Creating a Friendly Environment for Easy Access and Use of the Library for the Disabled: Roles of Information Professionals

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ABSTRACT

The need to access libraries is not one that we need to contend. Libraries provide us with a vast resources of knowledge whereby a person can access books, journals, periodicals, newspapers, patents, standards, conference proceedings, reports, CD-ROMs, etc. Today with the advent of digital libraries, collections are stored in digital formats and accessible by computers, also. People who are physically challenged should also have access to both that is physical libraries as well as digital libraries. Libraries are also a point of access whereby resources can be pooled and used by a large cross-section of the society. Therefore, making libraries accessible is important for the growth and development of the society. This paper focuses on the concept of physically challenged; categories; their information need; role of information professionals in providing access; need for assistive technologies; challenges and strategies for improving library use. This paper recommends that libraries should be adequately funded to provide better facilities and services for the physically challenged. Library authorities should have a written statement policy on library services for people with disabilities so that the policy may serve as guide during the planning of library services for them.

Keywords: Disability, information professionals, information access

1. INTRODUCTION

Information is power and its importance to the success of every aspiring individual should not be underestimated. Valuable information determine to a very large extent one’s success and future development. Every person, be it normal or challenged is to be given free access to information. Users with disabilities face various challenges in the quest to satisfy their information needs. Libraries therefore exist to meet its user’s basic needs for information by acquiring and organizing information resources, creating enabling environment and providing adequate services on the materials to users. Jaccarino (2009) rightly noted that, for libraries to add to the advancement of knowledge, they must not only provide resources but also ensure that the resources are effectively used. In this regard, libraries have the mandate of providing access to its resources and making sure that all users effectively use the resources. According to Roy and Bandyopadhyay (2009) physically challenged users are the handicapped people who are in one form or the other incapacitated to make effective use of the library resources. In the same vein, British Department for International Development (2008) posits that physically challenged are persons who have restriction or lack the ability to perform any activity in the manner within the range considered normal for a human being. Furthermore, Lin (2008) also defined physically challenged as inability to perform some or all the tasks of daily life or a medically diagnosed condition that makes it difficult to engage in the activities of daily life. Summarily, physically challenged persons are those who are disabled by physical, intellectual or sensory impairment, medical conditions or mental illness and these impairments being permanent or transitory in nature.

2. CATEGORIES OF THE DISABLED

There are persons with disabilities in all parts of the world and at all levels in every society. In Nigeria according to Adamu (2009), there are more than 19 million physically challenged people. He however posited that there are many types of challenges or disabilities; both physical and mental, and they vary greatly in causes, degrees and treatments. Common disabilities according to Rubin (2002) include the blind and visually impaired, deaf and hearing impaired, mobility impairment, leprosy cure, mental illness and mental retardation. A brief description is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blindness</td>
<td>- Complete absence of sight.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Vision</td>
<td>- Impairment of visual functioning even after treatment or standard refractive correction.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Capable of using vision for planning or execution of a task with appropriate assistive device</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leprosy Cured</td>
<td>- Cured of Leprosy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Suffers from loss of sensation in hands or feet or eye and paresis, in the eye and eye-lid and not manifest deformity.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Manifest deformity and paresis, but has mobility in hands and feet to engage in normal economic activity.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- In case of extreme deformity, as well as advanced age prevention from undertaking gainful occupation, then the expression leprosy cured has to be constructed accordingly.</td>
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Table 1: persons with disabilities in all parts of the world and at all levels in every society
3. INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE DISABLED

On the issues of coping with disability and relevance of information to the physically challenged, Adesina (2003) itemized the under listed as the information needs of the physically challenged:

- Information for educational development: This is of paramount importance. As a student, additional information would be needed to build on what was taught in the classroom.
- Information for social and personal development: Information is needed on assistive devices that could aid mobility.
- Information for recreational purposes which may include materials for leisure reading.

4. ROLE OF INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

Libraries are often in the unique position of being a community’s sole source of information. They have a responsibility to collect and provide information to their users including the physically challenged clientele. Wright (1979) posits that all library and information services available to other persons should be made available to the physically challenged individual in a manner which does not stress the individual. Information should be in a format that the physically challenged can use. He suggested the construction of ramps for the handicapped to have access into a room or building, or an isolated ramp attached to one side of it with special sign to indicate where the physically challenged should go through.

A major role of libraries serving the physically challenged is the development of the standards for fully accessible, highly functional information systems that is effective in meeting their information and educational needs. Wright (1979) equally suggests that libraries should begin to think on how they can modify their programmes and services to serve the physically challenged, such library services, according to Amusat (2011) will help to re-orientate the thinking of the disabled and make them live better lives. Different types of disability require different types of specialized library services. Watson (2011) categorized ways of improving access and services provided by libraries for the physically challenged in general into four main areas:

- Physical access to buildings, service counters, workstations, reading rooms, and shelves where possible. This can include providing:
  - Entrance with suitable, clear openings or automatic doors (preferred door width 900mm);
  - Ramps outside and within the building; incase of stairs: no open treads, handrails on both sides; ideally: elevators;
  - Barrier-free hallways (no floor mats or furniture);
  - Colour contrast in carpets and on walls (also to function as warnings near stairs and doorways);
  - Effective lighting;
  - Accessible tables, computer stations and public service desks (table height and width, turning spaces, ergonomic chairs, lighting);
  - Accessible public areas such as toilets and public telephone;
  - Shelving: should ideally fall within 750-2000mm from floor level;
  - Signage: plain typeface (sans serif such as Helvetica, Universe or Arial) on signs and websites;

- Intellectual access to the content of information carriers, including the availability of alternative format materials, adapted workstations and special software. Access can be facilitated on a wide variety of levels, requiring both technical and human solutions. Alternative format materials including Braille, large print audio-cassettes and digital files are part of the solution

- Training for library staff members in helping physically disabled. All staff, regardless of where in the library they work, should be sensitive to and have a basic knowledge of different forms of impairments. Also the ways in which different conditions affect the ability to make use of services and the built or physical environment as designed for the general population.

- Virtual access to library services for those not able to visit the actual building. People who are prevented from getting to a library because of disability should not be denied access to any of the library’s services. The services offered should provide the same quality of access to information about stock as the services offered in the actual library building, and the same opportunities for reserving or requesting books. Similarly, Maina (2009), Roy and Bandyopadhyay (2009) stated that information professionals will need to take into consideration the following points for...
effective usage of library by the physically challenged:

- Library services for the blind must enable them to have access to equipment such as Braille printers, Braille embosser and tape duplicators, Kurzweil reader (a text- to speech reading machine with synthesized speech output), closed circuit TVs for magnifying regular text, PCs with CD ROMS, Power Macs with CD ROMS, large print type writers, special track tape recorders, computers that are having adaptable equipment such as voice eyes.

- The library facility must be barrier free to wheelchairs and other mobility devices and ensuring that all devices including door handles are designed for easy manipulation.

- Provide information resources for the deaf and hearing impairment which include collection of books, caption videos, assistive listening device, specialized alerting devices, technological communication aids.

- Reader service section needs to increase the accessibility of their library. As all documents are not available in their technological form like Braille or talking book and some documents are needed by these users.

- Employ librarians who are qualified in sign language and use of Braille technology.

- Sign interpreters for effective communication with the deaf

5. NEED FOR ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

Technology has removed many barriers to education for physically challenged individuals. Students that are physically challenged can complete homework, do research, take tests, and read books along with their classmates, thanks to advances in technology. The aim of technology is to improve the lives of human beings. Persons with physical deficiencies are no different and require the use of assistive technology to compensate for their disability. According to IDEA, (1997) an assistive-technology device is “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, off-theshelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities”. Also Hopkins, (2004) defined assistive technology as a “system or support that allows a person with a disability to work around his/her area of challenge”. Assistive technology does not provide a “cure” for a condition or disability; it helps the user to accomplish a task more independently, well-matched assistive technologies provide solutions for people who experience barriers to learning (or other pursuits) as a result of disabling conditions (Hopkins, 2004).

According to Family Center on Technology and Disability (2012) some examples of assistive technologies are

- People with physical disabilities that affect movement can use mobility aids, such as wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, canes, crutches, prosthetic devices, and orthotic devices, to enhance their mobility.

- Hearing aids can improve hearing ability in persons with hearing problems.

- Cognitive assistance, including computer or electrical assistive devices, can help people function following brain injury.

- Computer software and hardware, such as voice recognition programs, screen readers, and screen enlargement applications, help people with mobility and sensory impairments use computer technology.

- In the classroom and elsewhere, assistive devices, such as automatic page-turners, book holders, and adapted pencil grips, allow learners with disabilities to participate in educational activities.

- Closed captioning allows people with hearing impairments to enjoy movies and television programs.

- Barriers in community buildings, businesses, and workplaces can be removed or modified to improve accessibility. Such modifications include ramps, automatic door openers; grab bars, and wider doorways.

- Lightweight, high-performance wheelchairs have been designed for organized sports, such as basketball, tennis, and racing.

- Adaptive switches make it possible for a child with limited motor skills to play with toys and games.

- Many types of devices help people with disabilities perform such tasks as cooking, dressing, and grooming. Kitchen implements are available with large, cushioned grips to help people with weakness or arthritis in their hands. Medication dispensers with alarms can help people remember to take their medicine on time. People who use wheelchairs for mobility can use extendable reaching devices to reach items on shelves.

6. CHALLENGES MILITATING AGAINST LIBRARY USE BY THE DISABLED IN NIGERIA

Notwithstanding these technological advancements, in Nigeria, persons with physical disability face some challenges in their attempt to make use of the library. These challenges according to Okoli (2010)
include horrors of architectural buildings which have discouraged many challenged persons from having education. Similarly, Eskay & Chima (2013) pointed out that inadequacy of appropriate reading materials, lack of properly trained library personnel and architectural problems as some of the challenges. Viney (2006) rightly notes that they encounter physical access limitations such as retrieving books from the library shelves, Crisp (2002) affirms that, disability can lead to frustration in some cases, and can adversely degenerate to a level that an individual may not be able to actualize his aspirations.

7. STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING LIBRARY USE BY THE DISABLED

Libraries are a point of access whereby resources can be pooled and used by a large cross-section of the society. Therefore, making libraries inclusive is important for the growth of the society. In this regard, Barrier Break Technology (2012) asserts that libraries can make a large impact on the education of persons with disabilities by providing access to resources through Screen Reader and Screen Magnification Support; Alternate Format Services; Accessible Website and Digital Library. Similarly, Iyoro (2004) affirms that accessibility as one of the pre-requisite of information use, hence in order to allow physically challenged students to use materials that are available only in print, they might need access to an optical scanner and optical character recognition programme such as omrpage pro, open book or a CCTV for low vision students.

On the other hand, Kassim and Maduagwu (2006) recommended the following to be considered: access to buildings which involves the provision of obstacle free routes with handrails and sizable door width; books-on-tape; provision of large print books; books on Braille; information and communication technologies (ICTs) and provision of tape recorders. Also Barrier Break Technology (2012) asserts that while retrofitting physical access into a library, there are various components of the building that need to be looked at. They observed that considerations need to be given to simple aspects such as ensuring that people with vision impairments are able to negotiate within the library without hitting against obstacles, people with hearing impairments are able to receive all the information they need, people with cognitive disabilities are able to find their way between similar looking book stacks.

However, Babar et al (2004) concluded that factors such as age, gender, type of disability etc determine the coping strategy adopted by challenged individual.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Library use has to do with visits to the library by patrons for the purpose of consulting its resources and services in order to satisfy their information needs. Library use by any category of library users, especially where such use is regular, leaves behind certain connotations of effectiveness of the patron in utilizing the resources of the library, and an acceptance of the entire package of service-provision, media-formats and access to items of need in the library.

If physically challenged persons require specially structured approach towards their proper communication with the rest of the society and these were not forthcoming, this implies that communication services were being deficiently provided for them and the reluctant effects on continued use of such deficient services by the physically challenged, may lead to a section of the society not being carried along in the process of national development. As a result, this paper recommends that

- Adequate funding to provide better facilities and services in libraries for the challenged is of paramount importance.
- Library authorities should have a written statement of policy on library services for people with disabilities so that the policy may serve as guide during the planning of library services for them.
- The entrance of the library must be easy to identify by people with vision and cognitive impairments. There must be a step free route leading to the library for the benefit of mobility impaired persons.
- Infrastructural facilities for adaptive technology should be put in place and the right environment should be created, because the abilities of these virtually impaired persons to creatively deploy these technologies are not in doubt.
- Appropriately designed signage and way finding system must be put from the main gate to all sections of the library. Good signage goes a long way in making people independent in there interaction and use of various facilities within the premises.
- Training and Retraining of Librarians- training is necessary for optimum performance. Therefore, librarians should be trained on how to relate to physically challenged clients.
- Librarians and information professionals should be committed to providing equal access to all library users, whether normal or challenged.

REFERENCES


