



Southern African Journal of Communication and Information Science

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To cite this article: Kuraga, K., Ndinde, S. and Maisiri, E. 2025. Evolving library staff skills during a health crisis: A case of Rimuka public library in Zimbabwe. *Southern African Journal of Communication and Information Science*. 2(2): 66-91.

Published Online: 17 April 2025

Evolving library staff skills during a health crisis: A case of Rimuka public library in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the evolving library staff skills during a health crisis. The focus was on skills that library staff could adopt in the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) era in Zimbabwe and worldwide. The aim was to generate insightful knowledge that could be used by information professionals facing health pandemics in order to provide current and relevant library services to their user community. The research employed a qualitative research design using a case study research strategy. Interviews were conducted with six library staff and four administrators who were chosen based on the purposive sampling procedure. Data was analysed thematically and presented textually. The significant findings were that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had caught the Library unprepared for providing distant services. The library staff did not possess the requisite skills to offer distant services. The Library lacked resources, including ICT gadgets, which could have been used to provide such services. The main recommendations were for the Library to organise in-house training programmes, workshops and seminars to equip staff with digital literacies. To this end, the Library could upskill its staff and use the general digital competencies framework to focus the training. The Library could appoint a systems librarian to set up and run a digital library. The staff could participate in collaborative activities with other local council libraries and events organised by institutions in the library profession. The current study adds to our knowledge of how staff skills in public libraries in Zimbabwe during health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have changed over time. Numerous studies have been conducted in developed and developing nations evaluating the extent of harm to library services in health environments. Nevertheless, there is little research on how staff skills could be developed and enhanced during health crises in African public libraries, especially in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic; information literacy skills; library staff skills; digital literacy skills; public libraries; Kadoma; Zimbabwe.*

Introduction

Health pandemics have caused significant global loss of life and disrupted public health, food systems, and work, including library services, putting millions at risk of extreme poverty and increasing undernutrition of millions of people by the end of every year (William, 2022). In 2019, the world witnessed an outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2021). Thereafter, almost all countries enforced a range of control measures, termed 'lockdown', which aimed to curb the virus' spread (Haider et al. *et al.*, 2020; Hussain, 2021). Haider *et al.* (2020:2) define lockdown as "a set of measures aimed at reducing transmission of COVID-19 that are mandatory, applied indiscriminately to a general population and involve some restrictions on the established pattern of social and economic life". The effect of the lockdown measures permeated communities and institutions of all types, including libraries and information centres, the world over, disrupting the normal flow of activities (Dodo, Weribagba and Oweipere, 2022). Highlighting the effect of the lockdown measures in public libraries, the International Federation of Libraries and Institutions (IFLA) (2020) states that public libraries in Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Bosnia, Brazil, the Cayman Islands, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, Myanmar, Nepal, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa, Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates were shut down. However, over 90% of municipalities in Sweden kept libraries open, with 85% offering extended services.

In libraries that had remained open, in-person visits decreased (Guernsey, Prescott and Park, 2021). In their survey, the same authors opine that in-person library visits dropped from 54% pre-pandemic to 18% during the pandemic. In instances of total closure, IFLA proposed the hybrid use of digitally-based operations and manual operations that the libraries could adopt to sustain some of their services. However, there was a need to innovate and use evolving skills to provide services to the public. What services to embark on or maintain depends on the nature of the lockdown measures that a country or library chooses to adopt and whether there is sufficient capacity to offer the services possible within the lockdown measures adopted. Lockdown measures enforced in different countries categorise communicable disease measures based on their compulsory or voluntary nature, targeting specific individuals or facilities or indiscriminately affecting a general population (Haider *et al.*, 2020).

The provision of library services takes different forms, corresponding to the various stages of human development (Eje and Dushu, 2018). In-house-bound technologies and techniques based on manual services were the order of the day before the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in public library information work. ICTs facilitated the “communication and the processing and transmission of information electronically” (Eje and Dushu, 2018:7). Due to advances in information technology, virtual environments become dominant, turning reality into an e-world. In an e-world, lives centre on “e-commerce, e-finance, e-government, e-social communications, e-media, e-education, e-learning and even e-gaming” (Ingram, 2021:2 as cited by Dodo, Weribagba and Oweipere, 2022). In this e-world, knowledge and communication are digitally based (Ilomäki, Kantosalo and Lakkala, 2011), which raises the need for service providers in public spaces like public libraries to possess digital skills that enable them to operate in virtual environments. The skills are grounded in digital literacy, which is the ability or skill “to search, organise, understand, evaluate and use digital information and also the ability to assess the impact” of ICTs and their management (Subaveerapandiyan, Sinha and Ugwulebo, 2022:2). Applied in a library setting, “digital library literacy skills include fundamental knowledge of computers, social media, integrated library management systems, information retrieval, networking, programming, Web page design, database management system, metadata, editing the data to multimedia documents and strong technical skills that include communication and critical thinking skills” (Subaveerapandiyan, Sinha and Ugwulebo, 2022:3).

The evolving skills to provide virtual services during lockdown in the COVID-19 era were critical, especially in public libraries. IFLA-UNESCO (2022) describes the skills as necessary “local gateway[s] to knowledge” that carry a mandate to foster “lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups”. Highlighting the importance of the role played by sustaining public library services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ameh, Ukwuoma and Oye, 2021) and Mabuie (2020) found that the libraries provided valid information to the public, researchers, health officers and frontline workers. Libraries facilitated the continuity of learning activities, raised public awareness of COVID-19 issues on preventive measures and management of the disease where possible while emphasising the need for adherence to public health measures, and provided a platform that kept the public engaged in their homes. In light of this, as noted by Neyra (2020), public libraries must stay close to their catchment communities more in such circumstances than in

any other to guarantee access to culture for the library communities through, for example, the transfer of cultural or academic activities to virtual environments or developing digital libraries of free access. However, as Ncube and Nyabadza (2020) observed, all public libraries in Zimbabwe suspended their services in line with the lockdown measures. This invariably negatively affects the catchment communities served by these libraries. Considering such developments, this study sought to explore the evolving sets of library skills that library staff members of the Rimuka Public Library in Kadoma, Zimbabwe, could have possessed to provide service during the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- i. To determine the skills required by public librarians during the Covid-19 outbreak.
- ii. To determine the services Rimuka Public Library could have provided during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- iii. To determine the resources the Rimuka Public Library required during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.
- iv. To determine steps taken to provide library employees with relevant skills during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background to the study

The current Zimbabwean public library system is a vestige of British colonialism. The system was established during colonialism by white settlers in the 19th century, with the first library opening in Bulawayo in 1892 (Made, 2000; Kanengoni, 2024). The public library system is built on a centralised public library system called the National Library Documentation Services (NLDS). Libraries were primarily for whites and educated whites in particular, with some philanthropic initiatives directed towards the black population. After independence, municipalities supported high-density and low-density areas, with subscription libraries serving low-density areas and city centres. In 1985, the National Library and Documentation Service (NLDS) incorporated various library services into one national library service, ensuring access to information for Zimbabwean citizens (Chisita, 2011; Chisita and Chibanda, 2019; Jeppson, 2024). Public libraries in Zimbabwe are spread out in all ten provinces; for instance, Harare has two public library systems: the City of Harare and the Harare City Libraries. The Local Government controls the City of Harare, while Harare City Library is an independent non-profit. Libraries are located in low and high-density areas. Other public

libraries in Zimbabwe include Bulawayo Public Library, Gweru Public Library and Turner Memorial Library in Mutare. Made (2000) identifies several pioneer public libraries in Gweru (1897), Chivhu (1903), Mutare (1904), Kadoma (1917) and Mvuma (1926). These libraries were established for recreational purposes but struggled to keep up with community growth due to a lack of government financial support (Kanengoni, 2024). United States Information Services (USIS), the US embassy, and the United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) provide public library services. Most public libraries have print resources, with ICT-based services offered as Internet Cafes (Chisita, 2011). Hikwa and Maisiri (2014) noted that the dominant information resources in public libraries are in print form, and very few libraries also have e-resources and/or offer ICT-based services. Where the ICT services are available, for example, at the Bulawayo Public Library, the services are offered in the form of an Internet Cafe, and patrons pay for their usage.

While many libraries in Zimbabwe tried as much to initiate programmes and strategies in service provision, the situation was different with the Rimuka Public Library, which is wholly owned by the Kadoma City Council (KCC). The effects of the lockdown measures were also felt at Rimuka Public Library in the city of Kadoma, which is located in the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe (Urban Council Association of Zimbabwe, 2022) which had to shut down its operations in compliance with the lockdown measures. The Library is run by the Kadoma City Council (KCC). It first opened its doors in 1916 by Mrs. Amelia Fitt, the far sighted wife of businessman George Septimus Fitt, owner of the town's excellent bookshop, when she proposed to the then Village Management Board that a room in their offices be allotted to serve as a small library. It was housed at the Welfare Youth Hall, where it occupied the backroom until the 90s, when the Stevenage Borough Community, United Kingdom, through donations provided by the British Embassy, funded the construction of the current building on Nyambo Street in Rimuka Township. The KCC was in-charge of the construction logistics and provided the labour. The opening of the Library was commissioned by the then British High Commissioner to Zimbabwe, Mr Peter Longworth, on the 3rd of March 2000 (Sternberg and Barton, 2017).

The library services were discharged manually, and in line with provisions of the IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (2022), the services were funded by the KCC and were accessible to the whole of the Kadoma community "irrespective of age, colour, academic qualification, or religion" (Dodo, Weribagba, and Oweipere, 2022). The services on offer

included research support, story reading and other outdoor information-related activities for children and their parents. Outdoor activities included a mobile library introduced in October 2021 that rotated in council schools lending books.

Statement of the problem

According to Corsillo (2020), the role of public libraries is to keep patrons educated, connected, and entertained. This comes with an obligation to develop new skills and acquire resources to keep services going despite being closed to the public during a health crisis. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kenya's Kibera and Kakuru public libraries launched innovative programmes through social networks, such as sharing books and story times. Likewise, developed libraries like Monash in Australia made efforts for patrons to access their libraries online (IFLA, 2020). In contrast, the Rimuka public library in Kadoma, Zimbabwe, remains closed and has failed to provide library services and public awareness programmes that could have enhanced the utilisation of library services during the pandemic. The failure to do this could be attributed to the lack of special skills by Librarians, especially during the pandemic. Based on Corsillo's (2020) view, the researchers sought to assess the evolving library skills of Library staff during the COVID-19 pandemic at Rimuka Public Library in Kadoma, Zimbabwe.

Research objectives

- To determine the skills required by public librarians during the Covid-19 outbreak.
- To determine library services that Rimuka Public Library could have provided during the COVID-19 outbreak
- To determine the digital resources the Rimuka Public Library requires to provide digital library services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To determine steps taken to provide library employees with relevant skills during the COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a set of crucial ideas that guide research objectives and conclusions. It argues why a topic matters and why the proposed methods are appropriate and rigorous (George and Swaen, 2022; Ravitch and Riggan, 2017:15). The researcher used a conceptual framework with visual representation to aid readers in understanding and remembering evolving library staff skills during and after health crises at public Libraries.

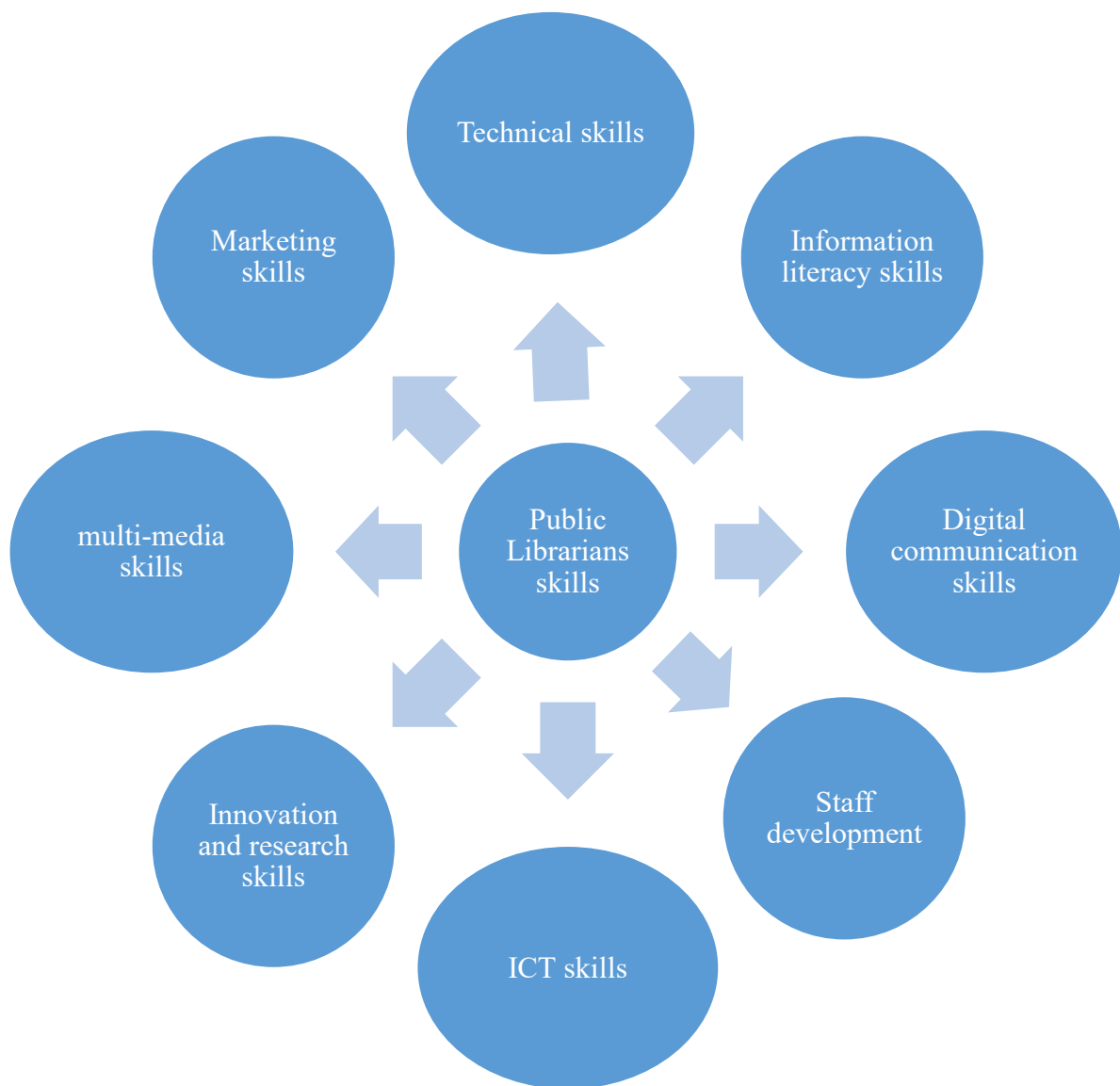


Fig 1: Conceptual framework from own source

During the Covid-19 pandemic, librarians required evolving skills to manage databases, websites, and social media platforms effectively. The skills included information literacy, research, planning, innovation, interpersonal relations, leadership, and management. Public libraries can position themselves as valuable institutions within their communities and adapt to the challenges posed by the Coronavirus. They should continue providing access to various books through virtual environments and digital libraries, ensuring a close relationship with their users (Hussain, 2021). The pandemic underscores the significance of libraries as cultural and social infrastructure, facilitating community interaction and addressing previously unrelated issues (Mabuie, 2020).

Shastri and Chudasma (2021) studied ICT skills and challenges among library professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that library professionals need to learn new skills and techniques to communicate and connect with patrons effectively. Ahmad, Lone and Basharat (2020) highlighted the importance of ICT in providing fast and accurate services, such as OPAC, library automation software, and barcode technology. Public libraries in Zimbabwe can implement these initiatives to offer robust services during the pandemic. Corsillo (2020) study on the Impact of COVID-19 on public libraries highlights the need for libraries to adapt to the changing environment due to COVID-19. Furthermore, Corsillo (2020) highlights the importance of libraries in keeping patrons educated, connected, and entertained. Library professionals work around the clock to maintain services, often utilising IT platforms. Balagopal, Vijayan, and Joseph's (2021) study on innovative methods adopted by public libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kerala, India, highlights the Valapatanam GP Library's virtual programming, including kids' events, reading clubs, cooperative projects, and technology tutorials.

Ameh *et al.*, (2020) study further explored the functions of public libraries and information dissemination by public libraries during the pandemic and the challenges within the Nigerian environment. The study proposed some key roles that public libraries, librarians, and information specialists can play during the pandemic, which include public awareness of preventive measures and management of the disease where possible, supporting frontline researchers, clinicians, and faculty with the latest research and evidence available, still provide traditional services even via alternative ways leveraging on technologies during the lockdown/reduced movement (Ameh *et al.*, 2020). Ali and Gatiti (2020) conducted a similar study on the functions of public libraries in Pakistan. The study highlights the crucial roles of

library and information professionals during pandemics. They promote public health awareness, engage the community, provide evidence-based information, and support medical staff, academics, and research teams. The pandemic has impacted library personnel's digital and technical skills, with 75% of librarians gaining digital literacy abilities. Public librarians can reach their users through various technologies, ensuring they are familiar with electronic databases and resources to meet consumer demands (Deol and Brar, 2021). Tools like RSS, tagging, and bookmarking are used for promotion. YouTube is a successful platform for distributing user-created content. During the pandemic, Zimbabwe public libraries could improve their skills and utilise social networking platforms for customer engagement.

During COVID-19, public libraries implemented various services, including e-resources, new technologies, online reference services, virtual support, document delivery, literature search, and webinars via various platforms (Balagopal, Vijayan and Joseph, 2021). A study by Baba *et al.* (2020) on the role of library professionals in satisfying user needs during the pandemic situation revealed that Library professionals must adapt to current trends and user demands during the pandemic, utilising new technologies like YouTube, blogs, and wikis to attract young users and revamp services. In today's information age, users often struggle to access valid information due to the abundance of different types of sources (Ashrafi-Rizi *et al.*, 2019).

Balagopal, Vijayan, and Joseph (2021) highlight the shift towards digital communication in libraries to meet user needs. They found that online reference services have become more popular. Ashworth (2020) highlights the innovative practices in library programming and operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Libraries are realigning services to perform traditional functions and leveraging platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, and WebEx for virtual support, document delivery, literature search, systematic reviews, and webinars. Library staff were also providing remote support services through websites and social media to combat misinformation (Lal *et al.*, 2022; Wang and Lund, 2020). Wang and Lund (2020) further found that libraries have been reshaping their staff to support research on social media spread during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Ireland, 40-50 librarians were working as contact tracers, highlighting the importance of libraries in providing reliable information about such crises. Ashworth (2020) highlighted the role of librarians in information gathering and contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Libraries continue to serve as guardians of historical records, with initiatives to collect and preserve materials, coordinated by the International Internet Preservation Consortium.

According to Ali and Gatti (2020), during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Pakistani libraries provided virtual support services to their users, including reference services, document delivery, literature searches, and systematic reviews. Some libraries have also launched online webinar sessions to keep in touch with users. Public libraries have also provided free online homework, access to e-books, audiobooks, news sites, magazines, and streaming videos. The lockdown has led to a rethinking of library services, with libraries focusing on digital activities and social service agendas. Library staff, including those at Kadoma Public Library in Zimbabwe, must adopt new skills to overcome challenges and keep users connected to knowledge and recreation.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a swift realignment of library collections, services, and operations online, showcasing the ability of libraries to adapt quickly and effectively to unprecedented circumstances, often acting as a catalyst for pre-existing change (Greenhall, 2020). In such situations, libraries should be automated and accessible online, enabling easy access to information during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Librarians and information professionals should liaise with their governments and philanthropists for the automation of libraries. This would include tax and tariff relief for ICTs and Infrastructure.

Etube (2010), in his study about ICT availability in Niger Delta libraries, stresses that virtual libraries offer advantages over traditional libraries, as they store materials in a computer system, allowing for manipulation and delivery in ways not possible in conventional libraries. These libraries must be automated in essential functions, and the material delivery process can be simplified. For example, books in digital libraries can be copied, lent, and borrowed, eliminating the need for holds. The mission of virtual libraries is to provide equitable, cooperative, and cost-effective access to library and information resources worldwide using digital technology. Adebayo, Ahmed, and Adeniran (2018) expound on the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Nigeria's library services. They argue that ICT promotes access to digital information, bridges the digital gap, and improves living standards. They also highlight its contribution to the nation's long-term development and societal formation. Zimbabwean public libraries could build a strong relationship by using computers and other related resources in their libraries.

Balagopal, Vijayan, and Joseph (2021) reveal that public libraries in Kerala, India, have implemented innovative methods to meet community needs and uphold social responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they face challenges due to reduced government

revenue collection and closures. Governments should introduce a Library Development Tax to improve library services and provide appropriate funding for librarian training and infrastructure (Taufiq, Rehman, and Ashiq, 2020; Hussain and Idress, 2021). This could lead to improved services for patrons, especially in developing countries like Zimbabwe. Providing adequate budgets for these initiatives can help maintain quality-based services.

Building virtual libraries is one big step in public library development. The Virtual Library offers access to databases, electronic journals, alerting services, online reference tools, and quality web resources to enhance teaching and research quality. Digital libraries cater to the demand for credible e-resources (UNESCO, 2020), providing free content and personalised collections. Services are delivered over the Internet using web-based technologies like HTML, XML, CSS, PHP, and JavaScript. Relational databases are used for organisation, storage, and retrieval of information, with popular relational database management systems like MySQL, Oracle, PostgreSQL, and Microsoft SQL server. Virtual library web servers authenticate users and run essential applications for delivering digital resources. Popular options include Apache servers and Microsoft's IIS. They deliver web pages, route users to resources, encrypt data, and support digital library software extensions. Building and maintaining a virtual library require proper technological infrastructure, including telecommunication, servers, application platforms, and software applications. Zimbabwe's improved telecommunication industry has increased competition and internet cafes, impacting the commerce, social, and educational sectors (Tsekea and Chigwada, 2020). Such developments can be used to service public libraries. Chisita (2020) study highlights the challenges faced by libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Libraries can empower citizens by disseminating information, providing access to reliable resources, and offering virtual services like digital literacy training. They can also sanitise collections and spaces of shared freedoms, ensuring a smooth transition. COVID-19 has necessitated retraining of professional intermediation and strengthening of librarians' mediation, consultancy, and interrelation skills (Hussain, 2021). This has led to redesigning interfaces and enhancing help, how-to guidance, and tutorials to create a coherent digital system. A comparative study between the UK and Slovenia revealed that formal education and continuing development training are the most common steps in library staff development, covering aspects of the digital library environment (Bawden *et al.* (2005). The first step in improving library services in Zimbabwe, even during health emergencies, should be implementing such training and insights.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional library norms, leading to new services and digital access through social media. Libraries have evolved, embracing creativity and innovative programming, operations, and service practices. The pandemic has boosted library professionals' digital and technical knowledge, encouraging automation and making services available online. This will facilitate accessible information sourcing in the post-COVID-19 era. Fu and Inskipp (2019) emphasise the importance of librarians being as tech-savvy as their clients due to the ethics of the profession and the changing information context. The UK's Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) supports professional registration through an online learning program and mentored portfolio. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (2015) calls for systematic staff development in public libraries. Gbadamosi and Alayande's (2011) study in Nigeria found that libraries in Oyo State prefer internal workshops, seminars, and conferences on computer applications to retrain librarians. Developing library skills is an investment that directs and solves problems in public areas in all weather conditions.

Public librarians must stay updated with rapidly changing technological environments and digital landscapes to serve their communities effectively (Thompson, 2009). A pilot study in the USA found that trained staff can provide more responsive services, helping patrons complete basic tasks online, understand pressing issues, and explore learning resources (Fellow *et al.*, 2018). This empowers patrons, reducing concerns about security and privacy. Continued professional development contributes to confidence and communication with library patrons, enhancing their experience and satisfaction (Hamid and Soroya, 2017). Krubu and Osawaru's (2010) research in Nigeria found that library staff acquire ICT skills through in-house training, self-study, formal training, and trial and error. They recommend short computer training and retraining programs to help staff update their knowledge and skills and to equip public librarians with transferable digital library skills through continued education (Edem, 2008; Farkas, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional library norms, leading to new services and digital access through social media. Libraries have evolved, embracing creativity and innovative programming, operations, and service practices. The pandemic has boosted library professionals' digital and technical knowledge, encouraging automation and making services available online. This will facilitate accessible information sourcing in the post-COVID-19 era.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative research design informed by an interpretive paradigm to provide an explanatory description. The qualitative method examined phenomena through librarians' and administrators' personnel and librarians' and administrators' subjective experiences and perspectives, acknowledging the contextual nature of human knowledge. The interpretive paradigm helped in understanding and reflecting on current and past experiences of the study population. This design enabled the researchers to gain insights into the perceptions, opinions and intentions of the library staff and administrators at Rimuka Public Library (Sanders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012:143). The trustworthiness of interpretive research was enhanced by showcasing the researcher's extensive fieldwork, data collection methods, rigorous data management and analytical protocols, like verbatim transcription (Stahl and King, 2020).

A case study research approach was used because it permits the study of the phenomena in a natural life phenomenon in a real-life context (Sanders et al., 2012:179). Sanders *et al.*, (2012:179) further state that a case study strategy can be used in explanatory research and fosters depth of understanding when data is collected through interviews. The researchers conducted structured interviews with the chosen respondents based on purposive sampling. The structured interview was preferred because it is a face-to-face administration that allows for the creation of rapport between the researcher and interviewees. The researcher set an appointment and timetable for interviews depending on their availability. The interview guide strictly guided the interviews. Before the interview sessions, the interviewers asked about the participants' willingness to be audio recorded. The researcher explained the interview's subject matter and why the information was needed (Gray, 2021). The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. It was applied to texts, such as interviews and transcripts. The researchers closely examined the respondents' data to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that repeatedly appeared. Data was coded by highlighting text sections using phrases or short codes. Next, the researchers reviewed the codes we created, identified patterns, and started developing themes. The themes were reviewed to make sure that they were valuable and accurate representations of the data. The themes were then named and defined, and a succinct and easily understandable name for each theme was created. Finally, the researchers had to write up their analysis of the data.

The study population consisted of ten people: six were the librarians and library support staff, and four were administrative staff from the social welfare and ICT departments at Kadoma

municipal offices who were responsible for library operations. The library staff was chosen based on a census method. The population was enumerated from all units, providing accurate information for various subdivisions, such as library and administrative staff. The study focused on a small sample of individuals with specific characteristics or experiences, identifying those who fit the study's objectives using purposive sampling. Rigour was achieved through careful planning, continuous reflexivity, and open communication between the researcher and the audience regarding the study and its findings (Johnson, Adkins and Chauvin, 2020). In some cases, the librarians and the administrative staff pulled documents from their official files to support their assertions. The respondents were coded with letters R, X, Y and Z for anonymity.

Research Findings

Skills required by the Library staff during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period

The next set of questions sought to assess the status of the level of skills possessed by the library staff. This had to be deduced indirectly because the staff were not involved in digitally-related chores. Thus, the researchers requested details on the responsibilities and duties that the library staff were involved in. In response, the librarians' duties included registering new patrons and encouraging patrons to pay their subscription fees, cataloguing and classifying library materials, sorting books and shelving books, manning the circulation desk and assisting patrons in searching for information using the catalogue. Additional duties undertaken when the lockdown was lifted included distributing information on COVID-19, reclaiming books that patrons had borrowed before the closing of the library for the COVID-19 lockdown, and ensuring that patrons coming into the library were sanitised and wore face masks.

A question was raised on what the staff felt about the technical skills they should have possessed to continue providing services during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period. In response, all the respondents agreed that, with the coming of technology, library staff needed Information literacy skills for competencies in digital information management, including website management, digital literacy and communication skills for digital marketing. The staff also mentioned an aptitude for creativity and innovation.

RY1 and RY5 mentioned that:

Seminars on COVID-19 health issues and how they could best prevent the spread of the disease were conducted, but nothing was done in line with digital libraries.

Respondents RZ2 and RZ3 stated that:

Information literacy skills are essential in this new era to enhance service delivery. Information literacy skills also help create and manage digital libraries, which can be accessed anywhere and anytime.

RY5 said that:

Introducing an electronic library and educating the staff with digital and ICT skills were some of the steps that could be taken to improve service delivery. The services would include the use of databases and electronic resources.

RZ1 mentioned introducing an electronic library and a feedback system that allows people to share opinions.

RZ3 said that:

Automation was needed, such as being active on Public Library forums. Those forums, such as workshops where librarians meet to discuss or talk about libraries where we are and where we are going, help in the flow of ideas, staying alert to new trends in the profession and engaging in skills development programmes to foster the development of innovations.

RZ4 said that:

Digital skills training, collaborations, and partnerships with Internet service providers who could be potential donors to other libraries.

The respondents were further questioned on whether there were any individual initiatives that staff had undertaken to upgrade their skills. The response was that not much was happening, even among the library management.

An additional question was on how the Library fostered staff development among the staff during a health crisis. RX2 replied saying that:

The staff gets assisted in one way or another when they want to embark on some educational programmes; it is also provided with funds to attend the Zimbabwe Library Association conferences, Zimbabwe International Book Fair and other library-related events.

The respondents were questioned on what they thought could be done to ensure that staff development issues are given prominence and are prominent in the organisation. Responses were for including staff development in the Council's mission statement and on the list of standing agenda items for the quarterly and annual reports of library activities. Standing items refer to agenda items that are consistently included in regular meetings.

On a question on the way forward, all the respondents agreed that the fact that library developments were evolving and that libraries are dynamic by nature means library staff should constantly advance their skills. They added that ICT skills were essential for improving service delivery and staff performance, growth, and competitiveness; staff also needed to stay in sync with the latest trends in librarianship.

Library services that could be provided during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

Answering a question on how the library could have offered services during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown since it operated on a manual system, it was said that the Library should have reduced the number of patrons using the library at a time to maintain social distancing requirements. Patrons would have continued to bring their own technological gadgets, books, and reading materials, as has always been the case. The library would have ensured that the patrons avoided sharing and maintained a social distance. Regarding the technological resources, the library had in place for patrons, it was said that the library had some Wi-Fi routers, but they were not functioning at the time. However, all respondents concurred that the Library lagged in this area. Another available electronic gadget was a computer used for administrative work.

The resources required by the Library during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

The next set of questions sought to determine the resources required by the Library should it continue offering services in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Alternatively, the Library would require the resources should a situation similar to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown arise. In response, most respondents mentioned social networking services and

collaborative platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as e-books, e-journals, online full-text databases, and a library website online with an online help desk. RX1 said:

Databases, compatible platforms, updated books with trending information, mailing lists, OPACs, SMS notifications, and QR codes.

RX3 added that:

The library has a computer and Wi-Fi facility, which can be used as a start-up, although all the required services are unavailable.

When asked about where the Library got funding from, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents noted that funding was obtained from the Kadoma City Council. Also, the Council should approve all library operations before implementation; it was further stated that the Council had a budget for the mobile library van launched in October 2021 that took reading materials to four Council primary schools in the catchment area of the Library.

Reiterating the funding issue, RZ2 said:

The Kadoma City Council is the parent organisation, and all financial support is centred on the Council grant and users' membership subscriptions.

Additional funds were said to be raised through charges levied when the Library holds family fun fairs and other family games. Fun fairs are events or activities organised within library spaces to engage and entertain visitors, especially children and families. These fairs aim to promote literacy, foster a love for reading, and create a fun and interactive environment for participants. Fun fairs in libraries often include various elements such as reading competitions, spelling competitions, library book share reading competitions, spelling competitions, library book sharing, exhibitions and storytelling sessions. The amounts from such events were reported as very little.

A further question was where the Library got external support from, for example, donations and other kind gestures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The response was that there had not been any donations from anywhere in the past years. The Council funded everything. However, two weeks back, Book Aid members visited the library for an assessment and promised to donate books to the library. RZ2 added that:

Previously, the library received donations from the Stevenage Borough Community, United Kingdom. However, with time, these donations had ceased.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study reflected that public libraries in Zimbabwe provided limited services during the COVID-19 period. The findings of this study showed that public libraries were affected most and also stopped mobile library services, which could have been an ideal conduit to reach school pupils who were restricted to their homes during the lockdown period. The findings established that resources identified by the respondents as essential for them to operate in a virtual environment, on the whole, included social platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp for networking and collaboration, e-books, journals, text databases, websites, Internet access, online help desks, databases, compatible platform, updated books with trending information, mailing list. The current study's findings are confirmed by Adebayo, Ahmed and Adeniran's (2018) definition of library resources as essential in information management and dissemination.

The study also found that the library had no electronic resources for patrons. Regarding funding, which is necessary if the library were to purchase resources, it was found that it relied solely on the Kadoma City Council grant and that its previous donors had stopped supporting it over the years. Such a scenario does not provide the best conditions for the Library to revamp its operations. As observed by Balagopal, Vijayan, and Joseph (2021), libraries whose primary source of income was government funds and membership fees from library users experienced funding shortages because of a reduction in government revenue collection caused by the COVID-19 pandemic situation. New membership and renewal of old membership suffered hindrances due to the shutting down of public library doors. The results call for library management to collaborate with their municipal counterparts to find other funding opportunities, such as fundraising programmes or income-generating projects.

Regarding the steps taken to provide library employees with relevant skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings showed no staff development programmes to equip library employees with relevant library skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, according to Guo et al (2021), the developing staff made them more responsive services for patrons because the staff would have gained a deeper understanding of patron's requirements. With such an

understanding, the library staff would be able to train their patrons to be influential library users, as indicated by Subaveerapandiyan, Sinha and Ugwulebo (2022), some of whom are already indicating their interest in using digital technologies by bringing their laptops to the library.

Highlighting the essence of developing staff to prepare for any eventuality, Balagopal, Vijayan and Joseph (2021) emphasise that public libraries need to plan innovative service models other than their existing must plan innovative service models other than their routine duties and responsibilities. This implies that library staff should be able to adopt various new tactics to overcome unpredicted events such as the COVID-19 pandemic difficulties. The findings further indicated that the library staff wanted to be capacitated in ICT and digital skills to manage, store, retrieve and disseminate information. The acquisition of such skills would help librarians to stay up-to-date with the requirements of a fast-changing technological environment and a constantly evolving digital landscape in which librarians operate. In support, Thompson (2020) argues that these requirements significantly demand the depth and breadth of the technical knowledge and skill required of public librarians. Krubu and Osawaru (2010) call for the knowledge and skills to be acquired through in-house training, self-study, formal training and trial and error in practice based on the general digital skills competence framework.

Although the library staff did not get any library-related training during COVID-19, they attended seminars in line with COVID-19 health issues. This assisted them in gaining knowledge on COVID-19 and enabled them to teach others about the disease. Such an undertaking resonates with suggestions by Ameh *et al.* (2020) for the role of public librarians and information specialists in creating public awareness of preventive measures and management of COVID-19. Overall, the study's findings show that the Rimuka Public Library failed to adopt or implement roles and duties that could foster a continuous provision of library services to its members and the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result was a disservice to their membership.

Conclusion

The study conclusion is based on the key findings of each research objective. The study concludes that the Rimuka Public Library closed its doors and halted all activities during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown due to a lack of ICT resources and a lack of ICT and digital

skills and competence among its members. The library users were affected. Public Library managers should improve library resources by identifying specific library service-related issues and collaborating with possible donors and their community influential figures to spruce up resources. Additionally, the library did not have funds, innovative ideas, or contingency plans to quickly turn some of its services from the manual to the online mode. The library management and municipality administrators should advocate for adding more electronic devices for their users. The computer lab ought to have sufficient gadgets. Nonetheless, this does not absolve the Library of its core mandate, which is to provide access to information to the public in all circumstances. Therefore, a question arises about the factors the Rimuka Public Library should consider when adopting digital techniques for some of its service provisions. The COVID-19 lockdown period should have allowed Rimuka Public Library to introspect and think about how it can join the digital bandwagon. However, it should be noted that “the dynamic nature of technology (innovations of new products) keeps opening gaps that require upgrades and total change of systems (Dodo, Weribagba and Oweipere, 2022). This means that the library should constantly monitor technology trends in information management to stay current.

Recommendations

The study recommended the following:

- The Rimuka Public Library should organise in-house training programmes, workshops and seminars to equip staff with digital literacies.
- Staff in charge of the library system should be supported in undertaking formal ICT training. Alternatively, the library can create a post for a systems librarian and appoint one to set up and help run a digital library.
- Kadoma City Council should set aside funding for the automation of the Library.
- Staff development should be included in the Library’s policy.
- Library staff should collaborate with other local council libraries in and outside the country to share resources and participate in events organised by organisations in the library profession.
- The Library should continue hosting events that bring in funds to the library.

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