

Web-Based Virtual Community Model For Enhancing Knowledge Sharing And Professionalism Among Public Library Stakeholders

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nexus between the application of information and communication technology (ICT) and library stakeholders. An interested party or stakeholder in library system includes library users who contact public library reference for information, the professional librarians, and other staff of the library that facilitate rendering of library services to library users. The obtainability of knowledge and skills are major requirement for success in any profession. A virtual community is about a common interest, thereby making it an effective tool for knowledge sharing and advancement of professionalism in all disciplines. This paper focuses on the desirable element in library professionalism and how professional knowledge can be shared among the professional librarians across the globe in this era of ICT application explosion. A conceptual virtual community model is designed and possible challenges exposed.

Key words: Knowledge Sharing, Library users, Professional librarians, Virtual Community, Professionalism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research has revealed that no individual or group is a monopoly of knowledge or ideas. This explains the reason why people collaborate in all areas of human endeavours. There is no individual or group that have all required knowledge within their domain, and thus need to somehow connect to outside source at either organizational or individual level. One way of making such connections to the external source of knowledge is by participating in virtual community's forum aka ICT driven interactions (Adamson et al., 2008).

Virtually every community has a need for library services; hence, there is need for professional librarians to be well informed on how to render services to the library users for effectiveness and efficiency. Interested party, inside and outside the library, represent library users who contact library reference for information, either print or non-print information materials made accessible to a well-defined community for reference or borrowing (ALA, 2017). Community of people sharing common interests, ideas, and feelings over the Internet or other collaborative networks is referred to as virtual community (WhatIs.com, 2017).

This paper examines the nature of services provided by the professional librarians, and flings more light on the role that virtual community can play in promoting and enhancing library services. A virtual community model for library professionals is proposed.

1.1 Problem Statement

The major roles of library is to provide library services to library users with a mission to provide information and resources to all who walk through library doors for one services or the other. In this era of ICT spread and internet availability, library tends to serve a broad, diverse, and growing population across the globe. Hence, the need for broad and borderless knowledge for librarians. The Virtual Community Model will strike a balance to ensure the Library professionals are equipped with required knowledge for professionalism, effective service delivery, and to find ways to best serve the library users.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Library Routines and Services

Library routines involve Selection, Ordering, Acquisition, Organization, Preservation, and Dissemination of Information. In Nigeria, Selection function of library includes, but not limited to the following: acquisition and organization of library materials, which should be based on approved library acquisition policy; Cataloguing and classification of library materials; Provision of reference and current awareness services; Selective dissemination of information to the various departments in line with the vision and mission of the organization; Promotion of readers' awareness; Compilation of library statistics/users analysis; Coordination of the profession in relationship with professional bodies and associations; and Giving regular professional advice on library matters to the management (FME, 2017). In an institution of learning, library must offer a proactive service with the aim of drawing the attention of library users to resources of general interest that can assist in learning, teaching and research; all these require broad and borderless professional knowledge.

The beginning of library routines and services revolve around technical service unit. The Selection, Ordering, Acquisition, and Organization of information materials are the area of concerns to Library technical services (TSU) of a library. Library technical services are the processing and maintenance activities of a library's collection (Evans, Intner, & Weihs, 2002; LibraryCareers.org, 2012).

2.2 Library Automation

Automation is a process of using the machineries for easily working and saving the human power and time. The main purpose of library automation is to free the librarians and library staff from manual rigor, and to allow them to contribute more meaningfully to spread of knowledge and Information using ICT tools and services. This will go a long way to adding values as follows: information explosion, availability of information in various formats (print, non-print, graphical, audio-visual etc.), using different approaches to meet needs of users, management and retrieval of information, to search national and international databases, leveraging on the impact of communication technology, increasing numbers of users (Bhupendra, n.d).

2.3 Virtual Community For Knowledge Sharing

A community is a small or large social unit (a group of living things) who have something in common, such as norms, religion, values, or identity. Communities often share a sense of place that is situated in a given geographical area (e.g. a country, village, town, or neighborhood) or in virtual space through communication platforms (James, Nadarajah, Haive, & Stead, 2012).

Virtual communities can be dedicated to a specific topic, or they can seek to bring people with similar philosophies together. Either way, communication is digitally based, information is shared and membership is optional. Virtual communities, of course, are usually dispersed geographically, and therefore are not communities under the original definition of community.

A virtual community is expected to possess the following characteristics (Rheingold, 2003):

- It is organised around affinities or shared interests.
- It supports many to many media communication.
- The communication is graphics based supporting multimedia content (e.g. graphics, animations, video, sounds, formatted text, sound).
- No geographical boundary or physical contact.

3 METHODOLOGIES AND DESIGN OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITY MODEL FOR PROFESSIONAL LIBRARIANS

3.1 Description of the Proposed Virtual Community Model

The proposed virtual community will be a web-based model that will facilitate interaction among the professionals in the field and the public. Its primary objectives are to provide a platform for the professionals to interact on the challenges facing the profession, facilitate knowledge sharing and research collaboration, serves as avenue for business promotion, and provides adequate information for members of the public. Three issues are central to the design of the virtual community, which are: The Virtual Work Place Environments; The Services; and The communication tools.

Having examined the roles of professional librarians based on the routines of services as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, and various review works contacted, we hereby propose the design of virtual community using figure 1 and figure 2 below:

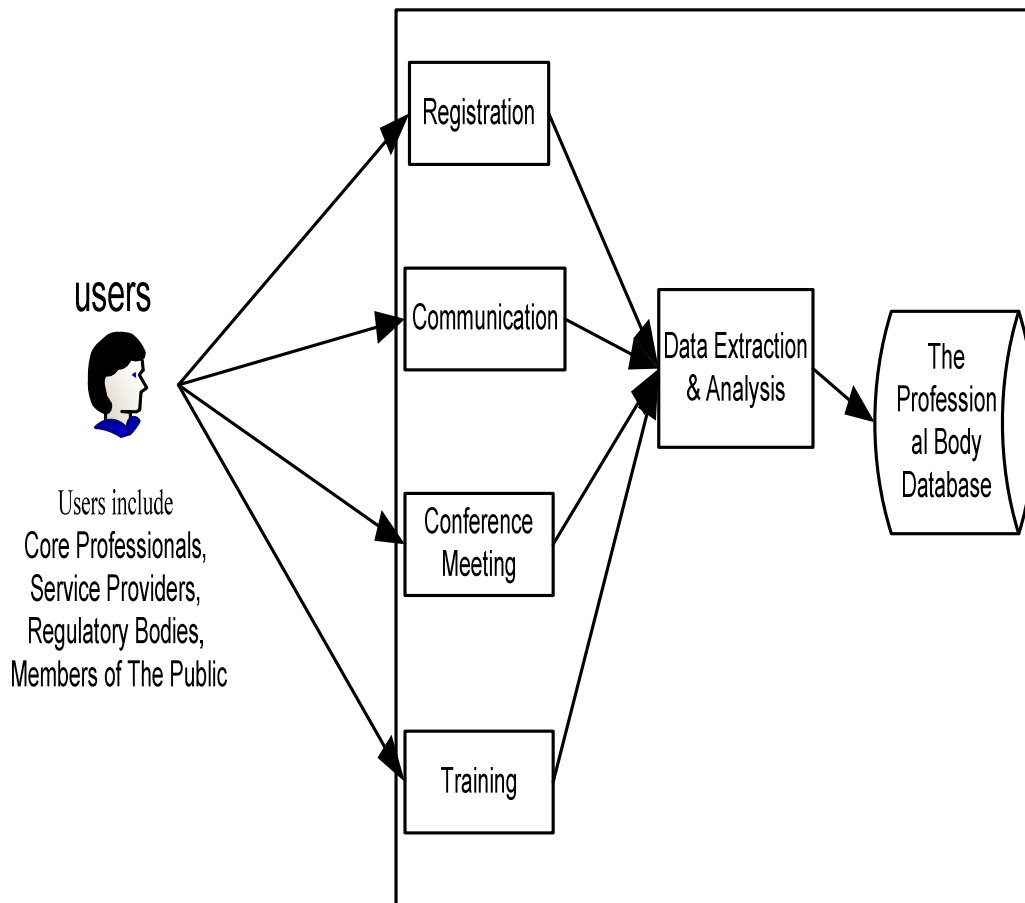


Figure 6: Model of Proposed Virtual Community

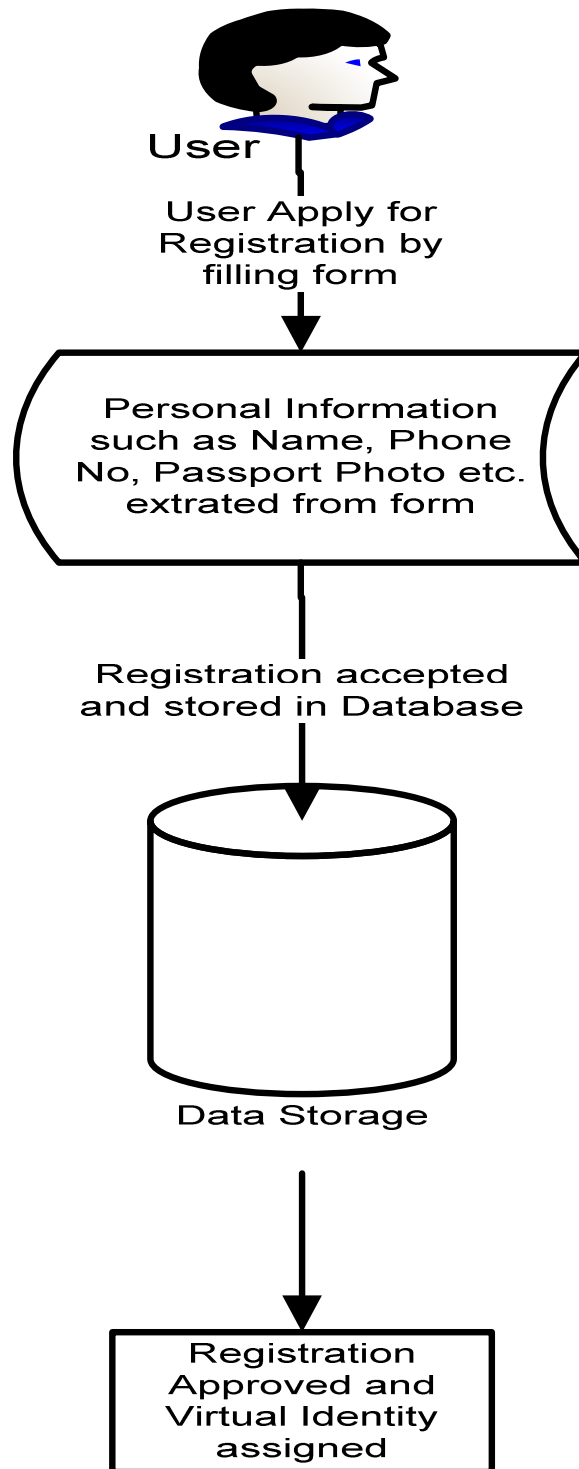


Figure 7: Registration Unit of the Proposed System

3.2 Benefits of the Proposed System

A dynamic profession requires constant interaction among the various stakeholders. The aforementioned features of virtual community offers greater benefits for knowledge sharing and business interaction in a library profession. It may be difficult, at times, to have regular physical interaction with all these stakeholders at all time, considering their geographical widespread. It is on this note that Virtual Community model is required to bridge the communication gap among the various stakeholders.

3.3 Virtual Work Place Environment Of The Proposed Model

The virtual work place environment describes the entities that constitute community members, how they are represented in the virtual community and the access status of each. The community members' categories include:

- The Core Professionals, which include the professional librarians and other library staff.
- Book publishers and marketers.
- Library users.
- Regulatory Bodies and organizations like the NLA, LRCN, AGOL, IFLA etc.
- Other institutions of learning.

The understanding is that each member can interact with other members on issue of common interest or any other issues. However, a member must apply for membership through the virtual community before he becomes a member. The owner of the model e.g. Professional Body, institution of learning, research centre will be the coordinator of the whole process. All members send their messages to the owner of the model via the virtual community. Model owner can initiate discussion with members; also, members are permitted to start a discussion with the model owner. The representative of the model owner has administrator's right. He approves member's registration, coordinates discussion, stores relevant information in the database and can de-member a member if situation warrants.

3.4 Proposed Services

Various services to be rendered by the proposed system are indicated in figure 1 above. These are:

- i. Registration:** This is required of every member before s(he) is admitted as a member. The ideal is that if a member applies for registration, s(he) supplies all personal details as requested in the online registration form. Approval information will be sent to the applicant at a later time. His/her access status will also be determined by the coordinating body Professional Body. Figure 2 describes the registration process.
- ii. Communication:** This can be in the form of a discussion with the professional body or other members. An example is seeking professional advice on the use of a material reporting a crime case, inquiring about the latest technology in the profession. The Professional body can as well send safety alert message to members of the community.
- iii. Meetings:** The professional body can organize a meeting with the virtual presence of other members of the community. The notice of meeting, the minutes of the last meeting, the meeting agenda may be dispatched before the meeting and

members will make themselves available online for the meeting irrespective of their location. The body can also organise a seminar online on issue of paramount importance.

- iv. Training: Online training can be conducted on current technology. Interested member can subscribe online with a fee or no fees depend on owner's discretion.

3.5 The Proposed Model Communication Tools

Various communications tools could be used in facilitating interaction among the users of the proposed system. The proposed tools are: **Email** and **Chat** messenger. Irrespective of the communication tools available, the following are recommended for successful interaction:

- The virtual environment should support members in their decision to communicate.
- It should allow users to choose among a range of communication types.
- It should provide the necessary tools to initiate communication as if users are in the real world.
- It should support user requirements such as use of gestures during communication mediated within the virtual world.

3.6 Possible Challenges of the Proposed Model

Effective implementation and use of the proposed model may be hampered by the following challenges:

- i. Irregular electric power supply.
- ii. Poor data communication and transmission infrastructures.
- iii. Low level of computer literacy among stakeholders.
- iv. Poor commitment of the owner institution's management.

4. CONCLUSION

This research work has made provision for the design of Web-based Virtual Community for professional librarians. The web-based virtual community model can promote knowledge sharing and professionalism in the library system. The dynamism and nature of the library profession and the widespread location of professionals and library users justify the need for a virtual community that will bring them together. However, for the successful implementation of the virtual community the stakeholders must make available infrastructure such as stable Electricity Power supply, Data communication and Transmission devices. On the part of the individual, the level of computer literacy should be upgraded. The professional body must embark on public awareness on the need for knowledge sharing and its concomitant benefit

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