



Rural Library Staffs' Competencies in the Information Society

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Abstract. The role of a rural library in developing an information society has long been realized by the government. The literature review indicates that the growth of the information society has forced the work environment and of librarians, especially in delivering services to the communities. Therefore, the rural libraries are being subjected to respond to the new changes. To ensure them to participate in the information society, there have to be appropriately trained workers in place; the rural librarian is required to put the element that promotes the use of information and rural library resources effectively. They should strengthen the function of a rural library staff as information intermediaries and increased their competencies to enable them to teach library users to use the information they need for. The required competencies will be discussed in this paper.

Keywords. Rural library; Rural library staff; Information society; Human capacity; Competencies

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1. Introduction

If we look at the range of human economic activity, we can divide the history into different segments, from the earliest forebears who began to work as farmers through the present era, which can best be described as the Age of Information or Information Society. At present, both developed and developing countries are being transformed into an information society.

The development towards an information society will require the participation of all stakeholders in government, civil society, and a private sector. The National Information Society Policy (NISP) documented by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) address the importance of libraries as part of the country's information policy. Libraries are considering redefining their position in fulfilling the needs of the information society [1,2]. Since then, public libraries have always been in search of new paradigms to be part of the information society.

As rural libraries are significant in the emergence of information-based society, they are being subjected to respond to the new changes. Therefore, a rural library needs to strengthen its human capacity if they want to take part in the information society. Human capacity refers to the development of the human resource competencies through the acquisition of broad and technical knowledge and skills in achieving the organizational goals [3]. These people include a librarian, information workers, and information users. According to [4] indicated that the librarians must develop their knowledge and skills to enable them to educate and train information users in identifying, locating, accessing, evaluating and utilizing information resources. With the skilled people in a rural library, it facilitates the rural libraries in the development of an information society by promoting the use of rural library resources in an efficient way.

Besides, [5] emphasized the knowledge, skills, and experience the history, culture, and language of the local community as important aspects for rural library staffs toward the development of an information society. The rural librarians should also be able to manage the marginalized community knowledge. Besides, they must also empower the information literacy of community members. By considering the importance of human capabilities in the development of an information society, this study, therefore, sets out to understand the competencies needed by the rural library staffs in developing an information society. Therefore, further question on this issue includes:

How the practitioners/librarians do perceive the staffs' competencies in supporting the development of information society?

This paper contributes to the area of the development of an information society from the human resources in two particular ways. It examines the competencies required by the rural library staffs from the library and information practitioners' points of view and highlights the skills and knowledge associated with information society development in rural areas. Second, the findings suggest rural library administrators develop criteria for rural library staffs. This paper comprises of five main sections. The following section is a literature review. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 presents the findings of this study. Section 5 provides an in-depth interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of the results of the collected data. Finally, the conclusions are outlined in Section 6.

2. Literature Review

The information society is conceptualized as a society in which people are expected informative and knowledgeable through the use of information and knowledge by means of rural libraries.

If libraries are seeking to develop an information society, they should also extend library roles and services in remote areas in ways that allow rural communities to utilize information [6]. The utilization of information will affect to their life, such as increase their economic and social life. Rural libraries have continued to be a major factor in two most important aspects: economic and personal development [7]. This development can be achieved by eradicating of illiteracy, inculcating a reading culture, and providing services for the “newly literate”. The concept of public libraries as a social organization has led to the acceptance of the idea that libraries add to the community values.

A positive relation between a rural library and an information society have been reported on many aspects [8], and therefore, it is important to identify the most significant roles of rural libraries in supporting the development of an information society. According to [9], emphasized the significance of a rural library in an information society, by stating that the information society development can be achieved if it is supported by the necessary key enablers. To better understand the key enablers of a rural library in the information society, the study refers to the previous discussion mainly by [10] which discussed the issues of a library in the information society. With their analysis, the study found human capacity as one of the important aspects of the development of an information society. The human capacity is considered as a prerequisite for the growth of an information society. As human capacity is important for a rural library to participate in the information age, the focus on the capacity building in all areas of rural library staffs is necessary. In a context of information professionals, these people include the librarian, information workers, and information users. Hence, it is accepted that the information society development requires that rural libraries develop the knowledge and skills of their staffs as these competencies be the essential aspects of the development of an information society from rural library perspectives [3].

3. Methodology

In this study on the importance of a rural library in information society development, understanding may be greatly influenced by the particular area of expertise or experience or position of a participant. There is a great benefit to harness the participants' judgments concerning the importance of rural library staffs' competencies in the development of an information society. Since there is no earlier model, particularly in the context of a rural library, as a basis of the current study, the present study was conducted along this line of thought.

The study is an exploratory research which employed a Delphi Technique. The study chooses the most appropriate research method, the Delphi technique, due to the fact that it is believed to be the best method to capture the insight of participants' views. According to a definition provided by [11], a Delphi is a structured group communication process which allowed a group of individuals to solve a complex problem. The Delphi technique involved research activities such as evaluating, fact-finding, exploring issues or discovering the known and unknown of a specific topic [12].

This technique consists of three essential components, which were the communication process, a group of experts and essential feedback [13]. In this study, the Delphi technique

refers to a technique in which a consensus is attempted and attained from the group of experts' judgments on the competencies required by rural library staffs in the development of an information society. Regarding the selection of participants for a Delphi study, identifying and selecting appropriate participants who will serve as expert panelists is one of the most important aspects of the Delphi technique [12] because it directly relates to the quality of the results generated [13]. Thus, the selection of the Delphi panel for this study was based on knowledge and experience with the issue under investigation.

Knowledge and experience were taken into account, among the participants, including those who have the education or working experience in the library field. In addition, participants also need to have experience in administration and strategic planning for the library. As discussed above, the participants were proposed to be professional and had a background of knowledge and experience in the library field. The actual study consisted of participants who had worked in a library for more than 15 years. Besides that, the majority of them had an educational background in the field of librarianship. Most of them currently hold a position as public library directors. One of the panelists was a former Chief Director of National Library of Malaysia. Because of the academic background and the working experience, it was assumed that the panelists had a considerable knowledge and experienced in managing and administering staff and rural libraries. Some of them were found to be involved in the policy-making related to the information society. All of the aforementioned criteria were met in the study.

This study employed a three-round Delphi technique to answer the research questions and to attain the research objectives. The first round approach was the unstructured and open response. The answers of round one provide a basis to construct a second and third round questionnaire. In the later round, the purpose is to seek quantification of earlier findings through ranking or rating until reaching a consensus of opinions. The current study stopped at Round 3 when consensus achievements on all items were verified by the panel.

4. Study Findings

This section presents a report on the data analysis and findings from the experts' opinions. It presents the findings across the three round Delphi surveys.

4.1 Round One

The objective of the first round of the Delphi technique is to brainstorm ideas and identify the experts' input of the staffs' competencies in developing an information society. The experts are required to provide as many ideas as they possibly could in response to the research questions. After having interviewed, transcribed and analyzed the data, seven items were derived related to the rural library staffs' competencies (Table 1).

4.2 Round Two (R2) and Round 3 (R3)

Based on the analysis of R1 Delphi technique, the questionnaire for R2 and R3 were developed consisting closed-ended questions in a format of Likert-type scale. The aim of the second round was to determine if the experts could achieve consensus on the items in the R2 questionnaire.

A five point Likert Scale; (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree was used to determine the experts' level of agreement on each item. Besides, the experts also had the chanced to give comment on the items to add to the discussion. The second round used the criterion of 80% responses to each item as the level of consensus. The experts' responses to the items are shown in Table 1. The results showed that there was a positive feedback from the experts to the items presented in the questionnaire. All items received either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the experts. These items were determined to be included in R3.

Table 1. Round 2 and R3 Rated Competencies

Items	Mean		SD		%
	R2	R3	R2	R3	
Rural library staff should have the knowledge and skill to promote library services to rural communities	4.58	4.80	.52	.42	100
Rural library staff should be able to effectively communicate with individual and groups in the community to gain support from the community	4.67	4.80	.50	.42	100
Rural library staff should have a broad knowledge of the library's collection	4.58	4.90	.52	.32	100
Rural library staff should be able to communicate and understanding the community needs	4.50	4.80	.52	.42	100
Rural library staff should have a strong imagination, vision and openness to new ideas and practices	4.50	4.80	.67	.42	100
Rural library staff must be friendly and responsive to all customers	4.75	4.90	.45	.32	100
Rural library staff should be able to work in a team environment	4.58	4.80	.52	.42	100

Notes: **Mean:** Rating scale used was Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Not Sure (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5). **% :** Percentage of responses in the two most favorable categories of the rating scale (Agree and Strongly Agree)

In the final round of the Delphi technique (R3), the questionnaire was developed from the compiled responses in R2. Using the same rating scale from the R2 questionnaire, panelists were required to review and re-rate on each item with a percentage of 80% or greater taking into consideration responses from other panel members on each item. The results showed that all items reached 100% consensus from the panels. The mean for all items ranged from 4.58 to 4.80 while the range of standard deviation was from .42 to .52.

The findings of the final Round Delphi study (R3) showed that the panelists addressed the importance of human resource competencies in different ways. The panelists responded that rural library staffs should have a strong imagination, vision, and openness to new ideas and practice, and must be committed to providing high-quality services to all customers. Other important skills of the rural library staff were related to communication with community, knowledge of the library's collection, friendly and responsive to customers. The findings also showed that rural library staffs should have knowledge and skill of library marketing, understanding the community needs and able to work in a team environment.

5. Interpretation of Study Findings

This section presents the interpretation of the Delphi findings on the skill competencies needed by rural library staffs in developing an information society. The final results showed that the study panelists suggested developing an information society with human capacity by paying attention to the skill and knowledge of rural library staffs. It is interesting to note that in all seven items of the rural library staff competencies, all items received the highest responses. This result may be explained by the fact that human capacity is a prerequisite for progress towards an information society [10]. They emphasized that the development of an information and knowledge society require highly qualified human resources. According to a definition provided by [3], human capacity is the development and the improvement in the people capabilities through the acquisition of broad and technical knowledge, skill, and effectiveness required for the purpose of achieving goals. Based on the above explanation, it can be suggested that human capacity in this study can be referred to rural library staffs with various knowledge and skills to achieve the development of an information society.

Regarding the library staff capabilities, there are many standard competencies found in the literature. For instance, American Library Association (ALA) had published competencies for librarianship, competencies for librarian serving children in public libraries and also competencies for special libraries. These documents define the knowledge to be possessed by all library staffs to fulfill the user needs. The present results are corroborated with the previous works of literature in which panelists emphasized various skills and knowledge that should be possessed by rural library staffs in developing an information society [14].

The findings show that rural library staffs must have the knowledge and skills in promoting rural library services to the rural communities. This position supported previous studies [15–17]. The experts who participated in this study concurred with the importance of marketing skills, particularly in the area of promoting rural library services to the rural communities. This result is in agreement with Taylor [16], who suggested that rural libraries promote a product, program, or service to make the rural library services visible to the community. In order to make the marketing activities are successful, rural library staffs should learn how to communicate more clearly and efficiently with individual and community groups. Good communication is essential to gain community support. They also need to have a broad knowledge of the library's collection and ability to communicate and to understand the community needs [14]. This result also supported most of the published standard of librarian competencies [18].

Another important finding was that rural library staffs must be friendly and responsive to all customers. Similarly, [17] observed that the libraries where users were encouraged into the library resulted from the welcoming environment in which the library staff was friendly, welcoming and helpful. The current study also found staffs' commitment towards providing high-quality services for all types of library users is important. Besides, the rural library staffs should also be able working well in a team environment and must have a strong imagination, vision, and openness to new ideas and practices. [19] provide the same views with the current study in which they categorized these competencies under the leadership and management, and strategic thinking and analytical skills.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the practitioners' interpretation of the competencies required by the rural library staffs. Accordingly, a three-round Delphi technique was conducted in this study. The literature review and background information by necessity came from a variety of sources which covered a topic of rural library and information society; a group of qualified experts was carefully selected, and the interpretation of the study findings was discussed to ensure the credibility of the study findings. This study provides valuable insights and several contributions to the academic, researchers and practitioners in the field of rural library and information society. The findings revealed the importance of rural library staff competencies towards the development of an information society, it would suggest rural library administrators to develop a list of criteria for rural library staffs. This criterion should be clear and consider all the aspects that proposed by the participants. In order for rural libraries provide an effective library service in an emerging of an information society, they will need some well-trained personnel who have the adequate competencies to operate the rural libraries.

For rural library staffs, the findings appear relevant in performing their daily tasks. The findings of this study could be used to enhance the rural library staffs understanding into competencies needed in an emerging of an information society, particularly in a rural library context. From the perceived competencies highlighted by the panelists, certain suggestions for competencies and framework at least could be taken into consideration when working as a rural library staff. In view of the many competencies should rural libraries play in the development of an information society, as documented in this study, the rural library staffs may need skills such as promotional skills, communication skills, and information content skills – to name a few. Furthermore, the staffs must be someone who understands the community needs, strong imagination, vision and openness to new ideas and practices and must be committed. These characteristics and skills are necessary to enable them to play the rural library's roles in the development of an information society.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

All the authors contributed significantly in writing this article. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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