

A Research Paper on Information Seeking Behaviour by the Employees of the State Department of East African Integration

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Abstract: This paper attempts to establish information seeking behaviour of the employees of the East African Integration. The Department of East African Community coordinates the activities of East African Community in Kenya. Wilson (1999) defines information seeking as, "those activities a person may engage in when identifying their own needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information". This study was a qualitative research in nature. The participants were drawn from 200 employees of the State department of EAC integration. The researcher employed interview method for data collection. The researcher used purposive sampling and interview schedules were prepared to gather information from participants. Data was analysed thematically. The results were that employees of the State department of East Africa integration sought information to assist them carry out their mandate concerning integration matters and they sought information by accessing the internet among others. It was concluded that information sought by employees of State department of East African Integration was information related to EAC integration process since a small proportion mainly from administrative directorate indicated that they seek information to better them in other disciplines of interest. It was recommended that due to lack of enough literacy skills on the part of the staff, librarians at State department of East African Integration should mount an effective IL programme in order to enable employees to easily access information whenever they sought for it. It was also recommended that ICT officers, librarians and record officers should put in place effective information retrieval tools that could assist the employees as they sought for information that could enable them carry out their mandates.

Keywords: East African Community; State department of East Africa, information seeking; Information behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study was to establish information seeking behaviour by the employees of the State Department of the East African Community Integration with a view of improving it. The Department of East African Community coordinates the activities of East African Community in Kenya. East African community is an inter-governmental organization comprising six Partner States namely: Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and South Sudan. While striving to fulfil this mandate, the department strives to develop policies, projects and programmes of EAC. It coordinates monitors and evaluates the implementation of EAC policies, projects and programmes and liaises with the public and private sector stakeholders on EAC matters. It maintains linkages between East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) and the Kenya National Assembly and EAC

institutions, line Ministries and other related institutions.

The main objective of EAC is to promote sustainable development of the region and create a prosperous internationally competitive, secure and politically united region, the six EAC Partner.

States are well aware that by pooling resources and potential, they are well on their way to realizing common development goals more easily than when they work alone. The term information seeking behaviour has been used in the research literature since the 1950's [1]. Thereafter it took several decades for the subject to be presented as a major field of study. Some of the most important studies of information behaviour include: Ellis' [2] behavioural model of information searching strategies, Kuhlthau's [3] information search process,

and Wilson's [4] problem-solving model. It might be useful to explain the terms information, information need, information seeking, and information seeking behaviour a bit further. The Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science defined information as: "Data presented in readily comprehensible form to which meaning has been attributed within the context of its use. So a specific data can be considered as information if it conveys a meaning to the person who receives it. Over time the term information need has been used in a variety of ways. Belkin and Croft [5] suggest that a search begins with a problem and a need to solve it—the gap between these is defined as the information needs. Information need, then, leads to information seeking.

The need may be expressed in various ways. Taylor [6] posits four points along the need continuum: 1) an actual but unexpressed need (visceral); 2) a conscious description of the need; 3) a formal statement of the need; and 4) a compromised need. It can be argued that whichever angle it takes people would need information which is not unique to staff of State department of East African Integration.

Taylor's analysis of the question-negotiation dialogue between an enquirer and information is bolstered by Rees [7] identification of problems which must be resolved in satisfying information needs. It is important to note that while Taylor focuses on the individual involved, Rees emphasises the interface between the user and the library. Both discussions help to reveal the process of information seeking for the purpose of satisfying needs.

On basic assumption behind the discussions of information needs is that people do need information. Nehnevasja (1966) begins at this point and further states that the question is not whether men need information, for they do. Rather, the issue is whether the information available to them is of the right kind and quantity, of acceptable accuracy, and of appropriate timeliness. What Nehnevasja seem to emphasize on are characteristics of quality information which employees of State department of East African integration should seek, access and use. Whenever people have information needs it will lead to information seeking. It has been observed that regardless of who is seeking the information the common denominator is that there is a gap within those seeking this information which needs to be filled. This is not an exceptional case for the employees of State department of East African Integration.

According to Wiberley and Jones (1989), information seeking is a basic activity in which all people participate, manifest through particular behaviours. It is of most interest to librarians in the

areas of collection development, services, and organizational structures. It follows that information seeking behaviour is, as Wilson [4] defines it, "those activities a person may engage in when identifying their own needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information".

Many other authors have written and have come up with models and concepts of information behaviour. One of those authors was Robert Taylor whose work focuses on the kind of formal information seeking activity that occurs at a library reference desk. His model has been instrumental for the training of reference librarians. He identifies four levels of information seeking: (1) the identification of a *visceral need*, or "vague sort of dissatisfaction" that is unexpressed; (2) the formulation of a *conscious need* that is expressed as "an ambiguous and rambling statement" and which sometimes results in communicating the need to another person; (3) the construction of a *formalized need*, expressed as a "qualified and rational" statement of the need; and finally, (4) the establishment of a *compromised need*, which is a query that is expressed in terms that fit the organization of the information system (i.e., the library collection or database. The need to search for information by the employees of the department and other stakeholders can be supported by Belkin [8] anomalous state of knowledge where those searching for information or knowledge recognize that there is a gap in their state of knowledge.

The existing studies on user information needs seem to cluster around four major groupings, regardless of the population being studied: (1) the behaviour of the user; (2) the nature, amount and source of the information being sought; (3) the quality of information; and (4) the timelines of the information.

When the activities of the employees of the State department are critically observed, they are in line with the treaty establishing the East African Community and arose out of the EAC Calendar of activities. These for instance will involve coordinating the activities of the EAC in Kenya; developing Country position papers; attending meetings of EAC and any other activities that are geared towards strengthening the integration agenda. In trying to fulfil their mandate therefore there is needed to seek for the right information, accurate, sufficient enough, and at the right time. This paper therefore attempts to establish the type of information they seek for and what prompts them to seek for this information,

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To investigate information seeking behaviour by the employees of the State Department of the East

African Community Integration with a view of improving it.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the type of information do the employees of the State Department of East African Community Integration seek for?
2. What prompts them to look for this information?
3. How do they seek for this information?
4. What can be done to improve their information seeking behavior

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was a qualitative research in nature. Creswell [9] defines qualitative research as an “inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore asocial or human problem”. Qualitative research is generally based on the belief that the people personally involved in a particular situation are best placed to describe and explain their experience and feelings in their own words.

Therefore they should be allowed to speak without the mediation of the researcher and without being overly strained by the framework imposed by the researcher [10]. In the context of the State department of East African Integration employees, there was need of finding out what type of information they sought for; what prompted them to seek information and how do they go about seeking information to the full advantage of the Department. This resulted in employing a qualitative research strategy because it is a design which combines the individual research participants, the researcher as a research instrument and appropriate data collection technique in a collaborative process of producing meaning from data and using that meaning to develop theory. The study was qualitative one where the researcher fully engaged the participants in an interview while being guided by the semi - structured interview schedules.

Participants

Population is a group of participants, objects or items from which samples are taken for measurement [11]. Orodho [12] defines population as that population from which the researcher wants to generalize results of the study. The study was carried out in the State department of East African Integration in Nairobi.

The total population of the State department of EAC Affairs staff was 200 employees. That constituted study population comprising integration officers, administrators, Economists, accountants, procurement officers, support staff and drivers. The researcher noted that the State department of East African Integration had another category of staff notably the interns who

were working in various departments but providing critical services. The interns were neither interviewed nor included in the pilot study sample. The researcher used purposive sampling and interview schedules to gather information from participants. That method of sampling was used since the researcher intended to interview participants who were likely to provide pertinent information to the study.

The researcher used a sample size of 50% of the total population 200. That sample size was ideal since in qualitative research one does not require large numbers of participants provided one gets enough information which can be relied on. To ensure that all the categories of staff participated in the study, the participants were drawn from all the five directorates. The department has two regional integration centres namely: Namaga and Busia Borders. The researcher visited the two centres to collect data from the staff there. It was believed that if the participants were drawn from the five directorates in the Department and the two Centres, it would form a good representative sample of the total population of the Department.

Measures

The researcher employed interview method for data collection for this study. The researcher developed interview schedules that contained questions that were used as a guide. That ensured that the interview was carried out systematically and that all the participants were subjected to the same questions in all the five directorates within State department of East African Integration.

Procedure

The researcher booked an appointment with the participants. The process of collecting data was by means of face to face approach. The researcher visited the participants in their respective offices and also excused himself to the participants by also asking the whether they were ready for him. That was to avoid a situation where he could put the participants under pressure in case they were busy. Once the researcher was welcomed and ushered in that gave an indication that they were ready for him. The researcher asked questions in the order they appeared on the interview schedule. He recorded responses on the schedule and had a tape recorder to assist him later on where there was need for clarifications.

The researcher sought permission from the participants to use the tape recorder. The researcher created an atmosphere that enabled him to get more honest answers and in the process of the interview established a rapport between himself and the interviewee.

Semi-structured interview schedules provided an opportunity for participants to respond to issues more appropriately. The interviews schedules were flexible, to the point and made it appear as if it was a mere discussion. Interviewing schedules also made participants to respond to issues in a more open and exhaustive way. The prepared interviewing schedules were used as a guide and this assisted in ensuring that there was a flow of information

RESULTS

Research question 1:- What type of information do they seek for?

The researcher sought to establish the types of information they normally seek and in what formats the information was presented. All the participants interviewed indicated that the information they sought was presented in both electronic and print formats. A total of 58 (76%) from all the technical directorates indicated that they seek information on policy formulation, EAC decisions that are made at various levels and any information that can enable them carry out their coordination role as State department of East African Integration.

The 18 (24%) who were interviewed were from the administrative directorate who provide support services in the department.

They sought information because information enhanced their capacity, need to know, and current information, personal enhancement and academic progression. The participants from the technical directorates were also of the same view.

Arising out of the above responses, it can be argued that the types of information sought by state department of East African Integration employees rotated on EAC coordination and integration matters.

The staff of State department of East African Integration had indicated that they seek for information because of a number of reasons among them to enable them perform their duties effectively; need to know and need to advance professionally in their careers. Wakeham *et al* [13] defined information need as “what is perceived to be required for the competent performance of professional task”. An understanding of information needs therefore focuses on why information is required and the source from which it is obtained. Wakeham in his definition of information needs attests to this. It is for this reason that they would seek for the type of information that will enhance their performance. It was important to appreciate that, those employees at State department of east African Integration were professionals and trained in different fields. It therefore follows that their information needs are diversified in nature. Although the staff at State department of East

African Integration might be compelled to seek for the type of information that was likely to enhance their performance at work, they would also would like to seek for information that was likely make them generally to learn as Maslow may attest to this.

Research question 2:- What are the factors prompting them to seek Information?

The participants were asked to indicate what prompted them to seek information. All participants from all the five directorates 76(100%) indicated that skills gap, office assignment, personal interest, personal enhancement, professional growth, when need arises, need to know, to be updated, new technological changes and to be accurate in their work were the major reasons why they sought information. In the technical directorates all the participants 58 (76%) agreed that the major reason why they sought information in addition to the above reasons was that to enable them handle EAC matters.

Those were participants from the technical directorates apart from 18(24%) from the administrative directorate who provide support services. It was noted that the core mandate of the State department of East African Integration was coordination of EAC affairs in Kenya.

It can then be argued that most of the employees at State department of east African Integration seek information in their pursuit to fulfil their mandate of coordination. Maslow [14] in his hierarchy of needs theory proposed that motivation is the result of a person’s attempt at fulfilling five basic needs: physiological, safety, social, esteem and self actualization. According to Maslow, these needs can create internal pressures that can influence a person’s behaviour.

The needs theories attempt to identify internal factors that motivate an individual’s behaviour and are based on the premise that people are motivated by unfulfilled needs. If one looks at the needs we do have esteemed needs that refer to the need for self esteem and respect, with respect and admiration from others. Not every employee in State department of east African Integration was a technical officer who was involved in coordination matters but we might have other employees who might be prompted to seek for information due some other compelling factors. Some of these factors might be need to learn as articulated by Maslow in his theory of humanistic learning to (1908-1970). Because of diversified nature of needs Wilson’s definition of information seeking Wilson [4] stated that, “those activities a person may engage in when identifying their own needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information” Wilson is agreement that

people will always seek for information because of a number of reasons.

Although it can be argued that staff of State department of East African Integration might want to seek for information because of other compelling reasons, needs associated with their work stand out as the most compelling factor [13].

Research Question 3:- How do they seek for information?

The participants were asked how they sought information. All the 76 (100%) participants indicated visited the library, visit websites, internet and intranet, visit the registry, peruse files, and approach whoever has the information, through books and reports, through memos, telephone calls, staff mail and through collaboration with MDAs.

The participants were asked to indicate how easily and readily the information is available at the State department of East African Integration. A total of 60 (80 %) participants across the five directorates indicated that information at State department of East African Integration is easily and readily available since the internet is available. Both library and registry are always open.

They had arranged their information well and run by skilled manpower while 16 (20%) were of the contrary view.

That information in State department of east African Integration was not readily available since it depended on the nature of information sought. For example, information on IFMIS (integrated financial management Information System), information on vested interest was difficult to get, low staffing levels in the library, communication in the department was not effective and retrieval of information was still not effective and took more time.

Research Question 4: - How does Information sought relate to EAC integration agenda?

The participants were further asked to state whether the information they sought had any bearing on the integration agenda. That was meant to determine whether the employees of State department of East African Integration were on the right track as far as EAC integration process was concerned. A total of 76(100%) of all the participants agreed that the information they sought at State department of East African Integration assisted them to make informed decisions. They indicated that information sought assisted them in: informing stakeholders and creating awareness; setting agenda for regional integration; formulation of policy; developing position papers; co-

ordinating and implementing the decisions of the council of Ministers among others.

It can then be argued that if information sought could facilitate the above roles then their information seeking activity was a vital tool in propelling EAC integration agenda.

When the importance of information is looked at from the government point of view, a number of authors, such as Neelameghan [14] and Camara [15], hint that planners, developers and Governments do not yet acknowledge the role of information as a basic resource, or are unaware of its potential value [16]. It can be true that if these authors hold a contrary view that governments and other planners are ignorant on what information is all about and the role it can play in development then there is need for concerted efforts to be made to achieve this. Many authors, such as Sturges & Neill [16]; Boon [17]; Van Rooyen [18]; view information as one of the most important resources needed for both rural and urban development. East African community is an inter-governmental organization comprising five partner states namely: Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania.

It therefore sounds ironical for these governments not to understand the value of information yet most of the policies, decisions and projects cannot be implemented by them without seeking and having adequate information.

It then follows that if governments which form the EAC of which Kenya is part cannot appreciate information and then there is a problem. It is important to note that when the employees at State department of East African Integration were asked whether they valued information, they all responded in the affirmative. The problem then can be at the policy making level of these governments.

CONCLUSION

That information sought by employees of State department of east African Integration was information related to EAC integration process since a small proportion mainly from administrative directorate indicated that they sought information to better them in other disciplines of interest. That meant that the type of information they sought was met by virtue of looking for information pertinent to the work they do and answered the research question. The study concluded that tools used by staff at State department of East African Integration to seek and access information were internet but not limited to other sources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions from the study, the researcher came up with the following

recommendations which if adopted can enhance information seeking behaviour by employees at State department of East African Integration.

During the interview, it was indicated by the participants that they had some challenges in accessing and retrieval digital while seeking for information. That was attributed to lack of enough literacy skills on the part of the staff. It was therefore recommended that librarians at State department of East African Integration should mount an effective IL programme. Information Literacy (IL) is defined as the ability to recognize when information is needed and how to locate, evaluate, use information effectively and responsibly and communicate.

It is assumed that if the librarians at the department conduct or impart literacy, the skills will empower the user of staff at State department of East African Integration to: solve problems; create new ideas; make informed decisions and turn data into meaning to create knowledge. It was also recommended that ICT officers, librarians, and record officers should improve information retrieval tools to enable staff seeking information access and use information easily.

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