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INFORMATION NEEDS AND UTILIZATION OF SMEs IN A COMPETITIVE ECONOMY IN LAGOS STATE

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Abstract

This study sought to establish the entrepreneurs' information needs and utilization on one hand, and the influence of each of these on organizational productivity on the other hand in twelve selected local government councils of Lagos State.

Self administered questionnaire was used to gather data from 236 entrepreneurs from 12 Local Government areas in Lagos State. The findings from this paper enumerate the need for accurate and timely information, proper information utilization and effective communication in the organization. As part of the paper recommendations, entrepreneurs were encouraged to be concerned with dissemination of information, and to create more relationship between communication process and employees' productivity so as to enhance organizational productivity.

Introduction

The explosive growth of information technology does not seem to have been accompanied by a commensurate improvement in the understanding of management and productivity.

The entrepreneurial system of today has become increasingly complex. These complexities have brought about increase in the spate of modern computer interconnectivity installation that would enable entrepreneurs achieve communication of data and multimedia over intranets, extranets and with the whole world, over the internet. It has been realized that management is in dire need of not only computer literacy, but what could be aptly referred to as "information literacy", that is, knowing how to locate, analyze, store and use information.

Popoola (2005) postulates the importance of information as being the fifth factor of production. In analysis, utilization, communication, security and retrieval of information, accurate information has become one of the most important attributes and tools of the modern organizational manager.

In addition, information plays an important role in life-long economic sector. This is because of strong reliance on information. In realizing the tasks of the society, individual and groups also need adequate, relevant, timely, accurate and reliable information. A precondition to meeting the above conditions, however, is the knowledge of the user's need in special field of the person to be supplied and when information is to be supplied. This is what Bruce (2002) also calls *anticipated information need*; conjecturing the way the information object will find its use in resolving the information needs of a patron. Thus, if information is to be used, it must be provided with the individual user in mind, not on the basis of what is convenient for the information provider.

Significance of the Study

The significant of this study is to show the information needs by the SMEs in Lagos State.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. investigate the express and latent information needs of SMEs in Lagos State.
2. identity the various methods and approaches used in acquiring information.
3. identity the problems encountered in the process of acquiring the needed information.
4. identity the effects of information utilization on organizational productivity.

Research Questions

The questions that need to be answered are:

1. What are the latent and express information needs of SMEs in Lagos?
2. What are the various methods and approach used in acquiring information?
3. Are there any problems encountered in the process of acquiring the need information.
4. What are the effects of information utilization on organization productivity?

Statement of the problem

The problem of this study is to determine the information needs and utilization patterns of SMEs in a competitive economy in Lagos State. It has become imperative that the level and nature of information, whether the required information is adequately and appropriately disseminated to the entrepreneurs should be studied. This is even more so knowing fully well that Lagos State is the commercial nerve centre of Nigeria. This is with a view to improving the overall system of information transfer by making available the right information to the right person in the right quantity at the right time. No one can deny the fact that information utilization can contribute to organizational effectiveness and efficiency (Adimorah, 1977). It is in the light of above general subject that this work intends to probe, examine and analyze the information needs and utilization of small and medium scale enterprise in Lagos State.

Definition of Terms

Information is interrelated or structured data, including collection, storage, processing and dissemination of news, data, facts, messages, opinions and comments required in order to react knowledgeably as well as to be in a position to take appropriate decisions.

Information need is a condition in which certain information contributes to the achievement of a genuine or legitimate purpose.

Information utilization is the way entrepreneurs use and convey their gathered and processed data to achieve stated organization effectiveness.

Entrepreneur is a term used to denote the organizing factor in production. The entrepreneur is responsible for such economic decision as determining what to produce and how much to produce.

Productivity is the relationship between valued outputs and valued inputs. The relativeness of the term 'production' makes the measurement to be viewed along

different lines. In this study, productivity will be defined in terms of entrepreneurs' performance as measured by the Entrepreneur Productivity Terms.

Literature Review

It is no longer news today that we are in a new information age, characterized by the existence of information techniques. As prominent as information technology is today, it is not equally new that SMEs are confronted with problems, which may be traced back to poor management of information. However, an accurate, timely, availability and use of information would reduce the common problems confronting SMEs. This study seeks to establish the pattern of information utilization and information perception and the influence of these on entrepreneurial productivity.

Pattern of Information Needs by Business Enterprises

An informed mind is an enriched mind. Every rational being needs some information for his day-to-day existence, activities and well-being. No society or organization can grow beyond its level of information awareness, acquisition and appropriation. This informs the existence of SMEs as an indispensable back-bone of any nation's economy, which needs information for its survival.

Okwilagwe (1993) stresses that, research indicates that the average citizen in the community, be it in academics or business, has common needs for information in coping with everyday societal pressure; he is ignorant of what information is available and where to seek it; information available especially in the suburban community is not adequate to meet his needs; and information sources available are not particularly helpful in meeting his information needs. The information may be very simple or complex. But it is a vital ingredient in the process of allocating resources to where they are needed. However, conceptualization of information need has been a difficult task.

Information needs have been seen differently by different people. McGarry (1981) states that, what constitutes information is decided by people who know the objectives of the organization. In an organization as SMEs, all the staff, in different ways, directly or indirectly, helps in achieving the goals of the enterprises.

Oladipupo (1993), agrees that information need is a condition in which certain information contributes to the achievement of a genuine or legitimate purpose. Derr maintains that, since it is difficult to pinpoint information purpose because it involves determining values and measuring extent of contribution of information to any information purpose, the determination of Information needs to process conceptual information needs is supported by their anxiety to acquire information to solving problems posed by the task of the various capacities of an information giver or taker.

Attempts have been made to assess the pattern of information needs by SMEs. Oladipupo (1993), makes it clear that the best way to find user's information needs is to separate the information according to the level of decision-making for which it is needed.

In his 'information needs of female entrepreneur's, Nelson (1987) states that women approach the entrepreneurial experience with disadvantages rooted in education and experience. He further says that a tendency for entrepreneurs to study non-business school subjects and to work as employees in "soft skill" areas has led some researchers to contend that entrepreneurs are hampered by internal barriers to success. This barrier, education, has cost many entrepreneurs productivity

and pains. Nelson states further that the effect of such barriers might be expected to be greatest during the start-up phase, when knowledge of a vast array of topics is vital to the launching and survival of venture. Those who lack background in the language and methods of business, he submits, may be doubly penalized by not knowing which questions to ask and of whom to ask them.

Franklin and Goodwin (1983) submit that small business owners "tend to use and consider most important those information sources that are convenient. These information sources are what the entrepreneurs need to start-up their business. Sourcing for information has been considered "a critical problem" for the SMEs at infancy.

In the perspective of UNIDO (2003), SMEs' need is accessibility to adequate information to enhance productivity and facilitate market access. They agree that the rapid advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) are having far reaching effects on business organizations. The amount of information available on-line is increasing exponentially. Society today is aptly termed an information society, in which information plays an increasingly important role in all aspects of our lives. When market shifts and technologies proliferate, when activities multiply and become obsolete overnight, successful institutions (SMEs) are those that consistently use information to create and apply new knowledge. When information is strategically handled, decision making and knowledge building in SMEs become less cumbersome. In fact, it is to be considered an essential resource or need.

More so, access to information is insufficient, SMEs need tailor made information solutions, that is, business information resources that assess, verify and apply information to a specific business problem.

In addition to the above, in most developed countries, business information sources are provided by commercial entities which are predominantly private sector-driven and operated (UNIDO, 2003). They openly compete with one another on quality and are continually tuned to the evolving need of their client. The services are provided to their clients in the form of value-added services, that is, as business solutions, using national or international sources of information.

The advent and influx of mini and micro-computers have brought an opportunity to small business, an opportunity that has increased substantially, because of the possibility of computerisation of information systems. Through the use of a mini or micro-computer a small business can develop an information system that will allow better and faster decision to be made. Computerisation of the information system is what Taylor and Meinhardt (1987) refer to as "computer information needs". They further stress however, that the process of developing an appropriate hardware usually presents more difficulties for small businesses than for large ones. The reasons being that, a small business is unlikely to have an in-house expert. Secondly, a small business usually have fewer resource than a larger firm to allocate and develop a computerized information system.

Management has been said to carry the bulk of the responsibility of any organization. And any organization (SME) that lacks efficient and effective management is preferred to be dead. Alter (1996) sees management as what the SMEs need from the activities of the managers, links them to both formal information systems and other information sources that managers use. He look at managers from their types of responsibilities.

Mintzberg (1973) groups into three the roles of managers in SMEs. They are interpersonal, informational and decisional. In interpersonal roles, the managers

plays the role of a figure-head for the organizational effort, leads in meetings, and disseminating the principles behind the new organization and serving as entrepreneur defining the new goals, the negotiator resolving conflicts, and the disturbance handler.

Conclusively, the pattern of information needs by SMEs is determined by the managers, by identifying factors that are critical to the success of their contribution to the organisational goals. The pattern backed up with right utilization of the information that will culminate into business productivity.

Information Utilization and Entrepreneurs Productivity

For information to be useful in any SME organization, it must be first of all gathered. Aiyepoku (1980) in his perception on utilization of information by policy makers in Nigeria says that a complete lack of a coordination unit or information gathering, storage and retrieval for use of policy makers made them not to have a high level of information consciousness.

In addition, making information useful for the SMEs in organization, Falola (2003) says, it must be communicated to the right quarters. Communication, in essence, is a process of exchanging information. It is also a process whereby the ideas, images, feelings, emotions, perceptions and opinions of one person are transmitted to another. Windahl, Signitzer and Olson (2006) define communication as a process in which the participants create and share information with one another to reach a mutual understanding.

After acquiring information, utilizing it to achieve any stated SME's or organizational goals or to achieve employee administrative effectiveness is very important or vital. However, before information can be used, it must be complete, error-free and adequate. In any organization, a high correlation is achieved between information adequacy and managerial or administrative efficiency.

The quality of any information that will be useful depends on accuracy and verifiability - the two go hand in hand (Falola, 2003). The accuracy of information refers to the degree to which information is error-free. Completeness of information referred to the degree in which it is free from omissions, that is, all information required should be available. The timeliness of information on its own refers to the time sensitivity; While relevance of information refers to the appropriateness of the information as input for a particular decision.

For any organizational goals to be met there must be free access to information, which, will enhance its utilization. Accessibility to information is viewed as an important factor in determining harmonious relationship, which ultimately affects organizational goals. Adimorah (1977) opines that management needs information at every level to formulate plans, refine decision-making and help makers to anticipate and resolve problems. He further recommends that information should be provided in the form suitable for its use and that it should be stored in such a way as to enhance accessibility.

In any organization, SMEs inclusive, a high correlation is achieved between information adequacy (culminating in its use), and managerial or administrative efficiency (the key is productivity) (Falola 2003). The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines productivity as a degree of effectiveness of industrial management in utilizing the facilities for production especially the effectiveness in utilizing labour and equipment.

As quoted by Ndiyo (2003), productivity is a quantitative relationship between output and input (Oyeranti, 2000). As long as the basic concept refers to the relationship between the quantity/quality of goods and services produced, this definition of productivity remains the same regardless of the types of production system. In other words, productivity is a ratio of some measure of output to some index of input used or the ratio between the quantities of resources used in the course of production. Ndiyo(2003) submits that this concept of productivity goes to imply the efficiency with which resources are utilized in production.

And entrepreneur productivity is defined as a product of effective information utilization. This implies that entrepreneur productivity is dependent on the degree to which information is utilized within an organization. One can submit that the inability to adequately process and utilize information would lead to a decline in entrepreneurs's productivity.

Productivity is measured by the way efficiently resources are transformed from input to output, which can also be measured in relation to each of the factors of production viz. Productivity of labour, productivity of capital, productivity of land, productivity of the entrepreneur. This makes productivity an encapsulating concept that is comprehensively distinctive.

It is common, however, in production to see emphasis being placed on labour productivity, reveals Ndiyo (2002). Oyeranti (2000) reasons that one justification for special emphasis on labour productivity may be because, labour is a universal key resource. But recently, advancement in information technology seems to suggest that labour productivity may actually be subordinate to the productivity of capital and other scarce resource such as energy or raw materials. Therefore, entrepreneur productivity is better perceived as the end result of a complex social process involving science, research, training, technology, management, production plant, trade union, as well as labour among other inter-related factors. It is a comprehensive measure that is concerned with efficiency and effectiveness simultaneously

SME Growth Through Market Research In Competitive Economy

The goal of every business is to make profit, but many business make losses even where there are ample opportunities. Conducting a market research before going into the desired line of business helps the business owner to break even and make profit within a short period. Businesses are not likely to miss their profit and growth targets with adequate market research.

Ekwere (2011) defines that market research is the process of gathering analyzing information to identify and define marketing opportunities and problems, as well as generate sales. Through market research, a business owner can refine and evaluate his marketing activities, monitor marketing performance and continuously improve marketing process and efforts. Market research basically involves collecting and analyzing information about the target market, which are the potential customers of a business (Ogunkunle, 2011). He says it involves gathering information about your competitors as well as the environment in general. The data may be obtained from a research that has already been done or by getting information directly from people (conducting a survey).

By conducting a market research, a company can gain invaluable information. In turn, the company can make better decision resulting in a higher degree of success and profit. Since the business environment in Nigeria is becoming more competitive, this kind of research is a high priority for all types of businesses and

organizations. Ekwere says that market research can provide answers and guidance to many marketing questions such as:

- Is there a demand for your products and services?
- What are the preference and needs of your potential customers?
- What is the size of your market or pool of potential customers?
- How many other businesses are offering similar products or services?

By the time a business owner can get answers to some of these questions, he is on his way to succeeding in his business.

However, it is pertinent to note that the key to market research is not just gathering data but also knowing what to do with the data that have been collated. Information gathered in this way can be categorized into qualitative which is more investigative and involves a fewer number of people, such as focus groups. The purpose for this is to understand buyers' attitudes and beliefs (Bamkole, 2011). He says that quantitative information, on the other hand, is used to draw specific conclusions and involves a large number of respondents. The researcher makes use of surveys and questionnaires, he says, adding that if the entrepreneur can afford a professional market research, it will work to his advantage.

Researching your competitors can also give you valuable insight into your market, including what existing marketing gaps there are. There is also need for consideration of strengths and weaknesses of your competitor's product, price, promotion, innovation and quality of service, and this will help the entrepreneur to draw up conclusions on the best way to handle his business.

Ikemba (2011) however, warns entrepreneurs that a few things could go wrong during marketing research, adding that business owners should, therefore, be careful while conducting their research. He says that financial constraints may limit the amount of research activity, leading to erroneous conclusion, adding that sometimes activities are put on hold before they are completed due to lack of funds. It is therefore, important that it is taken into cognizance before embarking on the research.

The attempt by companies and firms, most times, to do too much in such a little time is another constraint of market research. According to Ekwere, such entrepreneurs end up taking shortcuts and sometimes make use of out-of-date secondary data, which may produce the wrong results.

Research method

This is a survey. The research instrument used to collect data was questionnaire. The researcher collected data from 236 entrepreneurs in twelve local government councils, out of 21 local government councils in Lagos State.

Table 1: Analysis and Discussion of Data**Socio-demographic**

Background variable of respondents	Frequencies	Percentage
Sex		
Male	158	66.949
Female	78	33.05
Total	236	100.0
Enterprises		
SMEs	104	44.1
Large enterprises	90	38.1
Public enterprises	27	11.4
Missing system	15	6.4
Total	236	100.00

Table 1 shows that 158 (66.49%) respondents were males, 78 (33.05%) were female. Their types of enterprise were SMEs, 104 (44.1%) large enterprise 90 (38.1%) public enterprise 27 (11.4%).

Table 2: Percentage distribution of respondents on perception of information utilization in SMEs.

	Frequency	%
Proper information utilization in any enterprise will enhance organizational productivity.	180	76.2
Acquiring and using information are critical and important to my organization.	153	64.8
Information utilization and communication will lead to organization effectiveness.	183	77.5
There is no relationship between information to any organization.	2	8
Timeliness is important in the use of information to any organization.	170	72
Accessibility to information enhances information utilization, which ultimately affect organizational goals.	195	82.6
Information technology aids information availability and utilization.	165	69.9

From the Table 2, 64.8% recognized acquiring and using information as being critical and important to any organization, while 77% agreed that information utilization will lead to organizational effectiveness. 82% were of the opinion that accessibility to information enhances information utilization, which ultimately affect organizational

goals, while 69.9% agreed that information technology (IT) aids information availability in the use of information to any organization. 40% agreed that proper information utilization will enhance organizational productivity, and 8% disagree that there is no relationship between information adequacy and managerial efficiency.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of respondents on effect of information utilization on organizational productivity.

		Frequency	%
1	Adaptability-flexibility	180	76.3
2.	Productivity	180	76.3
3.	Satisfaction	173	73.3
4.	Profitability	177	75
5.	Absence of strain	165	69.9
6.	Control of environment	164	69.5
7.	Development	170	72
8.	Efficiency	182	77.1
9.	Employee retention	182	77.1
10.	Growth	196	83
11.	Survival	189	80.1

Note: Does not total to 100%, as respondents could select more than one option.

The Table 3 shows the effect of information utilization on the organizational productivity. The highest; growth and survival 83% and 80.1% respectively shows that for any organization to grow and survive information is important.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The variables studied are pattern of information utilization, perception of information and organizational productivity. From the data collected, it was established that the identified information available, have joint significant effect on organizational productivity. More so, the data collected revealed that pattern of information has a relative impact on organizational productivity.

In view of the results of this study, having the growth of SMEs and development in mind, there is need to make some recommendations which can enhance effectiveness in information acquisition, utilization and dissemination for SME's productivity.

The provision of adequate and accurate information technologists (manpower) will ensure greater productivity in the SMEs.

The entrepreneur should be concerned with the dissemination of information, communication process and they should seek for themselves the possible relationship between communication process and employees' productivity so as to enhance organizational productivity.

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