

IDENTIFYING INFORMATION SEEKING STRATEGIES

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Abstract:

The paper discusses the four main variables of information seeking strategy namely information need, channels, sources and barriers. The paper tries to establish a relationship among the four variables to ascertain the information seeking strategy among medical professional working in North East India.

Introduction:

Information is a basic resource for any scientific and technological research and communication. Further, use of terms like information Society, the information rich, information poor, knowledge worker, knowledge management, and information explosion suggest that information is an increasingly important social, political and economic resource. Academicians need information to keep abreast with the latest developments of their subject field or related field, writing or reviewing articles, writing seminars or conference papers, preparing a research projects. Information seeking behaviour results from the recognition of some need, perceived by the user who as a consequence makes demands on the formal system such as libraries, information centres, online service or some other persons in order to satisfy the perceived need. (Wilson, 1981). Information seeking behaviour gives rise to information seeking strategy. Belkin et al (1995) used the concept while saying "any ISS (Information Seeking Strategy) can be described to its location along these four dimensions ". These dimensions are:

- Activity or interaction (an information search)
- Goal of interaction (learning-selecting)
- Mode of retrieval (recognition-specification); and
- Resources considered (information-meta information).

In other words information seeking strategy consists of one or more cycles, with each cycles consist of one or more interactive feedback occurrences (user input, information retrieval system, output, user interpretation and judgement, user input) (Spink, 1997). Thus the variable that will identify the information seeking strategy are information need, information sources, information channels and information barriers. Even though, these variables can be conditioned by various factors such as nature of work, availability of information sources and other organisational and

personal variables, still a generalised relationship exist among the four dimensions of information seeking strategy.

Retrospection:

According to Wilson (1994), information user study dates back to 1916. Siatri (1999) traces the evolution of user studies from 1940's. True beginning of user studies started when Urqahan and Bernal (1948) reported their studies in the Royal Scientific Information Conference in London. Since 1960's, there has been an immense growth in the literature of user studies with orientation on use of primary and secondary sources of information and their dependence on information channels. During 1965, 676 user studies were published in one of the bibliographies of user studies. One of the important studies conducted in 1967, which deserves mention, is INFROSS study (Information requirement for information science.) based on survey questionnaire at Bath University. This study laid the foundation for further research. Need for conducting user studies was also felt by S R Ranganathan (second Law of Library science). It is very difficult to estimate how many user studies have been conducted so far but it is a very well established fact that user studies have generated enormous amount of literature. However the pertinent question is whether these studies have given the desired results and future directions or simply it has formed the knowledge base. The reasons for not arriving at some theoretical understanding of the concept is mainly due to complex nature of information needs. Thus studies conducted so far and models developed so far lack comparability and generalised conclusions. Moreover, different studies take different variables into consideration for assessing the information seeking behaviour.

To summarise, literature in information studies has grown quantitatively but still to arrive at conceptualisation of information seeking strategy of academicians. An understanding of relationship among information need, channels, sources and barriers is essential if we have to improve information transfer. (Saraf et al, 1998). Many studies have been conducted with the information needs, the use of literature or the information seeking behaviour of a particular group of people or scientists. Most of these studies have used the concepts of 'information use' or 'information need', 'information seeking behaviour' and 'strategy' and 'channels of communication'. This system exists in a system of complicated and inter-dependant relation. All these studies gradually contributed, in one way or another in establishing and expanding the field. In an era of continuous technological developments in conjunction with information overload, user studies continue to be a vital tool enabling information professionals to improve both their understanding of information use and hence information delivery (Siatri, 1999). In this context, it is felt imperative to study information needs, use of information sources, information channels and information barriers of academicians in Northeast part of India. This study tries to

identify the information seeking strategy among medical professionals working in North East India. These strategies can be used to identify the right methods / techniques in information retrieval, which can be imparted to medical librarians. Further, they also help in designing a training program at National and International levels

Methodology:

The sample for this study has been drawn from the medical practitioners working in four medical colleges with attached hospitals. These colleges are as follows: Gauhati Medical College, Guwahati, Assam Medical College, Dibrugarh, Silchar Medical College, Silchar and Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal. All professors, associate professors, assistant professors and registrars and demonstrators were included in the study. The basic objectives of this study are to:

- To investigate the nature of information needs of the medical practitioners
- To identify the types of sources and channels used by them
- To identify the types of barriers they face while seeking information
- To identify any relationship among information needs, information channels, information sources and information barriers.

A total of 605 medical practitioners were identified out of which 92 were not available for the study. The questionnaire booklet with total of 123 items divided into five sections was distributed among 513 medical practitioners. To this were added 23 private practitioners working at Guwahati making it a total of 536 respondents. The booklets were personally distributed and collected. After three requests, a total of 397 medical practitioners responded making it 74.06% response.

Discussion:

It is of interest to know as to how factors of information need are related with information sources, information channels and information barriers. Inter-correlations among information needs, sources, channels and barriers of Medical Practitioners were computed. The study reveals that, the formal and informal channels are extensively used by medical practitioners for the all three variables of information needs, i.e. conferences / seminars, medical information and upto-dateness. Medical practitioners use formal as well as informal channel for collecting information. Electronic text searching channel is used only for information need to attend seminars/conferences. Information regarding new clinical methods, new drugs, new treatments etc. is showing negative correlation with electronic text searching channel. Medical practitioners do not use computerized database either in their institutional library or out side the library. Because it is found, not single library has

the computerized database in the library. Regarding external / other libraries channel is used for conferences/seminars and keeping abreast with latest developments. The channel Internet/online searches is used for collecting information to satisfy their required information needs like latest project report, medical catalogue etc.

It is clear that the variables (both printed and non-printed) of information sources are having significant relationship with the variables of information needs and information channels. Primary sources and audio-visual sources have the strongest relation with the variables of information needs i.e. conferences/seminars. It means that the medical practitioners needs much more information like journals, patents, standards, research reports etc. for attending the seminars/conferences and information needs like documentary cinema, T.V. etc. for preparing the lectures for the audience or students.

Regarding information barriers, it is seen that environmental barriers are negatively related with variables of information needs, It is also found that environmental barriers have no relation with the variables of information channels i.e. electronic text searching and Internet/online searches. It means that all the institutional libraries have no any electronic database, online connection and Internet facilities, which are needed by the medical practitioners. Personal barriers also show the negative relation with the variables of information needs i.e. medical information and uptodateness. The institutional libraries are unable to provide required information like latest textbooks, reference books, journals etc. for the medical practitioners.

Conclusion:

Three variables of information need identified are (i) conference/seminars, (ii) medical information, (iii) uptodateness. These variables are highly correlated signifying their importance. Medical practitioners need information for conferences/seminars followed by medical information. This reveals that they need information about new drugs, new clinical methods and about new treatments.

Regarding information channels five variables have been identified and these are viz. formal channel, informal channel, electronic text searching, external/other libraries and Internet/online searches. All these five variables are significantly correlated. The variable formal channel has highest rank followed by Internet/online searches variable. This indicates that they depend more on formal channels like libraries but also use Internet and online searches as the channel to satisfy their information needs. The informal channel ranks third.

For the purpose of study information sources have been divided into two groups: printed information sources and non-printed information sources. Five variables have identified for printed information sources and are ready references, medical

sources, primary sources, secondary sources and external sources. The analysis shows that the primary source is the most important information source for medical practitioners. This includes journals, newsletters, treatise, patents, research reports and so on. This follows by the secondary source and ready reference includes sources like discussions within hospital, patients record (Centralized Medical Record Department) internal meetings etc. For non-printed information sources three variables have been identified after factor analysis. These are audio-visuals, on-line electronic sources and off-line electronic sources. The three variables are highly correlated indicating their significance. Audio-visual variable ranks first and followed by on-line electronic sources and off-line electronic sources respectively.

Information barriers are categorized into two variables namely environmental barriers and personal barriers. Between this the environmental barrier is the most important barrier. This indicates that, the medical practitioners do not get good library facilities and unfavourable attitude of library staffs in their institution. Personal barriers include items like non-availability of time to visit the library etc.

In conclusion, information needs, channels, sources and barriers are bound together in a mutually interdependent system known as information seeking strategy. This study needs to be carried out on a larger sample with different socio economic background for generalisations. Present study may serve only as a guide to study information seeking for final conclusions. We are experiencing a number of important changes concerning both users and technology available for provision of various services. It is very evident that users prefer to use telecommunication channels to satisfy their information needs. Therefore, it is high time that we redesign or reorganise our information systems as well as courses on par with the Schools of international repute.

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