Impact of Outsourcing on Library Activities: A Bird's Eye View

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Abstract

Due to the impact of modern technology the library environment has changed to a great extent. Consequently, the flow of work has changed and librarians have adopted new and additional duties. In order to face the challenges in this new environment the library authority have updated the strategic plan and changed the job priority. The information explosion during recent years has become a challenge to the librarians and library and information centers. Simultaneously there has been an ever increase in cost of information products, resources and services. Outsourcing of works is very common issue in today's production and service sectors. Engaging outside agency in the library is not a new subject. This paper attempts to highlight the meaning of outsourcing, its application in library management and activities as well as some pros and cons of this process. It also highlights the initiatives adopted by different kind of libraries in India regarding outsourcing.

Keyword: Outsourcing; New telecom policy; Offshoring; BPO; TCS.

Introduction

The transforming nature of information technologies, intellectual technologies and digitization is awesome. By the end of 21st century, most of the libraries would find themselves involved in upgrading or revitalizing their manpower, information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructures. In present and near future context no library can be an island affair, a rigid one and self-centered whether in terms of services given, resources stored or managing the show. Resources need to be shared; the management should seek cooperation from and extend help to other systems. The type of services and the organizing process of resources are now in a changing mode. In this context, outsourcing of library activities appears to be an innovative strategy. Outsourcing of works is quite familiar in today's production and service sectors. Engaging outside agency in the library field is now quite common. In the early 1900s, the Library of Congress began providing catalog cards to libraries. In recent days libraries are contracting outside agencies not only for classification and cataloguing services, but also for other functions as well, including the development of automated systems, the acquisition of materials, preservation of library resources, etc. These practices were not labeled as outsourcing when first adopted, but they are common practice today. Nowadays outsourcing is mostly used for digitization of data and especially for retro-conversion process in our country.

Though outsourcing has opened a new vista of opportunities for rendering specialized customer driven services but it still remains controversial, because of, the opposite argument that outsourcing of core functions/ services threatens library institutional viability, leaning towards privatization while it diverts local controls and diminishes the contributed value of professional librarians.[1]

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History of Outsourcing in India

Outsourcing is said to emerge a few thousand years ago with the production and sales of food, tools and other household appliances. After 1980 privatization was initiated and from 1990, private organization started to outsource the task to get them done from the professional organizations to achieve cost-effectiveness. In the year of 1994, the Indian government announced a policy under which the telecom sector was liberalized and private participation was encouraged. The 'New Telecom Policy' of 1999 brought the golden era of the IT/BPO industry. In that way inbound call centre, telemarketing services and data processing services have captured the market.[2] The present society is IT society where information technology has became the backbone of business worldwide. Outsourcing is the process through which one company hands over parts of its work to another company. Although IT industry in India has existed since the early 1980's, it was the early and mid 1990s that saw the emergence of outsourcing. One of the first outsourced services was medical transcription, but outsourcing of business processes like data processing, medical billing, and the customer support began towards the end of 1990s when multinational companies (MNCs) established wholly owned subsidiaries which catered to the offshoring requirements of their parent companies.[2]

What is Outsourcing?

Outsourcing often refers to the process of contracting to a third party. The term outsourcing was coined in the late 1980's, with different terminologies like Facility Management, Contract Service, Externalization, Partnership, Collaboration, Contracting, Hiring, etc., which is related to outsourcing the task and services.[3] Recently the term outsourcing is often used interchangeably — and incorrectly — with offshoring. Offshoring or Offsource outsourcing is, in fact, a small but important subset of outsourcing wherein a company outsources services to a third party in a country other than the one in which the client company is based, primarily to take advantage of lower labour costs.[4]

According to ALA's Task Force[5]

- Outsourcing is the contracting external companies and organizations, functions that would otherwise be performed by library employees.

- Privatization is the shifting policy making and management of library services of the responsibility for the performance of core library services in their entirely from the public to private sector.

- Core services are those professional activities that define the profession of librarianship. These include collection development and organization; gathering and providing information; making the collection accessible to all the library users; providing assistance in the use of the collection; and providing oversight and management of these activities.

- Outsourcing of library services/activities a potential requirement for today's libraries has taken shape from the genesis of Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), which has taken shape from Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). The BPO space has involved for mere data entry to transaction processing and the focus is on executing standardized routine processes.[1]

Why Outsourcing of Library Activities

It is our day to day experience that the library is the prime victim whenever any financial constraints or strategy occurs. Dubberly in one of his article argues that "libraries caught in the economic crunch of having to provide more services with reduced revenue can do so only by utilizing outsourcing".[6] There are mainly three areas where outsourcing work can be beneficial:

- *Cost Effectiveness:* To avoid the cost of investment on immediate infrastructure, outsourcing is helpful. It includes recruitment of staff with knowledge of modern technology.

- *Outside Workforce:* As creation of new post is virtually a complex process, outsourcing can be the solution here. It provides services per demand by outside talented workforce.

- *Timely Result:* There are several agencies or organizations having required work expertise and ready work force to response 'at a time/ as and when basis'.

There are many other reasons for outsourcing such as[4]:

- variable capacity of the organization;

- the ability to focus on core competencies by ridding yourself of peripheral ones;

- lack of in-house resources;

- increase flexibility to meet changing demand and commercial conditions;

- getting technical works such as cataloguing, classification, data entry, etc done more efficiently or effectively;

- tighter control of budget through predictable costs.

Outsourcing of library services/activities can increase overall efficiency without hampering the routine works of the library.

Areas of Outsourcing in Library

In the field of library, activities of outsourcing are not a new entity. In the past, typing of catalogue cards, subscribing the periodicals through the subscription agency, preparation of index cards, abstracts preparations, binding, interlibrary loan were managed through the outside agencies. The application of information technology in library and information centers gave new ways for the outsourcing of library tasks.

At the present situation the following services can be outsourced very easily from the different activities carried out in the library and

information centre[7,8,9,10]:

Acquisition Unit: Process for getting the approval books, Standing order books, online order entry and follow up, data input in worksheet, data entry from hard/soft copy, online data capture services, etc.

Serial Control: Subscription to the periodicals through vendors/aggregators/agency, building union catalogue of periodicals, preparation of holding lists, etc.

Processing: Preparation of catalogue cards, filing cards in sequence, OPAC development, labeling, tagging, putting plastic jackets, and reclassification of documents, thesaurus development, etc.

Circulation: Activities like barcode and RFID applications, preparation of cards, membership up gradation, interlibrary loan, etc.

Collection Maintenance, Organization and Preservation: Shelving books, reorganization of the collection, replacing the documents and maintaining the proper order of the documents, stock verification, fumigation, de-acidification, dusting, humidity control, microfilming, binding and other conservation related activities, etc.

Information Services: Electronic document delivery services, generation of bibliographies, printing bulletins, translation services, transcription services, building special databases, reprography services, query handling over telephone or helpdesk services, filing newspaper clippings, web based indexed document retrieval services, etc.

IT based tasks: Document digitizing services, digitization of catalogue services, content management systems, library automation tasks, maintenance of hardware, software configuration, testing and maintenance services, open source software development, website design services, website optimization services and maintenance of overall networking systems etc.

Manpower Development: Training, upgrading the skill of the staff by arranging refresher courses, etc.

Administrative Area; Creation of paperless

office, filing, postal services through courier agencies on contract, transport on contract, technical writing, editing, and publishing, marketing of the LIC's services, etc.

Maintenance of Area, Building, etc.: Engineering tasks, building maintenance, cleaning of floors, security, maintenance of smoke detectors, fire system, etc.

So it can be stated that there are so many core library functions of government or private libraries of various sizes and capacities which are often outsourced by outside people or agencies.

Positive Aspects Of Outsourcing[2,12,13,14]

- With outsourcing the organization can experience increased efficiency and productivity in non – core technical processes.

- Outsourcing of non-core library activities will give more time to professional staff to concentrate on core technical and administrative processes.

- Outsourcing can give organization access to professional, expert and high-quality services.

- Outsourcing can help the organization to save time, effort, manpower, cost of regular activity and training costs amongst others.

- Outsourcing can make an organization more flexible to change.

- By outsourcing, proper control over the library budget and the maximum utilization of the resources is possible.

- By outsourcing, information repackaging and generating the revenue is possible.

- Outsourcing provides access to a larger talent pool and a sustainable source of skills.

- By outsourcing, libraries increasingly use external knowledge service providers to supplement limited in-house capacity for production and service innovation.

- Expansion of the library's planning, implementation, and evaluation processes can be achieved through outsourcing.

- Outsources is a trend of standardizing the library can be possible, in IT services.

- Outsourced library support staff discovers a career ladder within a larger outsourcing organization, with more opportunities for advancement.

Negative Aspects of Outsourcing[2,11,12,15]

- When an organization begins outsourcing processes, they might find it difficult to manage the offshore provider when compared to managing processes within the organization.

- The contract term can be discontinued by the agency at any time without giving any reason or prior notice.

- Continuous changes in the contracting agencies may cause problems for running the management smoothly.

- Proper evaluation can keep the task on track; hence necessary care is required internally.

- The employees of an organization might not like the idea of outsourcing the library processes and they might express lack of interest or lack of quality at work.

- The employment opportunities of the library workers would be narrowed down if outsourcing takes place in a large scale.

- Where entire library is outsourced, there is a loss of institutional memory, familiarity with practice areas of firm, firm culture, partners, and associates.

- By outsourcing, the contractual staff are engaged for those works, without the feeling of belonging to the library staff. There is always a facility bar between permanent staff and the contractual staff.

- Outsourcing, though cost-effective, might have hidden costs, such as the legal costs incurred while signing a contract between companies. The authority might also have to spend a lot of time and effort in getting the contract signed.

- No safeguards for intellectual property (copying, etc.).

Besides these there can be several disadvantages in outsourcing, such as, renewing contracts, misunderstanding of the contracts, lack of communication, poor quality and delayed services amongst others. Finally a library, outsourcing their activities may not be open to future developments of its work as it becomes gradually dependent on outside agency.

However the disadvantages of outsourcing are less than the advantages of outsourcing.

Role of the Library Professionals

In the context of library outsourcing, the librarians perform an important role to coordinate in the process of outsourcing. Librarians need to clarify and understand the outsourcing issues, positions and concerns. For providing outsourcing services, clear understanding and agreement about the meaning of terms and conditions, informed discussion and decision are required. For example, the small libraries engage some skilled people preferably fresh graduate to do a particular library processing work on a short time project basis where librarians are to coordinate or supervise the work. In case of big libraries, there are so many types of outsourcing activities. Some small and medium libraries are also outsourcing their works, sometimes it is project basis or sometimes contractual basis. In all the cases librarians or permanent library professionals have crucial role to play in this respect. Actually quality of outsourcing services depends on the proper guidance and supervision of the librarian.[1]

Process of Outsourcing

While outsourcing any activity, the following steps are to be maintained[16]:

- Identifying objectives of the library

- Fixing of the activities/tasks to be outsourced

- Preparing schedule of cost-benefit analysis

- Prepare the proposal stating the details of activities

- Negotiation and clarification of the points of activity, fixing contract, finalizing the terms and conditions of contract, etc.

- Identification of risk

- Acceptance of the vendors

- Starting the process/ activity

- Evaluation and monitoring of the outsourced tasks

- Termination or renewal of activity or task.

Outsourcing Initiatives in India

There are so many libraries belonging to different kinds like national, academic, special libraries have already adopted outsourcing policy in several cases. Some examples are given below:

IT Library: Tata Consultancy Services Ltd.(TCS): Processing, Circulation, Newspapers and Journals browsing, Bar-coding, Information service, Collection maintenance, Shelving, Stock taking, Data entry, Database updating, etc,

University Library: University of Delhi, University of Madras, University of Mumbai, Jadavpur University, University of Calcutta, Rabindra Bharati University, Mysore University, Anna University, Coimbatore; Thapar University, Punjab : Database maintenance and networking, Web page design, Document Delivery services, Processing and preservation (Rare collection), Digital library service, System control (maintenance of hardware & software), Binding of books and periodicals, Pest control, Cleaning of floors, Security, Maintenance of

smoke detectors, Fire system, etc.

Special Library: ISIs - Kolkata, Bangalore; IIMs - Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Bangalore; IITs - Kharagpur, Kanpur; Ahmedabad Textile Industries Research Association (ATIRA), Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bangalore; IUCCA, Pune; ICAR, New Delhi; ZSI Libraries, ASI Libraries, Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research, Kalpakkam; Bose Institute, Kolkata; Indian Jute Industries Research Association, Kolkata: Retrospective conversion, System control (maintenance of hardware & software), Database maintenance, Reclassification, Stock verification, Bar coding, RFID, Rare document management, etc.

National Library, Kolkata: Retrospective conversion, Database management, System control (maintenance of hardware & software), Data entry, etc.

Public Library: Asiatic Society Library (Kolkata), West Bengal State Central Library (Kolkata): Books and Periodicals database creation and maintenance, Cleaning of floors, Security, Maintenance of smoke detectors, Fire system, etc.

Documentation and Information Centre: NISCAIR, NASSDOC: System control (maintenance of hardware & software), Translation service, RFID technology, etc.

Besides these there are many governmental and non-governmental organizations/ institutions in India who have outsourced their library activities/services in several cases.

Conclusion

Outsourcing can encompass a wide range of IT services to all activities of the organization. Each library and information centers (LICs) require a different understanding of priorities, measures, cost and benefits. The decision to outsource is a major strategic one for most organization, since it involves weighing the potential cost savings against the consequences of a loss in control over the product or services. Outsourcing decision should be based on solid cost benefit analysis and it can be a key opportunity of success. The use of external human resources to enhance IT service offerings is complicated by the evolution of outsourcing market. The library authorities must have the ability to meet their specific need and they have chosen to outsource for a variety of reasons. There is no overwhelming trend of libraries to embark on the total outsourcing of its technical services. Outsourcing of cataloguing, mainly computerization, is common to all types of libraries. Sometimes outsourcing acts as a managerial tool to be a workable solution to some management issues and when used carefully and judiciously it has resulted in enhanced library services and improved library management. Except core library activities, there are so many non-core library activities, which are outsourced as supporting services in India. So it can be stated that in some area the third party may be helpful. But self-sufficiency in all respect (as far as possible) may be the best option.

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