

INFORMATION SKILLS IN ORGANISATIONS: A NEEDS ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The basic tenet of information provision is to provide the right person with the right information at the right time and in the right format. This process requires specialised skills and trained professionals. This study attempts to determine the importance organisations place on information and the role it plays within the organisation, as well as the skills utilised and needed to better implement this resource. The study was conducted in the Brandwag complex and the Mimosa Mall development in Bloemfontein and made use of structured questionnaires to determine the awareness of organisations to the changing information needs in environments surrounding them. Information management relates strongly to the missions, visions and goals of organisations. Management may rely on traditional paper-based information systems or they might have advanced to technological systems, but the available information still has to be managed properly. Information is a pervasive entity and requires constant care in order to be of value to the knowledge base of the organisation and decision-making processes. The results attained in terms of the organisational needs and perceptions can be used to aid in the development of Information Studies curriculums.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a well - known fact that the information environment keeps changing and that the organisation with the most advanced and current information is the most likely to succeed in its ventures. Many companies confuse information management with information technology. According to Wilson (1997:8) information management predates the computer and can thus not be seen as a product of the information age. Technology did speed up the process, but the use of computers does not necessarily imply that information and its accompanying information skills are utilised or that information management is being practised. No organisation can possibly be successful in business without proper information and information management, and yet information management is an ill-understood concept.

Historical evidence indicates that the great empires of the past were masters at handling not only communication, but also information. Wilson (1997:10) uses the Roman Empire and the empire of Genghis Khan as examples. These empires were administered from the central capitals, that is Rome and a stronghold in Mongolia. Although without technological advantages such as telephones or radios, they were able to depend on runners and horsemen to bring them information on time. Information was brought from the most remote outposts and this resulted in the establishment of an empire. The ruler and his bureaucrats were able to keep abreast of changes and upheavals.

Information is a pervasive entity that keeps increasing all the time. The formats in which information is stored, keep increasing as well. Advances in technology made it possible to refine information and information management, thus creating better utilisation of possible opportunities as they arise.

At the beginning of this new millennium we are faced with rapid social, economic and technological changes. Information systems at work and at home are in a constant state of development. We are faced with new challenges daily and the ways in which we work and relax are also changing. Consequently the ways in which we manage the massive amounts of information that confront us will also have to change. It is imperative that skilled people should manage the information resource.

RESEARCH FOCUS

Since information and information management are essential to gain a competitive edge in the market place, the article investigates the

application of information skills in selected organisations, in order to, among other matters, apply this knowledge in the development of Information Study curriculums.

The focus is firstly on the importance of information as a resource and the information skills required within organisations. Secondly the information skills of current employees will be examined and suggestions offered as to what should be offered in Information Study curriculums.

A needs analysis was conducted in certain multi-national organisations, namely Pick 'n Pay and Game, and various banking institutions, namely Standard Bank, ABSA, Permanent Bank and FNB in Bloemfontein.

These organisations were chosen because of the magnitude of their utilisation of information. After all, the organisations are all role players in competitive markets and would therefore have to utilise information and all the possible skills they can obtain in order to stay competitive. Their needs were identified through the use of structured questionnaires. Data were analysed critically in order to draw certain conclusions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Importance of information as a resource

The organisations contacted listed the following types of information as important to them:

- Financial information;
- Management information;
- Personnel information;
- Demographic information;
- Personal/Client information;
- Market trends;
- Customer relations;
- Computer system information;
- Internal policy information;
- Procedural information;
- Political information;
- Legislative information;
- Labour registration information; and
- Technical information.

The majority of the respondents listed financial information as the most important type of information for their organisation to make a success in the business world. The second most important type of information listed was management information.

In considering the different types of information listed, it would appear that much attention is taken up with labour issues. In fact, much of management's time is spent on assuring that the people working for them are content. The rest of the information which they apply, is directly related to the people whom they serve.

The managements of these organisations all seem to apply Wilson's idea that information can only deliver its full capability when it forms a part of all strategic planning that takes place within the organisation (1997:57). In this way information and information management can support new ways of doing business.

In terms of the collection of data and information in the organisations the following were listed as important methods of gathering information:

- Research;
- Personal computers and the Internet;
- Feedback from clients and staff;
- Telesales;
- Advisors;
- File transfers from the respective head offices;
- Training courses;
- Meetings;
- Workshops; and
- Conferences.

These methods of gathering information were spread out over most of the organisations. From the responses it can be ascertained that research is seen as the most important method of gathering information in any organisation. Research supplies organisations with the necessary knowledge (a product of human labour) to produce better products. The other methods that are very popular are feedback from the staff and clients. In any organisation information is gathered from different sources inside and outside the organisation. Information sources in the organisation that are identified as important are listed as:

- Staff observation;
- Head office;
- Research;
- Sales analysis; and
- Observation of the competitors.

Here there would seem to be a discrepancy since most of the organisations identified research as the most important way of gathering information in the organisation, but thereafter they allocate a higher priority to information gathered through staff observation. Information sources outside the organisation are listed in terms of their importance to the ultimate success of the organisation:

- Customers/clients;
- Suppliers;
- Buyers;
- Surveys done by outside organisations;
- Subject journals; and
- TV.

According to the respondents more weight is allotted to the information gathered internally. As was mentioned earlier, management does seem to pay much attention to their respective staff members and their opinions count for a lot. This relates back to the mission and vision statements of most of these organisations where they purport to provide all their employees with equal opportunities to state their views. The respondents therefore mostly stated that gathering information from their employees was very important. A minority of respondents placed only an average importance on this source of information. In terms of methods employed to gather information from their employees most of the respondents and their companies favoured oral communication as long as the information imparted was of a "good" (relevant, reliable and clear) quality. Other methods employed to gather information from employees are:

- Questionnaires;
- Meetings to discuss problems encountered and possible solutions;
- Training courses; and
- Staff suggestion schemes that rely on faxes or memos.

Every one of the respondents stated that information was seen as a useful resource. The respondents also stated that regarding information as the

beginning of a competitive advantage was very important. They stated differing reasons for this, but information:

- Helps to generate new business;
- Provides them with an edge over their competitors;
- Aids them in providing a personalised product offering;
- Helps role players to stay aware of their positions;
- Contributes to people finding purpose in life and their working environments;
- Provides a better knowledge of the product;
- Affords them the chance to stay ahead of retailers and the shopping trends; and
- Provides them with the capability to provide a better customer service.

In view of the previous statements, it follows that most of the organisations and businesses agreed that employee awareness of the importance of information might make a positive contribution to the success of the company. Some respondents even stated that they supported this idea fully. A minority of companies expressed less enthusiasm, saying that they only agree with the statement, while one respondent stated that this aspect of information sharing was not highlighted in their company policy at all.

Information skills required by management

Responses, in terms of the number of information professionals employed, varied substantially among the organisations contacted. Some respondents stated that they only employ one information professional and others stated many, while some even outsourced their information work. The information professionals whom they do employ seem to work in a myriad of positions ranging from general sales to sales managers. Some of the information professionals are employed in technical positions, others are general, financial, marketing or senior managers in their respective companies. Information professionals are also employed in merchandising and general operations. The most popular positions for information professionals seem to be that of financial advisors and general consultants. Certain respondents stated that they sometimes employ external consultants to solve particular information needs in their organisations.

According to Savage (1996:196) "organisational learning and the ability to synthesise information are essential" and management must be able to draw on these multiple capabilities available to them in order to succeed. The activities performed by the information professionals who are

employed by the organisations back up the previous statement. Information professionals are actively engaged in the following types of activities:

- Designing and implementation of information systems and networks;
- Designing of websites;
- Downloading of information from intranets and the Internet;
- Obtaining feedback from employees, clients and customers;
- Research of various kinds;
- Financial work; and
- Training.

Most of the respondents (62,5%) declared that they did not employ personnel without tertiary qualifications in relevant subject fields in information related positions. The other respondents (37,5%) do employ people without these qualifications, but state that experience in the relevant field is just as important as tertiary qualifications. Other qualifications that were favoured by respondents were business skills and communication degrees. Experience that respondents would like their employees to possess, differed quite a lot. The retailers placed a high value on general expertise in the business, as well as sales experience. Budgeting and related financial experience also ranked very highly on everybody's list of necessary experience. Cross training in different departments were also listed as important to give employees a view of the bigger organisational picture. Being trained in the different departments will also solve one of the other chosen experience fields, since it will help employees to build up their general knowledge about the business.

Communication skills were also highly rated. Organisations expect their staff to be highly qualified in terms of both verbal and technological communication. This also implies that they should be experienced in information technology in general. According to Grossberg, Struwig and Tlabela (1999:83) it was the computer more than anything that led to changes in information technology. This is partly due to the ease of production and the rapid distribution of computer equipment over large areas of the globe. The immediate reaction of all businessmen is to reach for the computer and microprocessor to do most of their business. This means that everybody has to be computer literate in order to participate in the information age that necessitates the effective use of technology (Grossberg, Struwig & Tlabela 1999:83). Information technology has had a profound effect on the handling of information in the administrative and

business-support areas and according to Wiggins in Cronin (1985:40) when incorporated with machinery it also revolutionises the productive capacity and speed of manufacture. This leads to products being replaced that much earlier by new innovative products. In order to implement these new products, businesses need employees that have experience in general planning, strategic analysis, strategic planning and general management practices. Respondents mentioned that they would like their staff to receive better information training in terms of Windows networking and specific product knowledge. In general, respondents and their companies seemed quite satisfied with the level of information training which staff members received internally. They all state that they have regular training courses for all staff members. These training courses include courses at a high level where employees get sent overseas to gain a better understanding of the global business environment.

In rating the importance of certain courses for the possible inclusion in an Information Studies degree the responses were as follows:

Courses	Very important	Important	Moderately important	Not important at all
Computer training	50%	50%		
Communication skills	75%	25%		
Management training	58,3%	33,3%	8,3%	
Language: English	66,6%	25%	8,3%	
Language: Afrikaans	25%	41,6%	33,3%	
Language: African (Black)	8,4%	41,6%	41,6%	8,3%

Other courses that respondents would like to see included in an Information Studies degree include the following:

- Customer interaction;
- Labour law;
- Human behaviour;
- Sales skills; and
- Leadership training.

It would appear that organisational needs are as broad as the information field itself. An Information Studies degree would have to cover a very wide subject field to satisfy the needs of the modern organisation.

Current information skills in the organisation

In terms of the current information activities that are part of the ongoing procedure in organisations, respondents were asked to comment on their satisfaction in terms of the skills, knowledge and attitude that the job require from respective staff members. In terms of the knowledge and skills required 75% of the respondents state that they are very satisfied with their employees' levels of knowledge and skills. The other 25% of the respondents state that they are satisfied with their employees performance in terms of knowledge and skills displayed related to information activities. 16,6% of the respondents are very satisfied with their employees performance in terms of the attitude they display toward information related activities, 58,3% are satisfied with their employees' attitudes and 25% of the respondents were unsure.

Regarding the question about the effectiveness of their current information practices, 50% of the respondents listed their written practices as excellent, 41,6% rated it as good and 8,3% rated it as average. The oral information exchange received the following rating: 58,3% listed these practices as excellent, 33,3% listed it as good and 8,3% listed it as average. Technical expertise received the same ratings as oral practices. These results would seem to indicate that organisations in general are quite adequately prepared for the technological advances that the information age is going to throw at them. In terms of improving the skills of the current workforce, 50% of the respondents wanted to improve or change their current information situation. The other 50% seemed quite content with current practices. The respondents who did advocate improvements and/or change were adamant about changing the technological skills of their staff. They specifically listed more training in terms of the Internet and search strategies on this resource. Better oral communication was also quite high on the list. Certain respondents felt that their staff needed a better general education which is not something that can always be changed at University level.

According to an ANC discussion document on education and training (1994:79-80) the reconstruction of the old educational system is based on the following principles:

- Information is integral to lifelong education;
- Resource-based learning and a culture of reading and information skills underpin quality education;
- Democracy in society is underpinned by democratically managed institutional structures and practices; and
- Optimal use must be made of all resources.

The realisation of the value and utility of information of all kinds has led to the expectation of broader and more active information services. This implies that a higher level of intellectual and thinking skills must be taught at school level already. Such experiences will lead to "the development of a self-directed learner able and motivated for lifelong learning" (McDonald 1988:89). Essentially this is what the business of today expects from their employees. They want employees to be learners who are able to keep themselves up to date with new developments in their respective fields.

Something else that seems to cause problems in the working environment is the fact that people come from such diverse backgrounds. Respondents stated that they would like to see a better integration of the cultural backgrounds of their staff members. What is culturally acceptable in one culture might be considered to be ethically incorrect in another. As the organisation's culture keeps on changing these internal structural changes must be addressed as well. Management must be aware of these changes and try to understand and manage it through better research into the marketplace and clientele, continued dialogue with the different groups involved in such cultural changes and a good knowledge of the public's perception of the company and their values (Hickson & Stacks 1998:220). Multi-cultural awareness is part of most universities' communication courses, but the onus still falls on management to propagate good relations among their staff.

Respondents were also asked to comment on any possible deficiencies in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitude of their employees. Their responses relating to knowledge can be listed as follows:

- Many felt that new staff lack knowledge and need additional training;

- Others felt that the staff often knew what to do, but they did not necessarily understand why; which meant that they were competent to handle the required procedures, but had never been trained to understand the long term implications of what they do; and
- Others felt that their employees lacked a good perception of life and their own future.

As for skills currently employed, respondents only stated that new staff need training before they are adequately equipped to do their jobs. Certain standards are set within each organisation and new employees cannot be expected to automatically know exactly what is expected of them and therefore they need training, as much to improve their level of skills, as to help them to adjust to the new system.

Staff members are not always up to date with the newest systems and the utilisation of the latest technology. This implies more training for old employees too. Some companies expect their employees to stay up to date with the latest developments in their respective fields, but this is not always possible. Therefore employees should also receive the necessary support from their companies.

The question that asked respondents to comment on areas where their employees might be overqualified for was met with strong confirmation from all that one's personnel can never be overqualified for a specific job. The respondents were adamant about this statement, but refrained from commenting on hiring practices where prospective employees may be told that they are overqualified for a certain position and the salary level.

In terms of areas that employees were unprepared for when they were initially appointed, respondents listed the following fields as problematic:

- Product and technical information skills;
- Normal software training;
- Legal knowledge;
- Customer care;
- Promotional, practical and in store advertising; and
- Natural training that is needed when staff is promoted.

Respondents stated that they did not really have problems recruiting for specific information related jobs. The only time when they really struggle to get the right person is when the salary they offer is rather low. This could lead to businesses hiring somebody that might not be qualified for a specific position.

Some organisations also said that they outsourced some of the information related jobs. This means that they do not have to recruit somebody for that specific position, they just have to find a reliable external company. Reliability can be a problem, especially when the information is very sensitive and the company might not want others to see it. This could be another reason why organisations implement security and non-disclosure clauses as part of their regular data security protocol.

None of the respondents could identify specific manpower needs that were created by the appointment of an information professional. All of them are convinced that their needs are continually changing and this may lead to new manpower needs being created.

In terms of the amount of power relegated to information professionals the organisations again differed. The majority of the organisations state that they give much power to their information specialists and the IT department. Others stated that the amount of power was directly related to the job level of the employee or closely related to the type of project they were working on. Most of the organisations contacted seemed to see power as a flexible entity that could be given to people and taken away again as the need arose. Other respondents stated that information professionals in their organisations were either managers in their respective fields, or second in charge.

Information professionals are thus part of the management team, even if this means they are only allowed to make decisions up to a certain level. Only one respondent said that information professionals in their organisation have absolutely no say in management decisions. Angell (1993:168) asserts that it makes sense that information professionals must at least work with the "consent, authorisation and encouragement of the management of a business". What better way to get the consent of management than being part of that elite team?

It was stated by 12,5% of the respondents that their employees felt threatened by the information professionals in the organisation and the amount of power granted to this group. The other 87,5% felt that their employees were happy with the division of power in the organisation and they did not feel threatened by the information professionals.

These statistics seem to contradict the literature. For example, according to Angell (1991:118), people often resent the need to share data they regard as their own. User departments are unlikely to appreciate being under control of a central information department. They may resent the security controls that are implemented on data that are run through their programs.

This may lead to organisational conflict if management does not pay attention to the situation and the users feel that they do not benefit directly from this changed situation. Knowledge workers can also become demotivated if they feel that they are being separated from the data that they collect and utilise.

Respondents all declared that they could not think of instances where power, gained through information, have been misused. This seems rather strange. If we think of the environment that we live in most people try to better their positions no matter what the consequences. Possible explanations could be that the respondents were genuinely unaware of such instances or that they were unwilling to share such information with the researcher.

Organisations explain that their staff members have no secrets from one another. They are all willing to share the information and knowledge that they possess. They share this information and knowledge verbally or on the intranets of the organisations. A minority of respondents declared that their employees have no option but to share the information and knowledge they possess since it was part of the company's policy. These statements seem to cover the two types of culture found in organisations according to Moynihan (1993:172). Some organisations have a collective approach to solving problems and sharing information, while other organisations favour individual initiative and action.

In terms of sharing information Davis (1999:1) states that technology is an enabler, but it is the cultural aspect that really plays the most important role. Employees are often reluctant to share information and knowledge, because the old cliché says that knowledge is power. A method that might help employees to part with their information and knowledge might be to draw them into individual conversations. People are more willing to share in one-on-one settings than in group situations. The reason is that they may find the group situation very intimidating.

Organisations that struggle with information sharing might find that employees simply did not have the time to share information with others. Everybody is so busy with their allocated tasks that they do not get around to discussing interesting situations that come their way. Davis (1999:2) advises on appointing knowledge liaisons that will ensure that employees utilise their knowledge bases.

Responding organisations were asked to comment on the importance of sharing information with certain role players in their economic environment, and these were their responses:

	Very important	Important	Moderately important	Not important
Management	90,9%	9,09%		
Employees	72,7%	27,29%		
Clients	90,9%	9,09%		
Suppliers	63,6%	27,3%	9,09%	
Rivals	36,36%	9,09%	18,18%	36,36%

The table proves that sharing necessary information and knowledge with management and the clients are more important than anything else. Importance is also placed on the employees receiving the necessary information. Few respondents really felt the urge to share information with their rivals!

Everybody saw correct and timely information as extremely important. All respondents felt that such information could make a positive difference. They listed the following positive results:

- It helps to satisfy the clients;
- It often helps to calm down a difficult client enough to get him/her to listen to what is being offered or said;
- It has helped to introduce a new product in the past to satisfy a particular client need;
- Whenever a salesman is making a sale, the right information helps in allowing the sale to run smoothly;
- New trends are communicated well in advance and can be implemented correctly;
- Employees who can provide customers with the right information appear reliable and this helps the organisation with customer return;
- Good information lends credibility to the company; and
- Proper information leads to better knowledge, decisions and a higher profit for the organisation.

The reverse of the above-mentioned also received attention. The researcher was also interested in the effect that incorrect and untimely information could have on an organisation. Respondents cited the following examples:

- It could lead to conflict being created between individuals, the organisation and the industry at large;
- It could mean that they will be unable to satisfy their customers;
- A client that has a negative experience will tell others and with the spread of word of mouth the organisation may be negatively influenced;
- If employees act on incorrect information it can cost the company dearly, since they might invest money in a product that will not sell;
- A salesman that sells an item and provides incorrect information can lead to the client experiencing the whole sale as bad service;
- Incorrect and untimely information might lead to confusion;
- The organisation might miss out on opportunities;
- If incorrect information is provided internally it is subject to correction; and
- If incorrect information is provided externally, for example a client receives incorrect information, then it makes the employee appear unreliable and incompetent which leads to the company losing credibility; and
- This in turn might lead to the organisation taking a financial downturn.

CONCLUSION

The respondents approached realise that information is crucially important to their organisations and that it should be managed. Respondents stated that all information was useful and could be applied somewhere in the organisation. This is contradictory to Angell's (1991:124) opinion that a tremendous amount of information flows around most organisations which are either useless or harmless. This type of information does not need to be managed unless it interferes with the useful information. Managers will not treat this type of information as a resource. However, the main idea behind information management is to prevent the excessive duplication of certain information to reduce the information overload in the organisation.

Some forms of information need to be validated while others do not acquire this special treatment. Operational information will need careful

validation and information of a sensitive nature will also need management policies to ensure protection from outside interference.

In general the majority of respondents appeared to be quite satisfied with their current employees in terms of information skills and the application of these skills. They did agree with Ochalla (2000:13) that certain skills should be implemented in curriculums to better the quality of employees whom they hire. These skills include:

- Utilisation of computers for the searching and retrieval of information;
- Computer skills and Internet exploitation;
- Database management skills; and
- Interview skills.

Respondents over the whole spectrum seemed satisfied with the employees whom they hire from educational institutions. As culture plays a major role in the organisational setting, it is important to have courses that emphasise differences in intercultural behaviour and communication. All employees should have a basic knowledge of the different cultures represented in the organisation.

Much of what has been said thus far indicates that a degree in Information Studies will have to be a degree that covers a very wide subject area. It will have to prepare students for the real world. They should be prepared to step into the working environment and make a positive contribution from the beginning.

Many organisations do not have the time or inclination to train new people. They expect educationally qualified personnel to be proficient in practice as well. This is why most employers expect a certain amount of experience from the candidate before appointing a new staff member. According to Ochalla (2000:20) employers usually seek the following types of experience:

- Expertise in IT;
- Strategic planning and budgeting;
- Multiple customer interfacing;
- Middle level management; and
- Online searching.

But where are students/learners supposed to get experience? The above-mentioned types of experience can, in part, be provided through the correct curriculum. This is one of the reasons why an Information Studies degree will have to be such an encompassing course.

Ochalla (2000:21) identified the following skills as important to a Library and Information Science Curriculum:

- Ability to use information retrieval databases;
- Language proficiency and communication skills;
- Management and administrative skills;
- Interpersonal and leadership skills; and
- Computer skills in general.

Such a curriculum must also emphasise a community consciousness and commitment to work.

The public sector has been identified as the major player in the employment market for information professionals. This means that a sound education in management, information and communication technologies, information searching, analysis and synthesis, as well as the ability to perform practical work in different departments of the organisation is regarded as essential.

In the end, however, it still boils down to providing what one may call "the right information, at the right time, for the right purpose, to the right user, with the lowest possible cost, with the highest possible quality, actuality and security, and abiding to current laws and regulations" (Anon 2000:1).

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