costs and improved business performance of existing entrepreneurs through access to a wide range of current business resources (Urban Libraries Council, 2007)

XIV. Measuring the economic impact of libraries

46. An increasing number of economic research tools are now being used to measure the public value of libraries, including cost-benefit impacts and return on investment that public libraries generate. The studies consistently identify positive economic impacts made by libraries at the national, state and local levels (Urban Libraries Council, 2007).

47. According to Clayton and Hepworth (2006:9), libraries, museums and archives have evolved with the knowledge economy in different historical eras.

48. This is ascertained by John King and Margaret Hedstrom (in Clayton and Hepworth 2006) by observing that:

‘The historic rise of libraries, archives and museums over the past 500 years is shown to lead to the creation and codification of knowledge that enabled the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution. Institutionalised collecting was a mechanism for the stability, comprehensiveness, and access needed by a rapidly expanding, knowledge-dependent socio-economic realm’ (Clayton & Hepworth 2006:9).

XV. Conclusion and Recommendations

49. Libraries have evolved to become critical “bridge builders” in providing access to information, learning and skills development for hard to reach groups (Clayton, 2006). Higher levels of knowledge, all things being equal, enable people to improve their employability, or to start up more viable businesses. It is, therefore, good policy to use libraries as agents for bridging the digital divide because libraries ensure wider access to information technology, the Internet and specialized information networks. (ECA, 2003).

50. Libraries as agents of change and as centres of information are critical in the knowledge economy. Librarians themselves should be enterprising enough to play an advocacy and influential role in placing libraries on the agenda of government. Governments in respective countries should be urged to recognise, support and promote the development of libraries. The difficult but exciting challenge for librarians is to convince governments and communities that libraries are significant in contributing towards continuous employability in the creation of a knowledge driven economy.

51. There is currently a positive enabling political environment in Africa, namely
- a) African Union Vision and Mission
 - b) NEPAD and related programmes
 - c) Adoption of the Millennium Development goals by all heads of states
Commitment by world leaders to the outcome of the World Summit of Information society
52. All these create a fertile soil and conducive environment for libraries to play a critical role in providing, supporting and ensuring continuous employability and entrepreneurship in the knowledge economy. "Knowledge in Power"

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