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Demand for electronic legal information at the university of Botswana

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Abstract: *The advent of technology has changed the way legal research is conducted. The study looks at the availability of electronic legal information at the University of Botswana, perceptions of the university legal community about such information, challenges affecting access to electronic legal information and recommended solutions to those challenges. The paper also looks at the contribution that the library can make in alleviating the challenges and addressing the different perceptions by the legal community.*

Introduction

The advent of technology has made access to information so much easier and convenient. In addition to that, for the legal community at the University of Botswana (UB), library print copies of law reports and statutes are often not sufficient; law reports and statutes are the most highly used part of the library collection. An attempt is made to introduce students to electronic legal information every year. All first year law students go through the information literacy program which is a credit based program. Thereafter, through out their studies students are trained and retrained on all available e-legal resources and this includes subscription based resources and selected web resources like FindLaw, SAFLII etc. Training can be through sessions organized with lecturers, one on one or small groups on demand. Notwithstanding, though, there is still underutilization of the e-resources.

The aim of this study is to look at how well law students and lecturers appreciate the e-resources on legal information, whether they use the resources, the challenges they face in accessing the resources, proposed resolution to the challenges and what contribution the library and the librarian can make in improving electronic service. Hopefully the outcome of the study will help in improving the electronic service to the legal community

within the university and from outside since the university library serves both the faculty and external users.

The Electronic Legal Information Environment at the University of Botswana

The University of Botswana Library (UBL) became connected to the internet in 1998. The library system was however, automated in 1994. Therefore, electronic information has been in use in the library for quite some time. A lot of developments have taken place since then in terms of providing access to electronic information. There has been a steady increase of subscription databases for the past 5 years. UBL subscribes to a number of electronic resources with legal content. For example, there is; Ebscohost, JSTOR, SA E-Publication, Lexis Nexis and South African Law reports and Statutes, and Botswana Law Reports and Statutes. Electronic legal information is useful for several reasons; easy access, more users can use the same source of information at the same time, current information available, cross referencing, access to more resources in one databases, it allows for remote access (one does not necessarily have to be in the library building to access the materials), and one does not have to retype a form that they need to use, they can just copy and paste.

There are a total of 220 workstations in the library. There are also a number of computer labs around campus each with about 30 computers (each faculty has a computer lab).

Study Community

The study community comprised of law students and law department lecturers at the University of Botswana. There were 45 respondents (8 lecturers and 37 students). The survey was carried out through the form of a questionnaire (the questionnaire is attached). There were 10 questions and the questions required short answers. The questions were designed that way deliberately so as not to discourage respondents from responding the survey.

Findings

a. Computer literacy

The majority of the users indicated that they have some experience with the use of computers. 40% said they have average experience, 46% were above average, 7% were below average and another 7% said they were expert. On the frequency of using a computer, 40% said they use a computer occasionally, another 42% said everyday and 18% said once a week. 46% of respondents indicated that they last accessed a source of electronic legal information, 19% in the last month, 16% in the last week, another 14% could not remember the last time they accessed an e-resource and 5% said they had never accessed any e-resources before. Further, although there are about 6 databases that contain law content excluding web resources, 49% of the respondents indicated only two databases that they are aware of, 24% said one and 27% could not name one.

The results show that the majority of respondents' experience with computers is good enough. However, there is insufficient use of computers since less than 50% said they access the computers everyday. The challenges identified by the respondents are a contributing factor to the limited use of computers. Further, it is disheartening that 27% of the respondents could not name of the databases available not even web resources.

b. Challenges

Africa in general has a number of challenges regarding access to e-resources, insufficient infrastructure and financial constraints being the lead challenges (Alema, 2005). The challenges identified by the respondents are:

- Technical problems: connectivity is the biggest problem. Although the university is doing its best to provide internet access, the network is usually slow and sometimes down. The other problem pointed out in the survey is the log in problem, students are often unable to log into the library computers. Due to

technical problems only two computers in the library have the networked Botswana Law Reports which happens to be the most heavily used law database and this set up has been identified by respondents as a cause of concern.

- Lack of infrastructure; there are not enough computers to serve everyone and often one has to queue up for the next available computer. Financial constraints mean that the university can only provide so many computers; in a study carried out in 2004 (Seanego) this was identified as one of the challenges facing the university students in getting access to computers. At the moment there is no internet connection in the dormitories. Such access could help especially for students who may afford to have their own computers. Frequent computer malfunction is another problem that impacts on the few computers available.
- Inadequate computer literacy; many of the students come to the university with no computer training.
- Limited printer availability; the library provides fee based printer facility and there are only two printers to serve the whole library user community.
- Computer phobia; some students who have not had exposure to computers before coming to the university do not feel free to use the computers.
- Economic implications; some of the users especially students can not afford personal computers and to sustain internet connection if they do have computers. This is a serious hamper to connection as it means everyone has to rely on computers available in the library and compete with about 20 000 other students. Although there are computers in faculty labs, students prefer to use computers in the library for several reasons including that library opens for longer, better internet connection, and ready access to other materials in the library (Seanego 2004)
- Not all information needed is available online
- Computers are often attacked by viruses and therefore slow or fail to work completely.
- Some databases are prone to developing problems and sometime shutting down completely.

The most frequently cited challenge was the inadequate computers.

In study conducted in 2004 (Seanego) some other problems identified by respondents accessing computers in the University of Botswana Library were; prolonged use by other students, lack of technical support, use of computers for playful activities thereby denying others opportunity to use the computers, faulty computers, noise around the workstations and lack of technical support. Studies carried out among several developing regions libraries expressed similar problems related to access to e-information, for example Isreal (Baruchson-Arbib, 2002), Ghana (Adika, 2003) and Dar es Salaam (Luambano, 2004).

c. Recommendations to Address the Challenges

The respondents to the survey come up the following suggestions that can be applied to address the challenges:

- Awareness on other available free internet resources that can add to the number of electronic information sources available
- Subscribe to more databases with more international legal content.
- Increase the number of computers
- Improve internet connectivity
- Wireless internet to deal with the problem of connectivity
- Open a lab for law department that can be used by students taking law courses or increase the number of computers in the library with Botswana Law Reports
- Regular workshop training on internet and available e-resources
- More regular maintenance of computers
- Longer access period for computers in seminar rooms.
- Offline access to South African Law reports and Statutes
- More technical support for trouble shooting
- Provide more printers in the library; come of the lecturers suggested that for effective use of e-resources by university staff they need to each have access to

personal printers as opposed to the current system of one departmental printer shared by all staff.

Most frequent suggestions in terms of the number of respondents who opted for those suggestions were; more computers, regular maintenance and training.

d. Electronic or Print?

83% of the respondents rated the value of e-legal information as high. Further, all the respondents stated that the library should subscribe to more electronic information and on the question of which format they would prefer, print or electronic, 64% opted for electronic but also suggested that print should be retained due to the problems often experienced with electronic information. Those who opted for print stated that in the current circumstances print is more convenient.

It is evident from the responses to the questions relating to the value of e-legal resources to the respondents that they value electronic information; there is a quest for more e-legal information. However, at the moment due to the current challenges associated with access to the electronic resources they would rather have print copies available as well.

Conclusion

In her concluding remarks Adika (2003) observed that the internet has revolutionised information-related activities globally and the statement could not be more accurate. We can not go back, we have to move forward. Libraries have to find ways of promoting use of e-resources. The challenges identified may discourage law students and lecturers from using the e-resource more often. In spite of that, there is no dispute that the demand for e-information increases all the time as the legal community realizes more and more that e-information is convenient, saves time, and you can get more for your money in one database. In Botswana where law firms are not characterized by library buildings the use of electronic information is more practical to the attorney in practice. My view is that by

promoting use of e-information among law students they can be prepared for the future use of such resources when in practice.

How can the university legal community be encouraged to use electronic sources of information more? A lot needs to be done to promote the use of e-resources among the legal community at UB. A lawyer of tomorrow is bound to find themselves in a predominantly e-enhanced environment; secondly there is no culture of library rooms or buildings among the practicing attorneys in Botswana so it is logical that many of them would want to have e-library as opposed to a print or predominantly print library.

It is submitted that the participation of the lecturers in encouraging use of e-resources is critical; where the lectures are not using the resources themselves or are not actively involved in encouraging their students to use them it is unlikely that students will use the resources. Practice has shown that persistence pays, although a number of lecturers still do not use the e-resource well enough some of those who initially did not show interest got to appreciate such resources through receiving information from electronic resources upon requesting it from the librarian. Therefore, the first important point of focus is to train and encourage lecturers more so as to increase their appreciation of the e-resources. Lecturers can also grade citation of e-resources in references on students' assignments; they can refer students to more e-resources or indicate the available e-legal resources on the course outlines so that if a student can not find a print source they can always refer to the e-resource as another second option.

Similarly the law student community can also be encouraged to use e-resources more often through regular training (as observed by the respondents themselves), awareness through notices and just by plainly pushing the information to them. This means that the library has to invest time, staff and finances (for colorful and catchy notices) to ensure that this happens.

Infrastructure improvement is also one area that can not be avoided both in terms of increasing the number of computers, improve connectivity and regular maintenance. This

may be a long term solution due to financial constraints but it is critical component is promoting use of e-resources. As observed by Baruchson-Arbib (2002);

The dual role of today's library in the modern college is to make contemporary research tools available and to provide instruction and encouragement for using these tools. To fulfill this role, institution administrations must invest resources both in obtaining the tools and in marketing them to students by increasing the number of library instruction courses. The more widespread the initiatives of the administrations, librarians, and lecturers, the more use students will make of modern EIS.

DEMAND FOR E-LEGAL INFORMATION by K.F. Radijeng

1. You are: ----- Student ----- Lecturer
If your are a student year of study ____
2. What is the level of your computer literacy
----- Expert ----- Above average ----- Average

----- Below average -----None
3. How frequently do you use a computer?
-----Every day -----Once a week -----Occasionally -----Never
4. Are you aware of any electronic sources of legal information available? If yes which ones?

5. When last did you access an electronic source of legal information?
----A few days ago/today ----About week ago

----About a month ago ----Don't remember ----Never

6. What are the challenges you have with access to electronic legal information?

7. What do you think can be done to address those challenges?

8. Should the library subscribe to more electronic legal information? Why?

9. How do you rate the importance of electronic information to your work/study?

A. High B. Somewhat important C. Little importance D. Not important E. Don't know

10. Given a choice between print and electronic information which one would you rather use and why?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

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