Collaboration Between libraries, Archives and Museums (LAMs) in South Africa:
A Digitisation Skills Sharing Initiative.

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this study was to determine the possible benefits if libraries, archives and museums (LAMs) in South Africa were to collaborate on digitisation efforts in terms of sharing skills and training. The following research question was formulated: What are the possible benefits for South African LAMs should they collaborate in terms of sharing skills and training, for digitisation purposes? The study thus addressed the collaboration between LAMs for digitisation purposes, in the context of the South African LAM landscape.

A mono-method qualitative study was undertaken to investigate the main objective, that is, if collaboration could help LAMs deal with the challenges they face, in terms of skills, when digitising their collections. The objectives were addressed by a literature review and by conducting non-standardised, semi-structured interviews with 21 interviewees at different LAMs. It was concluded that collaboration could indeed appreciably alleviate problems related to digitisation, the most prominent being the lack of skilled digitisation employees. It was found that many of the institutions employed low-level skilled workers or workers who were learning on the job.

In determining the relevance of the research, it was important to find out whether or not LAMs in South Africa were open to collaboration and responses to this question were positive. It can thus be concluded that the results of this study can be used to motivate and push for collaborative partnerships for the purpose of digitisation between South African LAMs.

Keywords: libraries, archives, museums, skills, collaboration, digitisation

1. Introduction

The lack of digitisation skills has plagued South African LAMs resulting in them having little to no progress where their digitisation projects are concerned. A solution to this obstacle is seen to be collaboration. This paper looks to determine the possible benefits if libraries, archives and museums (LAMs) in South Africa were to collaborate on digitisation efforts in terms of sharing skills and training. Looking back at when libraries began digitising their collections is important for understanding the processes and techniques relevant to digitisation. Digitisation projects were small in size as institutions only looked to digitise certain pieces of their collections (Verheusen, 2008:30). Today digitisation projects are large in size as institutions no longer look to digitise certain pieces of their collection, but everything they have.

This becomes difficult as South African LAMs suffer from the absence of adequate digitisation skills. Both Pandey and Misra (2014:140) and Asogwa, (2011) provide that the lack of employees encompassing adequate digitisation skills is a serious drawback for digitisation projects. The lack of skills also leads to other challenges such as poorly digitised material, resulting in poor image quality (Rieger, 2010:14). Pinkas, Schnur, Wolff, Hovde and Harling-Henry (2012:268) add that images may be faded or blurry. However, it is important to note that this is not always the result of inadequate skills, but may be because of the poor technology utilised. Nonetheless, Carsten (2017:5) stresses that the lack of digitisation skills is directly linked to the production of poor quality images and argues that this creates a problem for digitisation projects within LAMs. Another challenge is the physical sensitivity of certain pieces in collections. These pieces of the collection require specific skill to be handled appropriately, so as to prevent them from getting damaged (Jaswal, 2016:4; Jagboro, Omotayo, & Aboyade, 2012:9). A potential solution is seen to be collaborative training.

Employees merely attending and learning from training would mean nothing should they not apply what they learned (Chauhan, Ghosh, Rai & Shukla, 2016:201). It is usually attending through workshops that employees receive training on how to utilise digitisation technology (Thomas, 2015:347). For this study, collaboration for training purposes could also encompass sharing the financial burden that comes with getting access to trustworthy trainers and training facilities. Additionally, those who received the training first hand should then bring the knowledge back with them and share it with their colleagues who did not attend the training in a collaborative manner including people from other institutions.

In answering the main question - what are the possible benefits for South African LAMs should they collaborate in terms of sharing skills and training, for digitisation purposes? Semi-structured interviews were posed to 21 participants from 16 different LAMs. Through both the findings and literature, recommendations will be made on the challenges LAMs face, specifically the lack of skills as well as how collaboration can help resolve this challenge.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining Digitisation

According to Sotirova, Peneva, Ivanov, Doneva and Dobreva (2013:26), digitisation refers to the transformation of analogue media to digital media. For instance, moving information on compact disks (CDs), pictures, manuscripts and other types of media to electronic formats through utilising equipment such as scanners which allow analogue information to be converted to digital media. It is essential that managers do not waste digitisation resources, but use them effectively as in most cases they are limited (Petersohn, Drummond, Maxwell & Pepper, 2013:487).

2.2. Digitisation skills challenge

One challenge presented by the digitisation of collections is the creation of metadata (Pinkas et al., 2012:264). It is important that metadata be created correctly as mistakes in loading metadata could lead to files getting lost. Pandey and Misra (2014:138) explain that metadata is data that provides information on a particular document. As such, losing this type of information leads to digitised materials not being retrievable, which presents a serious difficulty of digitisation.

The issue is that many workers dealing with digitisation have not received specialised training for digitisation purposes (Jagboro et al., 2012:10). Vrana (2010:327) lists image quality and training staff as challenges faced during a digitisation project. Setlhabi (2008:1) argues that institutions tend to rush into implementing digitisation, thereby leaving them little to no time to provide staff with the necessary training, which only leaves them with an unskilled workforce, incapable of completing digitisation projects properly and produce quality results. Jaswal (2016:4) cements this argument by stating that there exists a lack of expertise in the digitisation and digital repository processes field. Due to digitisation requiring staff to encompass various skills, training and skills development become one of its biggest challenges (Jagboro et al., 2012:10).

It is important to plan digitisation projects, and when doing so it is essential to cover the steps provided by The Public Record Office Victoria of Australia. The first and certainly one of the most

important step is ensuring that digitisation staff encompass the required skills to successfully see a digitisation project through to completion (Carstens, 2017:3). In organising their combined skills, LAMs may generate results that could bring even more value than those aggregated by experts of a certain subject (Goldstein, McAfee & Suri, 2014:471).

2.3. Defining collaboration

Collaboration can be referred to as the act of working with partners to accomplish a mutual goal (Plucker, Kennedy & Dilley, 2015:1). ARACY (2013:1) define collaboration as parties coming together in an effort to solve several challenges and secure outcomes that may not have been reached without the collaboration taking place. Not only does collaboration leverage different perspectives and skills, it also holds the capability to encourage innovation and improve productivity in an organisation through aligning the actions of the different parties involved so as to complete a certain task (Morel, 2014:36).

2.4. Training and collaboration

There is a rise in the need for a more flexible as well as more skilled workforce today due to not only the rise in competition everywhere in the world, but also the ever-changing market as well as continuous technological developments (Al-Hakim & Lu, 2017:22; Nikandrou, Brinia & Bereri, 2009:255). As such, training within and between institutions is strategically crucial.

A brilliant way to improve employee productivity is through training (Cheung & Chan, 2012:147). In terms of a return on investment, institutions hold high expectations when investing in training. They anticipate that employees will improve their skills and bring what they learn to work and achieve higher levels of success, both for themselves as well as the institution. This is the reason trustworthy trainers are in high demand all over the world (Chukwu, 2016:367).

Employees merely attending and learning from training would mean nothing should they not apply what they learned (Chauhan et al., 2016:201). It is usually through attending workshops that employees receive training on how to utilise digitisation technology (Thomas, 2015:347). For this study, collaboration for training purposes could encompass sharing the financial burden that comes with getting access to trustworthy trainers and training facilities. Additionally, those who received the training first hand should then bring the knowledge back with them and share it with their colleagues who did not attend the training in a collaborative manner, and with people from the other institutions.

With the sharing of skills and knowledge among employees, experts can then be brought in to only deal with the extremely challenging components of digitisation, experts coming from both inside the institution or outsourced (Tanner, 2006:10). Suweero, Moungnoi and Charoenngam (2017:254) define outsourcing as the process of bringing an external entity to handle a certain task in your institution. Additionally, this creates an opportunity for collaboration in a sense that the external experts could train and transfer their skills to in-house staff. This could also enhance the strengthening of partnerships through fostering the idea of empowering workers ("Sharing skills benefit", 2005:7).

With continuous creations in the technology space, the ways in which work processes are fulfilled keep changing. As such, it is necessary that workers acquire both new knowledge and skills to complete work processes (Tai, 2006:52). How employees perform is of great importance to the success of every institution (Detsimas, Coffey, Sadiqi & Li, 2016:486). Tai (2008:52) provides that it is through training that employees can obtain the necessary skills to cope with the changes and challenges of everyday work. The aim of this section was to indicate the essentiality of training, which can come as a result of LAMs in South Africa choosing to collaborate.

Stark (n.d.) shares four steps that need to be looked at when beginning a training programme:

1. The first step is to identify all the subjects that need to be included in the training.
2. A checklist that summarises all the subjects needs to be drawn up.
3. Identifying all the resources that will be needed for the training is the third step.
4. Finally, a performance evaluation tool needs to be put in place.

As soon as all these steps are successfully completed, training may commence. It is important that the steps be completed in a collaborative manner by the sample of this study.

3. Research Methodology

It was a need for each participant to be chosen strategically, as a result, it was a necessity for the researchers to utilise purpose sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2011:319). This was due to the fact that all participants had to encompass knowledge not only in digitisation, but also in collaboration. An identified limitation of purposive sampling is that researchers are not able to generalise their discoveries to a population, however, a vital benefit of purposive sampling is it allows for rich data to be gathered. Additionally, it is was imperative that semi-structured interviews be used so as to allow participants room to express themselves and an opportunity to delve into the more sacred facts about their institutions (Qu & Dumay, 2011:246). Once data was collected it had to be

analysed. The researchers saw it fit to use ATLAS.ti. as tool to assist them with analysing data (Friese, 2014:1). ATLAS.ti assisted the researchers in analysing the data thematically through its ability to create codes. Ibrahim (2012:40) explains that thematic analysis allows for data to be grouped according to similarities in data.

4. Results and Discussion

Half the participants viewed skills sharing as a tool to save money as it would allow for "further training to take place free of charge". In accordance with this, Allen and Bishoff (2015:47) provide that collaboration enables skills to be shared between organisations which then results in those organisations saving money. It is important to note that it is not suggested that training be cancelled, it is however suggested that if certain skills can be found within the knowledge base of different LAMs, those skills can be shared should institutions decide to collaborate.

Nine participants argued that the growth and development of skills would come as a by-product of institutions collaborating for digitisation. In line with this thinking, Sangwan and Garg (2017:7) state that through collaboration, the gaps found in digitisation skills would be minimised and it could create a platform where skills can be transferred. In addition, two participants pointed out that something as simple as having a conversation with others can help enlighten you in terms of the skills you lack as well as the ones you possess. Another two participants indicated that sharing ideas and developing skills could produce outcomes such as the creation of digitisation best practices. Literature argues the same thing stating that collaborations endorse best practices (Tanackoviæ & Badurina, 2008:562).

The Majority of participants confided that South Africa lacks sufficient digitisation skills, which negatively impacts the completion of digitisation projects. Similarly, Fourie and Meyer (2016:423) indicate that not having sufficient skills available is a key difficulty within organisations. One participant asserted that LAMs in South Africa are frustrated by the absence of skills as it impedes the completion of digitisation projects.

Several participants provided that determining which organisation to outsource to, is another challenge, that is in the event that an institution decides to outsource. Participants recalled occasions where private digitisation organisations digitised their collections poorly. This is an indication that there is a lack of digitisation skills not only in LAMs, but also outside of LAMs. Authors such as Pandey and Misra (2014:140), and Asogwa (2011) also highlight the big absence of digitisation skills and a lack of staff with good digitisation skills in the country. This suggests that even though

a digitisation project may be outsourced, institutions are not guaranteed their projects will be completed successfully. However, it is the general belief of the participants that the necessary digitisation skills could be acquired through collaboration.

There was a case where a participant indicated that their institution appointed someone to focus on their digitisation, even though this brought relief to her, the issue is that the individual had never worked in the digitisation space. In another case the individual charged with digitisation admitted that she was a historian and that information systems were not one of her strong suits. This meant that these individuals had little to no digitisation skills. This is a problem most LAMs in South Africa face, and according to Setlhabi (2008:1) it is because institutions are in a rush to digitise their collections. Which then leaves them void of time to conduct the necessary training and thus leaving the institutions with workers that do not possess the required skills to successfully finish a digitisation project efficiently as well as produce quality results. Equipping digitisers with the necessary skills is considered by Carstens (2017:3) as one of the key steps when attempting to successfully complete a digitisation project. The historian, nonetheless, stated that it was through collaboration that she gained digitisation experience and skill.

A lot of the digitisation equipment at these LAMs is imported, the issue is that numerous participants are left frustrated by the lack of technical support for this equipment in South Africa, as such they have to revert back to overseas for help. This can also be attributed to the need for digitisation skills (Carstens, 2017:3; Jaswal, 2016:4). A reoccurring issue was that of a shortage of skills. This issue also came with the challenge of paying for overseas training. This is highlighted by Jagboro et al, (2012:10) who state that training opportunities for digitisation are seldom as digitisation skills development requires the training to focus on a broad spectrum of skills. That is not to say that training is not important, because it is as it will help institutions complete their digitisation projects (Nikandrou et al., 2009:255). Not only will training help with the completion of digitisation projects, it will also give institutions a competitive advantage by improving the value of their employees (Nikandrou et al., 2009:255).

According to Brunetti and Corsini (2017:32), training programmes are inclusive of such things as classroom training, work experience as well as workplace training. Be that as it may, most of the participants pointed to the fact that there was an absence of official digitisation training for staff conducted or facilitated by their institution. Additionally, it was presented that it is difficult to retain those with the necessary skills as the private sector offers higher salaries. This disproportion not

only further aggravates the lack of skilled workers within LAMs, but it is also a hindrance to collaboration (Tanackoviæ & Badurina, 2008:561).

Every participant is willing to collaborate, and some are already involved in collaborations, for example, two participants working for the same institution indicated that they were in a collaboration with two other similar institutions as well as a university in order to have their collections digitised properly. Another institution pointed to the fact they were struggling to find organisations to collaborate with mainly because of political issues. This factor is touched on by Ocholla (2008:469) who asserts that political policies could impede organisations from collaborating.

5. Summation and recommendations

The main finding of the study was that the lack of digitisation skills in South African LAMs negatively impacts the completion of digitisation initiatives. For instance, a lot of the digitisation equipment at these LAMs is imported, the issue is that institutions are left frustrated by the lack of technical support for this equipment in South Africa, as such they have to revert back to overseas for help. This can also be attributed to the need for digitisation skills. A reoccurring issue was that of a shortage of skills. This issue also came with the challenge of paying for overseas training. For LAMs in South Africa, training opportunities for digitisation are seldom as digitisation skills development requires the training to focus on a broad spectrum of skills. That is not to say that training is not important, because it is as it will help institutions complete their digitisation projects. Not only will training help with the completion of digitisation projects, it will also give institutions a competitive advantage by improving the value of their employees.

Another key finding was that collaboration, in terms of skills sharing, is a tool to save money as it would allow for "further training to take place free of charge". Collaboration also enables skills to be shared between organisations which then results in those organisations saving money. It is important to note that it is not suggested that training be cancelled, it is however suggested that if certain skills can be found within the knowledge base of different LAMs, those skills can be shared should institutions decide to collaborate.

There is also a willingness to collaborate, and some institutions are already involved in collaborations, for example, there is an institution that is involved in a collaboration with two other similar institutions as well as a university in order to have their collections digitised properly. However, another institution pointed to the fact they were struggling to find institutions to

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collaborate with mainly because of political issues. The recommendation is for institutions to find ways to collaborate in order to upskill their employees' skillset. Be it through joint workshops or only paying for one person from partner institutions, and have that person train fellow colleagues. This leaves a research gap which is to determine what is required for successful collaboration to take place.

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