IMARK

Module
Investing in Information for Development

Information Access

Lesson 4: Management Interventions

Learner Notes

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This lesson is part of the IMARK Module on "Investing in Information for Development". The Module contains six units. The unit on "Information Access" comprises five lessons:

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This course is available in self-paced e-learning format on CD-ROM and the Internet (www.imarkgroup.org).

Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- define possible management interventions to make information access more efficient and cost-effective.

Introduction

An information access policy (policies are rules of procedure) must take three issues into account:

- the special features of information as a commodity;
- the sources of external information; and
- the mobilization and maintenance of internal information.

Management options for improving the information access activities related to these issues usually fall into two broad categories:

1. Encouraging effective and efficient information use.
2. Assessing information needs in order to set clear acquisition and mobilization priorities.

Let’s take into consideration the first option.

Encouraging information use

Here are some of the steps you can take to encourage information use. The goal is to make your staff aware of the fact that the new digital information environment offers possibilities that will be beneficial in their work.

1. **Require staff to cite current information in their project proposals and results reporting**.

The goal is improved proposals and reports, and the means is a requirement that staff make better use of databases, abstract journals and/or full-text journals.

2. **Introduce facilities and procedures to make Internet access as widespread as resources permit.**

The Internet is a rich source of information and a means of communication. But it will not be used if an organization does not provide enough computers, and/or if these computers are in inconvenient locations, and/or if there are not enough staff to help new users with technical and content issues.

3. **Encourage and reward internal information "champions" and innovators.**

Within almost any organization, there are some staff who are more enthusiastic than others when it comes to the Internet and digital information. They can be leaders if they receive management support.

4. **Enhance the status and responsibilities of librarians.**

The roles of librarians are changing. No longer are they just custodians of books and journals, but instead are becoming key players in information acquisition, management, dissemination and training. Many of them would like to be information "champions", but they need management support.

Assessing needs and setting priorities

Encouraging information use should ideally be coupled with decisions about resource allocation. How might an organization best spend the money that it has available for information acquisition? This “resource allocation process” has two parts:

1) **assessment of information needs** within the organization;
2) based on these needs, **agreement on priorities** as to what information to acquire and what not to acquire.

Let’s take the case of Yelena, the young director of research in an agricultural organization based in Brazil. She wants to do an “information needs assessment” within her organization. After considerable discussion with her colleagues, she decides that the best method will be a questionnaire sent to staff members. But what should she ask?

One option is to include in the questionnaire a list of potential acquisitions that she has drawn up, and ask people to indicate which ones they are most interested in. This approach is more effective than a questionnaire asking users to list the information resources that they need. In fact, even though this approach is more “top-down”, it has the advantage of limiting the scope of the discussion. A director of research like Yelena can follow up by getting trial versions of some of the items noted in her suggestions, so that staff can see what is on offer.

Yelena finalizes the questionnaire. It includes her suggestions, but also gives staff an opportunity to indicate their preferences. The response rate is good. But she knows that the questionnaire is only a first step, and that there can be other potential inputs to her needs assessment. Here is what she says about it:

We can ask scientists, teachers and authors of extension material to tell us what information sources they use most often. We can even check citations in their publications and training materials…In addition, our library has kept a list for several years of requests that we could not meet, as well of a list of sources that people wanted to consult but that we did not have available… We can use these data as part of our needs assessment.

To summarize, Yelena has identified **three methods** for assessing the information needs of her audiences:

- a **questionnaire**, which has to be carefully designed to elicit useful and accurate answers;
- an **analysis of information sources** that staff use most often; and
- an **analysis of requests** made to the library that could not be met.

Yelena finishes her needs assessment and gives the results to her Executive Director. The Executive Director is happy with the assessment, but realizes that it is only half the equation. The other half is available resources. The challenge for senior management will be to balance these two.

In most organizations, there are more information needs than there are resources to acquire them. So Yelena's Executive Director needs **criteria** for setting priorities and for making investment decisions.

Selection criteria

Here are some of the ideas of Yelena's Executive Director for establishing acquisition criteria:

- **Frequency of use.** Put a higher priority on (a) materials that users need often, and a lower priority to (b) materials that users need only occasionally. The former can be kept "in-house", and the latter can be accessed externally.
- **Size of audience.** Put a higher priority on (a) materials that will appeal to a wider group of users, and a lower priority to (b) materials that are of interest to a small group of specialists.
- **Currency of information.** Put a higher priority on (a) materials that contain up-to-date information, and a lower priority to (b) materials that are of mainly historical interest.

Yelena's Executive Director also wonders if it may be useful to **set different acquisition goals** for different types of material. The following considerations should help her...

There are likely to be three broad categories of material accessed in any technical organization. They are described in the table that follows. Keeping in mind these categories is another useful way for setting acquisition criteria.

TYPE OF INFORMATION	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
GENERAL SCIENCE	The goal here is to have a minimum number of essential reference works.	*Let's take an experiment station on camel breeding. Information in this category might include books and journals on animal breeding and zoology.* *If we consider an extension service, this type of information might include handbooks on training and group dynamics.*
CORE SCIENCE	The goal here is to have as much detailed and specialist information as Resources permit.	*For the camel breeding station, materials here might include essential journals on genetics and breeding technology.* *For an extension service, it might include socio-economic data on the geographic area in which the service operates.*
PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE	The goal here is to have practical materials necessary to help staff do their work well.	*For the camel breeding station, materials here could include textbooks on camel husbandry. For an extension service, it could include handbooks on farm management and accountancy.*

Decision making

Once you have set you acquisition criteria, it will be important to consider how decisions regarding information acquisition should be made. The following suggestions can be useful:

1. **One person** should manage the process.

2. Acquisitions that are to be financed from the core budget of the organization should be made on the recommendations of **groups of subject-matter specialists** (perhaps representing departments or faculties).

3. Acquisitions to be made from non-library budgets can remain under the control of **individual project managers**, subject to the requirement that they first clear all acquisitions with the overall process manager (to avoid duplicate and cost-ineffective acquisitions).

4. As much as possible, the **process manager** will defer to the recommendations of subject-matter specialists and project managers, but in the event of disagreement, his/her decisions will take precedence.

Summary

What can a manager do to **improve information access** when resources are scarce?
Options fall into two broad categories.
(1) Encourage information use.
(2) Assess information needs, and then set clear acquisition and mobilization priorities.

Four ways to **encourage information use**:
(1) Require staff to cite current information in their project proposals and results reporting.
(2) Introduce facilities and procedures to make Internet access as widespread as possible.
(3) Encourage and reward internal information "champions" and innovators.
(4) Enhance the status and responsibilities of librarians.

Three ways to **assess information needs:**
(1) A questionnaire.
(2) An analysis of information sources that staff use most often.
(3) An analysis of requests made to the library that could not be met.

Three criteria for **information acquisition**:

(1) Materials that are used most frequently.

(2) Materials that contain up-to-date information.

(3) Materials that strike a balance between general science, core science and professional performance.

One person should manage the decision-making process regarding information acquisition.