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# Information Brokerage: An Entrepreneurial Approach to Information Services in Nigeria

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Richard Branson, the Chief Executive Officer of Virgin Group, predicted in 2011 that information brokerage will be among the leading professions that will emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nigeria has for long been practising librarianship, as a profession, in form of public service, but it is yet to be appreciated in the same manner as professions like law, accountancy, medicine, estate management, surveying or even journalism, unlike what obtains in developed countries. Subsequently, because of this lack of respect for the profession, the practitioners are not sufficiently appreciated, most especially in the less developed countries.

With the advent of information and communications technology, librarianship started evolving, expanding librarianship frontier of knowledge into mainstream information science within the world of information society and globalization. Ordinarily, library and information service profession originated as public service, without much prestige. With the revolution in information and communications technology, knowledge society has been expanded, modified, exemplified, and potential within the information society, characterised by ICT, has changed and enhanced the library and information service profession around the world.

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In Africa, there is little empirical research on information consultancy and brokerage, and almost nothing originated from authors in the developing countries despite the upsurge of reasons for involvement in the services provided in the region (Ocholla, 2009). The question is, is there really a market for independent information production in Africa? Available information shows that it has been going on for 15 years in Botswana, with a market for high-quality, value-added research and information services, even though it thrived under growing and contracting economic cycles. As a way of moving librarians out of the library, the American Society for Information Science (ASIS) was itself a major force in the drive to divorce information from the library. To ASIS members, information is not only recorded items of knowledge; it is also the digitized bits of information that could be moved through computers and telephone lines to where it is needed (Levine, 1998: 5).

## II. ORIGIN OF INFORMATION BROKERAGE

It is believed that information brokering - the business of buying and selling information as a product - has been around for a long time. It can be traced to the early history of Gutenberg in the middle 1400s, in which church and government prerogative, involving the distribution of "origin works of art," gave way to mass production and the business of book publishing (Levine, 1998). Another school of thought opines: "information brokering as we now think of it as a business opportunity for the individual information professional was begun by the French in 1935. Conversely, followed that the concept came from the Societe Fracaise de Radiophone, an organisation of professionals who created the notion of supplying information over the phone for a fee."

By contrast, we cannot point to the genesis of information brokering in Africa. Africa has still not tapped significantly into the vast field of information, which is yet to be fully appreciated as a field with enormous social, educational and economic benefits.

## III. ENTREPRENEURIAL APPROACH TO INFORMATION BROKERING

Regardless of Africa's approach to information and communications technology in the information age, the business of information brokering is a manifestation

of globalization-global village where information is at your fingertips; but how many people- researchers, students, managers, lecturers - are skilful enough in ICT, information retrieval techniques, storage and dissemination? It is from this perspective that finding a solution to everyday problems is the goal of many visionary entrepreneurs; it is a way of developing ideas to address our society's greatest challenges because if Africa does not get it right now in terms of ICT, then the rest of the world will not wait for us.

In considering investment in consultancy and brokerage services in a unique consumer environment such as Africa, it would be fool-hardy to ignore the complexities posed by the coexistence of an information-conscious population, on the one hand, and a semi-literate population, on the other hand. For instance, Nigeria has a literate level of 60% (Ocholla, 2009).

#### IV. KEY LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, Africa as a whole does not have any record or data of library and information professionals, information brokerage or independent information professionals. Although identifying them may be difficult, Igbeka (2008) opines that there seems to be some confusion sometimes as to what to call someone who provides clients (users) with legally obtained information for a fee. Some go by the title information broker (IB); others, independent researcher, independent information professional (IIP), information consultant, freelance librarian or business librarian. All these terms refer, more or less, to a person who engages in the business or activity of buying or selling information as a product –an information entrepreneur or technocrat.

#### V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The recent government policy on the development of entrepreneur skills in all our tertiary institutions aims at reducing the rate of unemployment among university graduates. It is an innovative approach to the development of a new curriculum for all the universities, so that when students graduate they can become employable instead of looking for white-collar jobs. According to Grimm (2006), innovative milieu is a prominent driving force for promoting start-ups as well as regional economic development. Innovative milieu, as defined by Fromhold-Eisebith (1995) and cited in Grim (2006), is a local environment with specific features: it promotes entrepreneurial innovation, and is characterized by a network of multiple persons who make the best use of informal channels among executive companies, research and development institutions and regional administration. Putnam (1993) shows that entrepreneurial

success not only results from individual attributes like a strong drive for self-actualization or existentialism but is also determined by the social performance and integration of entrepreneurs within regional public lives and networks.

Flora, Flora & Sharp (1997) developed a three-way model for entrepreneurial social infrastructure (ESI) that promotes economic development. They stress:

- High degree of institutional openness and transparency, which also means the acceptance of controversial opinion and politics;
- The mobilization of diverse resources (meaning the presence of organizations like public (and private) banks, or venture capitalists with a certain commitment and positive attitude to local and regional investment); and
- The network qualities of a community which should optimally be inclusive for all community members and linked horizontally to other communities, and vertically to regional, state, and national centres.

A further theoretical analysis of entrepreneur theory and practice by Mitchell (1994) emphasizes the idea that ``entrepreneur use expert scripts to process information differently than novices was first introduced into the literature, there has been considerable development of this branch of research within the larger body of entrepreneurial cognition literature (Englebrecht, 1995; Gustafsson, 2004; Mitchell & Chesteen, 1995; Mitchell Smith, et al, 2002; Mitchell, Smith, Seawright, & Morse, 2000). Igbeka (2008) in her theoretical perspective based on the study of library and information science with other issues related to library and information services. This includes academic studies regarding how library resources are used, how people interact with library systems, and the organisation of knowledge for efficient retrieval of relevant information. She highlights the different roles and duties of librarians, their work places and qualifications, and different types of libraries. She also theorised on the influence of information and communications technology librarianship, which expands the horizon of the profession through modern practice.

Kissel (2003:1) views an information broker as an individual who searches for information for clients. Information brokers use various resources including the Internet, online services that specialize in databases, public libraries, books and CD-ROMs. They also make telephone calls. Some regard the word 'broker' as a misnomer. For others, 'information retrieval consultant' would be more accurate. The issue of name bearing or tag for library and information service professionals is a question of nomenclature. What they do and the contents of information provided to their clients matter to the public, although it might be confusing to construct a business model.

## VI. INFORMATION BROKERAGE BUSINESS MODEL

Whether a company sells products or services, or does other businesses, or both, there are many different ways to approach the marketplace and make profit. Business models, of which the brokerage model is one, are used to describe how companies go about this process. They spell out the main ways in which companies make profit by identifying a company's role during commerce and describing how products, information and other important elements are structured. Just as there are many different types of industries and companies, there are also many different kinds of business models. While some are simple, others are very complex. Even within the same industry, companies may rely on business models that are very different from one another, and some companies may use a combination of several different models. As Reyport (2011:8) explains, every e-commerce business is either viable or not viable. They hardly qualify for the paint-by-number prescriptions that business people seem to expect. Business models themselves do not offer solutions; rather, how each business is run determines its success. So the success of e-commerce business will hinge largely on the art of management even as it is enabled by the science of technology.

Lack of basic infrastructure can mar this good model. African countries are yet to make a breakthrough in the provision of a sustainable environment for this type of project.

## VII. SKILLS NEEDED TO SUCCESSFULLY OPERATE THIS BUSINESS

These include expertise in researching and accessing public, and in some cases private, information over the Internet through traditional sources such as libraries, microfiche archives, and so on. To update a Website, an individual requires basic Web publishing skills. Communication skills should be concise and descriptive.

## VIII. COST TO START THIS BUSINESS

Starting this business will require the design, development and hosting of a Web site as well as having a computer, appropriate software and a printer. The approximate start-up cost ranges between \$3,000 and \$7,500 in advanced countries. The average cost for a would-be Nigerian business man going into information brokerage would be double this amount.

## IX. NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES NEEDED

An experienced and competent individual with superior online researching skills and resources can start this business single-handedly.

## X. INTERNATIONAL POTENTIAL

The international potential of this business is unlimited. There is no telling where a client may reside. If you have access to the information they seek, you can e-mail it to them, and this makes the borders of your business purely virtual and governed solely by language.

## XI. IMPORTANT BUSINESS ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

The information brokerage business sometimes infringes on the privacy of others, and whenever this happens there are legal implications. Before entering the business, one should research the liability and risk factors. Sometimes, there are tight deadlines to be met. Somebody has to ensure he/she has done additional research they can resort to in order to provide adequate professional service. Moreover, pricing should be clearly outlined on the company's site. Various services are defined by the nature of information the client is searching for. The costs should be competitive and reflective of the amount of time it takes to conduct each search.

## XII. EXPECTATIONS OF LIBRARIANS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Beyond information consultancy or brokering, librarians at this stage of Internet usage and database, should be readily available. Even as the smallest libraries become connected, librarians must also hone their skills in order to determine what can financially be offered in the library. A great development in getting more out of the purchasing power of the library dollar has been the creation of library consortia (Stanley, 2003:134). When considering entrepreneurship in the field of information brokerage, the future of librarianship can be simply summed up: competition. Librarians must learn to focus on self-promotion and review resource allocation in an increasingly competitive field (Bynog, 2003:137). According to Parker-Gibson (2003: 161), an information professional "should be at least a little interested in everything, should read a little, often in professional literature and in other areas, and should be aware of the world around him or her, even as the world becomes more complex."

## XIII. AFRICA'S PERSPECTIVE ON INFORMATION BROKERAGE

According to Ocholla, (2009), documented empirical research on information consultancy and brokerage shows almost nothing originated from authors in developing countries despite the upsurge of reasons for involvement in the services provided in the region. Today's information seeker is preoccupied with

too many projects, and wants information as fast as possible. He does not have the time to spend long hours in the library looking through huge piles of obsolete books and journals. Ifidon (2004, cited in Igbeka, 2008) argues further that the problem of finance for the maintenance of the library and its services brings into play the idea of fee-based library services. This is often referred to as in-house brokerage. Fee-based library services are services which libraries provide to primary and secondary users either for profit or on cost-recovery basis.

#### XIV. LIBRARY AND BUSINESS

The type of business idea within librarianship is about selling information. Branson (2011) says that it is not only about having an idea but also making sure that it sells or works. With the business of information brokering, it is necessary to identify which areas of librarianship should be commercialised or turned around for entrepreneurship. Aguolu & Aguolu (2002) categorically state six fundamental roles of libraries: knowledge conservation, information, education, research, culture and entertainment. Put together, these form the bedrock of duties and functions of library and information professionals. In other words, these are the basis of information professionalism. Today, there are academic librarianship, school librarianship, media librarianship, law librarianship, and corporate librarianship. The following fall into information brokering:

1. Gathering competitive intelligence in various sectors such as pharmaceutical, financial, telecomunication and energy.
2. Searching patents and trademarks;
3. Creating databases for organisations;
4. Preparing research reports in response to staff requests for specific information;
5. Verifying facts for external and internal reports and duplications;
6. Identifying research done at other organisations to avoid unnecessary duplication;
7. Evaluating and comparing information software and sources of data prior to purchase;
8. training other staff to efficiently and cost effectively use databases (Igbeka, 2008);
9. research, analysis, information services, information management and consulting services (Ocholla, (2009);

The front runners in this type of business in Nigeria are not many, and where they exist they are still referred to as librarians. The British Council in Nigeria sells information in its domain to the public in Nigeria. It is membership-oriented. Photocopies of materials are charged and paid for. Referrals are the only free take-away materials. According to a study carried out by Ocholla (2009), "the analysis of data and the subsequent results revealed that, while Botswana has

information consultants and brokers, there is a need for their services in management mainly but also in information technology, information systems and informal training". There is no doubt that information brokering is an emerging profession in Nigeria and other African countries.

Where library and information services are free, most especially within academic, public and national domains, library users are not patronising them as expected, apart from paying for registration or ISSN /ISBN numbers obtained from the National Library. Students go to library just to read. The apathy from clients is due to a number of factors. The question of introducing an entrepreneurial approach may be discouraging. Another angle to it is that many people do not mind paying for those services if good services or products are offered them.

#### XV. THE NATURE OF INFORMATION BROKERAGE

Information brokering as a profession probably has its roots in the 1960s, when a few individuals and library organisations realized that the computer and the photocopier, harbingers of the significant role to be played by technology in the information revolution, would have an impact on information retrieval. The ability to deliver documents, copies of published articles, and similar material to the academic, business and professional communities, on demand, presented an opportunity to those with enough foresight and entrepreneurial spirit to turn the need into business.

As a result, information brokers provide their clients with information for a fee. They provide research and other information services. In Nigeria, according to Igbeka (2008), their job cannot be specifically defined since they perform different functions. According to the view expressed by Rugge & Glossberner (1997, cited in Igbeka, 2008), because information is such a nebulous commodity, those seeking it will have a wide variety of information needs. It will, therefore, not be possible for information brokers to do the same thing or perform the same types of jobs. Consequently, no two information brokers' jobs are exactly alike (Rugge & Glossberner, 1997).

The role of librarians and information professionals in information brokering, with regards to the nature of their job and the ability to search for information especially on the Internet, has led to the foray into illegal businesses like peddling confidential information such as credit card records, purchasing information, unpublished phone numbers and phone records, and selling information to private investigators, amongst other vices. Consequently, Frantz (1999, cited in Igbeka, 2008) states: "Even at this early stage the case provides an unusually rich window into the secretive world of information brokers, a new breed of

investigators who have grown into a multi-million-dollars industry by trafficking in confidential information obtained through lies and access to the latest public and private computer databases.” It therefore means that for information brokers, there should be a code of conduct/ethics before they can practice. According to Igbeka (2008), the following are some of the work information brokers are doing in Nigeria:

- Indexing;
- Abstracting;
- Retrospective conversation;
- Cataloguing and Classification (Contract cataloguing);
- Literature reviews;
- Online literature search;
- Print searches for users;
- Owning a library or bookshop with the cooperation of nearby libraries in the area of interlibrary loan;
- Packaging information;
- Editing and publishing;
- Developing hyper media –products;
- Translation;
- Marketing management of library;
- Organisation of seminars, conferences, and workshops;
- Presentations (e.g. Microsoft Power Point);
- Creating databases and website design.

#### XVI. AVAILABILITY OF MARKET FOR INFORMATION BROKERAGE

Nearly all of the areas of librarianship are practicable in Nigeria. This is because there is hardly any research project that does not require information. It may be the case that the information broker will not be able to find the exact answer to a client’s questions: for instance, there is nobody that knows the exact value of all the personal property of Nigerian residents-and yet this is an area worthy of research. However, a good researcher will often find enough information to deduce or extrapolate an answer. In line with the example just mentioned, there should be useful statistics that can be accessed from insurance associations and from the Federal Office of Statistics to enable the client to make an educated guess.

It can be garnered from the above that clients for the information practitioner can be found among:

- Information-hungry professionals, such as speech-writers, competitive intelligence professionals, marketing directors and product managers;
- Organisations that do not have an in-house library but need professional research support;
- Librarians who need to outsource some of their research;
- People with more money than time and a specific research need

In order to successfully carry out the above task, one requires a good qualification and personality. There are some qualities expected from information brokers. Apart from being intelligent, a good education and skills in all key areas, experience and training are also required. Warnken (1981) cited in Levine (1998) on how to start and operate information fee-based service, provides a list of specific services to be performed by information brokers and fee-based information centres, which are mainly information gathering and processing. Ocholla (2009) suggests that in addition to research skills, one must know how to run a business: that is, marketing oneself, developing and implementing a business and marketing plan; handling the day-to-day operations of a small business, including invoicing, accounts payable and cash flow, continuous upgrading of information skills through professional development and managing clients. There is the need to have good communication skills, since one will be talking face-to-face with clients, over the telephone, by email, and writing analyses and seminar reports.

Afolabi (1998, cited in Igbeka, 2008) identifies the information-related careers that library and information science graduates could start and build with specific reference to the African situation. Branson (2011) had said that one would have to consider a lot of things before thinking about starting a business.

#### XVII. BENEFITS OF INFORMATION BROKERING TO AN ENTREPRENEUR

The recent pronouncement by the federal government of Nigeria to include entrepreneurship in the new curriculum of Nigerian tertiary institutions might serve as a good ground for the take-off of information brokerage. What is required is an enabling environment coupled with the awareness that library and information services as a profession is becoming one of the fastest growing and viable ventures in this age of information telecommunications technology.

There is an international association of information brokers - Association of Independent Information Professionals - with over 700 people who either own businesses or are interested in doing so (Ocholla, 2009). This can be replicated in Nigeria. Membership attracts fees, and the benefits cut across. For information professionals in Nigeria, benefits are in the area of:

- Business opportunities;
- A new focus on info-entrepreneurs;
- Creation of specialised areas;
- Employment in corporate organisations;
- Re-Branding of information profession (different nomenclatures);
- Assisting government in drafting information policy;

- Strategising for competitive intelligence of an organisation;
- Document delivery;
- Code of conduct and ethical business practice in case of competitive intelligence work;
- Boosting the frontier of entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

According to Aguolu & Aguolu (2000), library is a growing organism, depending on which area of librarianship and information one finds himself or herself. All the aforementioned benefits are peculiar to all of them. Nigerian information professionals are capable of handling any of the services earlier on mentioned, if given adequate human resources, training and focus. A new area of specialisation is on the way, just as mass communication emanated from library and information.

## XVIII. CHALLENGES FACING INFORMATION BROKERING IN NIGERIA

It may be difficult to ascertain or identify obstacles now facing information brokering in Nigeria, since there is no recognised organisation, either private or public, that is fully registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission, the body saddled with the responsibility of registering companies in Nigeria. What we have in existence are business centres that carry out all sorts of office activities. In a nutshell, the business atmosphere in the country does not operate along that line and, whatever their nature, these activities cannot be described as information brokering; neither can the practitioners be referred to as information brokers, independent researchers, independent information professionals (IIP), information consultants, freelance librarians or business librarians. All these categories of ventures or entrepreneurship may be operating other sub-groups of companies, but not fully as information brokering.

Librarianship practice in Nigeria is yet to be fully appreciated by the public. The idea of creating a business out of it as a purely public-service-oriented type of profession might be a stumbling block. The lukewarm attitude of users towards librarians is worrisome and frustrating. An entrepreneurship approach to information service need is a different package. The illiteracy level in Nigeria is high: over 60% of Nigerians cannot read and write. Most especially in the northern part of the country, the educational gap between the North and the South is widening daily (Ocholla, 2009).

In considering investment in Africa, it would be fool-hardy to ignore the complexities posed by the co-existence of an information-conscious population, on the one hand, and a semi-literate population, on the other. Therefore, for this type of entrepreneur – the information broker – to succeed, there is need for a highly educated environment. The type of information

society in the world today requires information brokering practice for information development sustainability.

Nigeria is ranked 104th in the usage of ICT in 138 countries by the Global Information Technology Report (GIT) for 2010-2011 at the briefing of the World Economic Forum (WEF). South Africa and Mauritius are 47<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup>, respectively. Sweden, Singapore, Finland and Switzerland occupy the top four slots in the 411-page report (Nwoke, 2011). In this type of environment, Nigeria may not have the required basic ICT infrastructure to excel and leverage on the practice of information brokering.

ICT in Nigeria is yet to take its pride of place due to the poor state of power in the country. The clamour for entrepreneurship in Nigeria will be mere rhetoric if measures are not taken to tackle the perennial problem of inadequate power supply, since that is the back bone of any economy. At present, there is no association or body representing the profession of information brokering. Practitioners are doing it within the confines of the Nigeria Library Association and other affiliate bodies related to information technology. It is difficult definitely to tell the proper direction of information brokering, unlike what obtains in the United States, where there is the Association of Independent Information Professionals with nearly 700 members.

## XIX. OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

There is need for intending information brokerage practitioners to do a feasibility study on commercialisation of the library and information service profession. Perhaps, the best approach will be to register with business consultants who will advise on the viability of the idea. This is called planning, which is a vital part of starting any new business. It is also necessary to have a good consultancy outfit that can recruit good hands. Information brokerage is an instant product that requires immediate results because there is hardly any research project for which there is no information. It may be the case that you will not be able to find the exact answer to your client's question. Therefore, there is need for experts in the various aspects of information brokerage.

Coordination, marketing, promotion and publicity of information consultancy and information brokerage activities are essential. The areas identified for consultancy services need to be developed and exploited. Clients' awareness of the usefulness of information management should be created and the consultants and brokers should be readily available when needed. Put together, innovation, productivity and efficiency are the derivatives of technological progress. In other words, the starting point for developmental planning is technology- building up the knowledge base and tools for production of goods and services.

## XX. CONCLUSION

Nigeria is not yet a force to be reckoned with in the field of information brokering. Perhaps the advent of information and communications technology is taking the library and information service profession to greater heights. Tracing the history of information brokerage to the 1960s and 1970s, there is ample evidence to show the viability of the profession in Nigeria. More so, the recent policy of the Federal Government of Nigeria on entrepreneurship can encourage people in this noble profession to try their hands at selling information for a fee.

## XXI. RECOMMENDATION

Information is regarded as the fifth factor of production in the 21<sup>st</sup> century -after labour, land, capital and entrepreneurship. In Nigeria, the level of unemployment has reached an alarming level and therefore every discipline must be engaged with from the point of view of entrepreneurship, so that more jobs can be created for fresh graduates and those that have been jobless for years.

There is need for adequate infrastructural development in the areas of power supply, good roads, social amenities, credit facilities from financial institutions and private ones. Library and information professionals must strive to develop their information and communication technology capabilities beyond rhetoric and be more proactive in meeting information storage, retrieval and dissemination challenges facing them. Information is critical to development, thus ICT as a means of sharing information is not simply a connection between people but a link in the chain of the development process itself.

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