Chapter 88
Exploring Workplace Experiences of Information Literacy through Environmental Scanning Process

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ABSTRACT

Information Literacy (IL), as a key component of education for decades, has been underemphasized at the workplace. This chapter reports on a study aimed to explore workplace experiences of IL through the environmental scanning process adopted by the travel industry in Singapore. Some 42 travel agent companies responded to the survey, and 13 employees, representing various functional units and hierarchical levels, participated in the follow up interviews after the survey. It was found that IL skills had significant influence on the quality of information for decision-making. Senior Managers were satisfied with their employees' overall level of IL skills. However, many problems still surfaced during the environmental scanning process, such as inability to find the needed information, overreliance on habitual information sources, and improper storage of information.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information technology makes huge amount of information available to people with easy accesses. Information Literacy (IL), as the ability to define information needs and to search, retrieve, evaluate, synthesize and use information (Goad, 2002; Todd, Lamb, & McNicholas, 1992; ACRL, 1989), has been a key component of education for decades. Historically, information professionals and librarians have been the masters at utilizing IL skill set for meeting

the information needs of their users. However, the rapidly evolving digital universe demands all people to become information literate. No matter where one works, in education, government, business, healthcare, or industry, the ability to locate, access, synthesize, evaluate and use information from diverse resources to make informed decisions and to effectively solve problems is a necessary competency (Klusek & Bornstein, 2006; Goad, 2002; Gardner, 2000). Perrault (2006) pointed out that IL is necessary for businesses to be competitive. Moreover, in the 21st century, IL requires a move beyond a skills-based approach in IL, especially in response to technological innovations such as the Internet and focuses on the production of knowledge in collaboration with others (Marcum, 2002). IL should move beyond the traditional literacy levels of reading and writing, while embracing information and digital literacy in the process (NFIL, 2013).

However, at the workplace, employers may tend to pay more attention to the need for computer or information technology (IT) skills (Bruce, 1999). Cheuk (2000) pointed out that having the ability to handle IT does not necessarily mean that they are information literate. Underlying these challenges and demands, IL is also mistaken for digital literacy (NFIL, 2013). Digitally literate people are generally wizards at using a variety of digital tools. They are not necessarily IL practitioners. In organisations, individuals continue to struggle with information overload due to their inability to find useful or specific information, or the inability to retrieve information effectively. These problems may result in increased operating costs, which in turn may negatively impact the organisational performance. This suggests the need for individuals to become competent users of information.

Although there is a substantial body of literature on IL in educational settings, there is much less literature on its applications at the workplace (Weiner, 2011; Lloyd & Williamson, 2008) and even fewer of them have integrated the skills with a

specific management activity; i.e. how those skills could be applied in a business context (Zhang, Majid, & Foo, 2010). It is, therefore, desirable to explore the workplace experiences of IL through its application in business context. Environmental scanning, as an information-intensive management process for dealing with information about the external business environment (Zhang, Majid, & Foo, 2010; Choo, 1993), was selected as the context for this study, which aimed to find out the role of IL skills in making the environmental scanning process more effective and efficient. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are the information sources used for scanning the external environment?
- What is the relationship between level of IL skills and the quality of information for decision making?
- What are the IL related barriers and problems in the scanning process?

BACKGROUND

This section mainly provides a review of literature about IL at workplace, and the application of IL for environmental scanning.

Information Literacy at Workplace

The term "information literacy" was coined by Paul Zurkowski in the 1970s in the workplace context. Zurkowski (1974) linked IL to the attainment of economic goals and solving workplace problems. The 1989 Final Report of the *American Library Association's Presidential Committee on Information Literacy* define that an information literate person must be able to recognize the need for information, to effectively access, evaluate and creatively use information (ACRL, 1989). This definition was most widely accepted, and it also established a significant connection be-

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