**Theme: “50 years of re-engineering Library, Record Centres and Archive Services in an Evolving Information Environment”**

**Topic- Organization Exchange Programs: A practice to improve performance and share best practices in Information Management Processes in Organizations**

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**Overview**

In Zambia many organizations have different types of information hubs, that take the format of libraries of different types, archives, Records Centre’s among others found in major institutions such as Zambia Revenue Authority (ZRA), Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA), University of Zambia (UNZA), Copperbelt University (CBU), Energy Regulation Board(ERB), and United Nations Information Centre (UNIC).All with different mandates but serving similar purpose in the management of information resources.

This paper will share the experiences of UNIC from what it has learnt in organizational exchange programs and will illustrate what some of the above-mentioned organizations have implemented and used from exchange programs among themselves.

An organization working in isolation also implies that it is not learning from its environment it best learns from other business models and adapts accordingly. Information repositories hold a unique place in the development of a nation and in an environment faced with reduced funding it is imperative to find ways to keep operations running in an innovative way.

From a general perspective organizational exchange programmes will result in developing organizational capacity and capability, and ultimately helps to develop employees and the organization but will require considerable effort, commitment and adaptability. An exchange program will yield benefits such as career development, building institutional relationships, sharing skills and experiences, share knowledge and best practice between agencies, resource mobilization, networking and advocacy among others.

It is worth pointing out that there are different types of exchange programs and will vary in duration from a few days, months or over a year depending on the size of the host organization. The UNInformation Centre utilizes accelerated learning exchanges to learn best practices from within and outside of the organization.For such an undertaking to be a success, the host organization needs to ensure that a number of administrative and logistical matters are in place well in advance and key reference materials are available.

The visiting organization will have to determine who will participate in the exchange visit. Those picked should have a genuine desire to both offer and receive new ideas and to provide a report upon their return. The general rule of thumb is that the host and the visitor have collective responsibilities to ensure the success of the exchange program and some issues that need to be addressed could include the following; identify focus areas for activities/discussion during the visit. Maintain an open, supportive, friendly environment for discussions about programs and organizational strengths and challenges, as well as past successes and lessons learnt as well as provide.

As can be seen from the above the success of an organization is not entirely dependent on how it associates with itself but its interaction with other systems in the business environment. In Zambia, not many if any organizations are conducting exchange programs and the information profession is no exception.

It is very important that our information sharinggo beyond annual gatherings to regular meets as a way of sharing best practices and/or highlighting the information management practices in our respective domains. It is imperative for us to ensure we are in constant touch with each other and learn from the field what we are doing and how we have overcome the many challenges being faced in the midst of reducing budgets and organizational restructuring as a way of showing our relevance in the organization.

**Discussion**

Talk to anyone who has been on an exchange and you will generally get a very positive response an exchange program can be a career and life highlight for an individual and the organization as a whole. An international or local staff exchange assists park agencies to develop organizational capacity and capability, and ultimately helps to develop employees and the organization.

An exchange programme primarily aims at enhancing standardized performance management skills, sharing of new ideas in the organization, and many more knowledge management technologies that are relevant to the job at hand.

The UN Information Centre is part of a network of 63 entities found in different countries around the world, their sole purpose is to create public awareness and draw attention to the work of the UN in their respective countries as well as highlight its activities globally. These centres work closely with the media, Educational Institutions, Civil Society Organizations, Government and Communities.

In the Department Of Public Information of the United Nations, there is a work force in excess of 7000 people who work in different units and who are inter-linked in one way or the other. Therefore, it is not an easy task to deal with such a diverse composition of talents and different expectations and targets that should achieve the same organizational goals.

Senior management has realized the need for centres to perform at the highest level in part because they are part of the public relations domain of the Secretary Generals’ office inaddition to this; many offices have exhibited high levels of innovation in their service delivery.

This approach has largely been influenced by the staff members who are managing their respective information resources in cost effective practices e.g. changing the delivery formats from traditional mail orders to electronic formats that are less expensive and easier to maintain or the translation of materials into local languages and repackaging it into attractive user-friendly packages.

Such approaches have influenced centres to share with the rest of the networkbest practices across the board, the Office of Human Resource has also played a pivotal role in incorporating these best practices into platforms that staff have access to and can consult on a variety of work related information management practices.

This has also helped streamline operational costs as it has averted the piling up of workloads when staff goes on part-time and full term study programs because there is a ready reference for those who are filing for them in the interim. Some of the platforms that UNIC staff is using for sharing best practices include platforms accessible via the internet such as UNishare, Inspira, iSeek, Skilport, WebEx and many others. Where budgets allow staff are also travelling to other duty stations to see for themselves some of these best practices at work.

Since 2008, the UN introduced a programme called “UN green”, the implication of this initiative meant the UN was now going paperless as a way of reducing it carbon footprint. A good cause but one that meant that hard copies of materials produced by the UN would no longer be available, everything was going to be available online only.

This is a good practice; however, it must be appreciated that not all duty stations can adequately provide electronically reference resources, because of the constraints that come with setting up a good internet facility for clients to access. Then you have a clientele that prefers hard copy materials as most of them either cannot afford the internet charges, therefore you need to find means and ways of still providing the same information.

Hence repackaged e-sources was the answer in addition to downloaded and compressed files ready to go, the centre asks its clients to provide storage devices such as pen sticks where information is stored and they use it on their laptops and other devices they have access to.

The information centre in Lusaka introduced an internet portal for its clients in 2010/2011; the setup has the following attributes: one host computer powering 10 computer terminals using software called NComputing and another called Truecafé. This solution was every cost effective because we would have initially bought 10 full computers at a cost of over $ 10, 000 which was an expensive option compared to the $ 3, 000 spent on acquiring a new computer, software and additional computer screens and mice.

Other centres have been consulting us on this platform, teleconference meetings have been organized on demand to discussion our platform and suggest possible approaches that would see the introduction of similar tools being introduced in other centres around the world.In addition, we have been recognized as one of the most responsive units in the network in the provision of information to our clients and others have been encouraged to learn from us and adapt some of the practical applications we are using.

**Overview of organizations that have put organizational exchange programmes into practice**

**Zambia Railways**

What is now Zambia Railways Limited was formerly the North-Western Region of Rhodesia Railways with its regional headquarters at Kabwe while the company’s headquarters was in Bulawayo. The construction of this line started at the Victoria Falls Bridge in 1903 and was finally connected to Zaire (Now Congo DR) in 1909.

The line operated as Rhodesia Railways with joint ownership with Southern Rhodesia until after the dissolution of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1963 when Rhodesia Railways became and operated as the Unitary Railway System with Assets remaining jointly owned by Zambia and Southern Rhodesia (Now, Zimbabwe) until 1967.

In 1967, the Zambian government passed the Zambia Railways Act 1967, which gave birth to the Zambia Railways Board. In 1978, the government decided that Zambia Railways be transferred to Zimco with effect from January 1979. This transfer necessitated the incorporation of the new company, limited by shares and the dissolution of the Zambia Railways Board.

In 1982, the Railways Act vested all assets and liabilities of the Zambia Railways Board into Zambia Railways Limited, a company incorporated under the companies Act of Zambia. The transfer was effected in April 1984.

In December 2003, the government privatized Zambia Railways Limited through a concession agreement signed with a private company called “Railway Systems of Zambia”. The latter was given rights to operate both freight and passenger trains.

On 10th September 2012, the government decreed and cancelled the concession agreement signed with the private company, Railway Systems of Zambia, and repossessed operational rights from the private entity and hence the re-birth of Zambia Railways Limited.

Zambia Railways within its structure has a very rich archive and holds the entire history of the Railway Companyand information about its formative years to engineering plans developed over the years, including pictures of the first republican president commissioning some of its flagship projects of its time.

This information has been classified and arranged in such a way that it is very easy to trace any kind of resource within its holdings. The digitization process has been very expensive but a worthwhile under taking thanks in part to its resilient Archivist.

**Zambia Revenue Authority**

The Zambia Revenue Authority is a semi-autonomous agency established under the ZRA act, chapter 321 of the laws of Zambia whose purpose is to collect an assortment of taxes. The authority has many divisions within its framework, for purposes of this discussion; attention is drawn to the facts that the organization generates a lot of information in the form of records both as a service provider and for its clients.

All this information has to be managed and stored some place and this is why they have a records centre at head office. Therefore, it faces a colossal task to ensure that its staff is able to store, retrieve and track records that eventually find their way into the records centre. The systems in place have been developed over the years and have not been entirely in-house sourced.

ZRA has rolled out a programme to streamline its operations like tax online currently being used by the domestic tax and customs divisions as well as Asycuda World. The Registry team has also moved with the times, this implies that it must have in place the relevant software and hardware and begin the process of scanning already existing documents and merging them with those being generated electronically and stored on the servers as well as harmonizing its operations in-line with the new systems deployed across the organization.

**Zambia Information and Communications Authority**

The Zambia Information and Communication Technology Authority is an ICT regulatory body responsible for regulating the ICT sector in Zambia. Its mandate is derived from the three Acts, the Postal Services Act No. 22 of 2009, Electronic Communications and Transactions Act No. 21 and the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) Act No. 15 of 2009 to regulate ICTs, postal and courier services in Zambia. Like ZRA it also generates a colossal amount of information that has to be managed in a meaningful way, it also has a repository that it uses. They are also in the process of implementing similar resources such as those found at ZRA.

**National Archives**

The role of the National Archives is to provide an efficient and effective records management system and safe custody of all public records, archives and printed and non-printed publications in order to ensure lawful access to information by government institutions and the general public." To accomplish the above functions, the National Archives comprises of the Archive Administration Sections, Records Management Section, Library and Legal Deposit Services Section, Conservation and Reprographic Unit, and Administration Unit. It will also have Provincial Archives and Record Centres.

The National Archives has accomplished a lot with regard to its resources in its custody, what is impressive is the electronic database it has even for its pictorial information that holds in excess of 50 000 pictures.

A generalcomment about the above organizations and those not mentionedis that they have been in touch and have exchanged ideas and learnt from one another. In essence,they have observed the various digitizing equipment used in their respective organizations, the software used such as commercial platforms like alchemy, archival software and open source software such as open biblio in addition to the human resource requirements and cost implications among other things.

After the tours there has been institutional reporting, and highlights such as the cost to these mentioned tools,the processes and manpower strategies and other ideas from the staff manning these units have been highlighted this has seen the development, rehabilitation and total overall of the way some of these units are doing their work or at least seen the first stage which planning being done while waiting for approval to implement the projects.

**How does an organizational exchange programme help the individual?**

An exchange will require considerable effort, commitment and adaptability from exchanges and the rewards can be quiet considerable to include but not limited to the following:

1. Enhanced career development i.e. options available for advancement.
2. Learning your work supports a bigger picture of the organization.
3. Build inter-company relationships through knowledge sharing.
4. Review, think and learn about new challenges so that you are able to plan for your own needs.
5. Reflect and re-evaluate the challenges in your job position.
6. Refreshing and reinvigorating as you get new ideas from other organizations.
7. Developing insights and cultural understanding into the work culture of other organizations and their success in industry.
8. It enables you to share skills and experiences.
9. Influence the thinking and behaviour of yourself and others.

**What are the perceived benefits from an institutional perspective?**

1. Foster professional development for individuals with potential for accelerated learning.
2. Knowledge sharing will develop individual and organizational capability.
3. It reinvigorates existing staff to develop their skills further, shift thinking and rebuild enthusiasm.
4. Facilitate and share knowledge and best practice between organizational units and external entities.
5. Build industry relationships that enable the transfer of skills, experience and knowledge both now and into the future.
6. Build each participating agency's reputation as an employer of choice or best practices in the industry.

**Types of organizational exchange programmes to choose from**

The general rule of thumb is that organizational exchanges will enable organizations to and or expand their organizational capacity and capability. Depending the size of the organization and the work that it does exchanges may vary in duration from 3, 6, or more than 12 months, and maybe structured in the following formats:

1. Study Tours

Individuals, agency or board staff visiting another agency and viewing their work, case-in-point tour taken by Zambia Railways to Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines-Investment Holdings (ZCCM-IH) or ZRA.

1. Job shadowing

This entails working with someone for one to two weeks to see how they carry out their

work.

1. Back filling staff positions (in emergency situations)

This is to assist an agency working in a crisis, for example when a member of staff falls ill or expectantlydies.

1. Accelerated learning exchanges

For example sending a team to work with a more specialized professional teamsuch as INFLA in another country. 

1. Management Exchanges;Exchanges between senior managers through this is usually an in-house practice as opposed to inter-company arrangements.
2. Project based exchanges

This is an arrangement between agencies to boost capacity and development for specific projects.

**Potential Areas for Support or Sharing Among Local Organizations**

Organizational exchange programmes have the potential for growth for an organization and its staff on multiple levels and will focus on many areas of interest to include the following:

1. Better leadership and management coordination.
2. Enhanced strategic planning methods and approaches.
3. Good governance practices and working with boards in organizations that have one.
4. Decision-making will be all-inclusive and communication structures clearly defined.
5. Budgeting & financial management
6. Administrative systems such as human resources, recordkeeping/information management etc.
7. Monitoring and evaluation/organizational learning i.e. planning, data collection, analysis, documentation, etc.
8. Basic skills building for staff or volunteers – such as writing, computer, etc.
9. Fundraising and resource mobilization
10. Networking and advocacy

**Responsibilities in planning and carrying out an exchange visit: Host Organization**

1. Establish availability and identify tentative dates for the site visit. If possible, the visit should happen at a time when the visitors can observe your activities taking place.
2. Determine who will participate in the exchange visit. Designate which staff will be responsible for receiving the visitors and taking them around.
3. Make necessary logistical arrangements, e.g. set up meetings, arrange local transport, meals, etc. were applicable.
4. Inform key staff, volunteers, and community leaders of the upcoming visit.
5. Prepare and share an agenda for the visit. Consider including discussions with staff, volunteers, participants and community leaders. Don’t forget to estimate and include travel times and distances between locations. Also consider including a wrap-up or closing activity.
6. Prepare any other program materials and share key documents and background information about your organization with the visitors at least 2 weeks prior to their coming.
7. Try to identify good ideas from your organization that you think might be helpful to the visitors.
8. Introduce the visits to community leaders as appropriate.

**Responsibilities in planning and carrying out an exchange visit: Visiting Organization(s)**

1. Determine who will participate in the exchange visit. People should agree to participate in the team only if they have a genuine desire to both offer and receive new ideas and to provide feedback to others.
2. They must review and give feedback on the proposed agenda.
3. Notify the hosting organization (with enough advance notice) of the names, arrival dates/times and other relevant information about arriving participants.
4. They must review the materials sent by the hosting organization.
5. They must be prepared to present/discuss their own organization and programs, as well as successes and challenges faced.
6. Ensure participants are adequately prepared for the demands of the agenda/program especially if it will involve a lot of walking and standing during the tour.
7. When you return home, share relevant information, approaches, skills, recommendations and ideas with those who did not participate.

**Responsibilities of All Organizations involved**

1. Based on the needs of both organizations, identify focus areas for activities/discussion during the visit.
2. Develop clear expectations about the visit, including:
   1. Issues to be discussed
   2. Type of activities to be carried out i.e. meetings, focus group discussions, observation, site visits, etc.
   3. Who will participate?
   4. The program duration/length
   5. Financial responsibilities i.e. which organization will pay for what were applicable?
   6. Who will be responsible for follow-up and reporting?
3. Maintain an open, supportive, friendly environment for discussions about programs and organizational strengths and challenges, as well as past successes and lessons learnt.
4. Provide complete, accurate and meaningful information and feedback to each other during the visit.
5. Do not act in any way that can negatively affect the reputation of the other organization during the visit.
6. Monitor participants’ reactions and comments during the visit. Notify each other of any issues or problems that arise. Communicate and cooperate fully and openly with each other in relation to the solution.
7. Provide participants with a formal opportunity to comment on the program immediately following participation.

**Challenges faced in the implementation of an exchange programme**

What follows below is from personal experience and feedback after talking to some colleagues in the profession:

1. Lack of support from senior management, for any programme to be implemented or supported senior management needs to buy into it. If such is lacking it makes it very difficult to roll-out such a beneficial expedition.
2. Organizational processes are shrouded in secrecy,generally, many organizations are reluctant to share how they operate and if they do every little information, which is vague in content is made available. Ideally the exchange programme is not meant to be an espionage undertaking but one of knowledge sharing.
3. A general lack of understanding on how a exchange programme works, the fear of the unknown, is very real and because of this new ideas are usually frowned upon and end up being shelved to gather dust.
4. Financial constraints i.e. the possible costs of implementing such a programme maybe limiting especially for a small office. Therefore, the who, why, what, where, when and how need to be addressed fully such who covers the costs of travel, accommodation and other eventualities should they arise.
5. Conflicts of interest in relation to staff and that of the organization interest. If a staff member has identified a real need for an exchange programme it may come into conflict with the goals and objectives of an organization especially if there is nothing that is outlined that gives mandate for an organization to take part in such it may be a crossroads for the staff and management.
6. There are no definitive guidelines available, because activities such as organization exchanges as done on an Adhoc basis.
7. The cost of procurement maybe high for those interested in getting similar hardware and software to implement their own good practices based on the knowledge obtained from their exchange programme with another organization.

**Conclusion**

The overall process of an organization exchange programme cannot be over-emphasized regarding the benefits, challenges and the process required making it a success both short and long term.

It is imperative that management takes time to explore the options that are available to it, most often than not the solution does not necessarily lay in the fact that sending a member of staff to school for further training is the solution; sometimes the answers are with organizations with whom you share similar service traits.

This is why organizations and its staff need to take advantage of entities such as the Library and Information Association of Zambia (LIAZ) to support and provide linkages for those who want to undertake an exchange programme, they will be in a position to talk to organizations and facilitate the process.

Organizational exchange programmes are a good way of improving our own working systems, it is also a good way of learning how to do things differently and in the most cost effective manner possible.

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