

Editorial Commentary

Need for Infopreneurship for LIS Professionals in a Gig Economy

The term infopreneur is considered to be a portmanteau derived from the words 'information' and 'entrepreneur'. An infopreneur is an entrepreneur who specializes in the sale and distribution of information and expertise. In other words, an infopreneur is a professional who collects information from multiple sources and personal experiences and uses them to create a unique package for consumers. As soon as experts across various niches realized they could create "information products" and sell their knowledge online, infopreneurship took the Internet by storm. Weitzen (1988) coined the term in the 1980s elaborating what it means to be an infopreneur in the book *Infopreneurs: Turning Data into Dollars*. In the book, he explains how to tap reserves of information, tailor it to the needs of the customer, and market it to business and government.

Bailey Richert, the Award-Winning Business Coach for Infopreneurs, defines Infopreneurship as a business model where an individual, or "infopreneur", shares their life experience, knowledge and passion with others through information products and services that create value and generate income. Over a period of time, we all have amassed a wealth of knowledge gained from experiences in our lives especially from work assignments, hobbies, interests, passions or just circumstances we have lived through. An infopreneur is someone who takes that knowledge - both tacit and explicit - turns it into products and services and sells them. These could be things like books/ebooks, online courses, coaching, virtual summits, workshops, masterminds, presentations and more (Richert, n. d.). There are technologies and computer-based services that truly make the creation and distribution of these products and services easier than ever before. Today, anyone with internet access can self-publish a book, launch online courses, give presentations, and market their goods and services cheaply. The advantage of this kind of business is that one can work from anywhere once the information products are created.

Unfortunately, library and information professionals are somewhat reluctant to venture to be infopreneurs. This is because majority of the libraries, organizations, or institutions where they work are either supported by government or the management. But the scenario is fast changing and a large number of libraries and information centers, especially those from the private set up or self-funded are forced to probe methods to generate fund by adopting models which are sustainable. The situation is somewhat similar to the thinking prevailing till the 1980s when the library and information centers were considered to be not-for-profit outfits and the services should be provided free of cost. Therefore, it was believed that the very discussion about marketing of libraries was unethical. But over the years, the LIS professionals are convinced of the need for marketing of information services and products. Same is the change in the thinking about the need for generating funds through creative and innovative methods. Such practices would equip the professionals in the line of infopreneurship at the individual level.

In fact, the practice of infopreneurship is not new in India. A glowing example is the Informatics India, the Indian e-information company based in Bangalore, which provides technology and content solutions to libraries and publishers across India. It was founded in 1980 by N V Sathyanarayana, a library professional, as a firm providing information in the pre-internet era through a telex facility. Over the years, Informatics has emerged as the one-stop solution company for e-information across the globe with its flagship cloud-based database product J-Gate to deliver e-journal literature, India Business Insight, i-Scholar, e-Boox.in, content management, digitization and publishing services and library solutions like Koha implementation, EZproxy for remote authentication and RFID (Informatics, n. d.).

Two important developments underscore the need for infopreneurship in the present information ecosystem. They are (1) the drying up of opportunities in the government sector, and (2) the emergence of the gig economy. It is a matter of common knowledge that avenues for LIS professionals are dwindling both at the centre and states. A cursory survey of the university librarian posts throughout India, especially in the state universities, would show that only a fraction of them have filled up the vacant posts. Same is the case with lower level posts in university and college libraries. Deemed universities and private universities are keen to run the show with minimum professionals. The chances of professional librarians in the school library sector and public library sector are also grim. Special libraries are no exception. Those who want to recruit LIS professionals demand new skills to fit the bill apart from the traditional master's degree in Library and Information Science. A number of studies of online job portals are available that chart out the course of change in the skill requirements demanded by the potential employers. American Library Association (n. d.) gives a sample of skill sets required for librarian job positions in addition to the professional qualifications.

As mentioned earlier, the second development is the unfolding of gig economy. Gig stands for a job usually for a specified time. Gig economy can be described as employment without the guarantee of a fixed schedule or income. Typically, employees are hired for tasks or "gigs," and their payment is dependent on the completion of the project. They may work for themselves or may be hired through the digital marketplace. They are also referred to as freelancers, independent workers and casual earners. Gig workers include self-employed, freelancers, independent contributors and part-time workers. In other words, a shift from a full time 10 to 5 job to an on-demand, freelance and task-based economy can be termed as gig economy. (Donovan, S. A., David H. Bradley, D. H. & Shimabukuro, J. O., 2016). Though the terms peer-to-peer markets, peer economy, sharing economy, collaborative economy, matching economy and talent marketplaces are also used synonymously, gig economy is the most widely accepted for such a set up.

The gig economy consists of the collection of markets that match providers to consumers on a gig (or job) basis. In such a model, gig workers enter into formal agreements with on-demand companies to provide services to the company's clients. Prospective clients request services through an Internet-based technological platform or smartphone application that allows them to search for providers or to specify jobs. Service providers (i.e., gig workers) engaged by the on-demand company render the requested services and are compensated for the jobs. A gig economy encompasses all platforms that hire independent contractors, consultants and workers in different sectors, such as information technology, content creation, social media marketing and communications, food and beverages, creative fields such as art and design. A gig economy, therefore, means the existence of temporary or part-time workforce instead of a conventional workforce.

India has emerged as the 5th largest country for flexi-staffing after US, China, Brazil and Japan. Here, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana account for most opportunities in terms of growth for the flexi-workers (Pooja Monga, 2020). A liking for flexible work is being driven by factors such as freedom, technology upgradation, skill focus, additional income and human capital. With technology penetration and the improvement in human capital, emerging economies like India is sure to grow in the global gig economy at a rapid rate. With the US being a more advanced economy, it is advisable for India to study the trends in the US gig economy to identify the potential of gig tasks in India. For example, Ola (multinational ridesharing company offering services that include vehicle for hire and food delivery) and OYO (hospitality chain of leased and franchised hotels, homes and living spaces) in India emulated Uber (technology company providing ride-hailing, food delivery, package delivery, couriers, freight transportation services), and Air bnb (online marketplace for lodging, primarily homestays for vacation rentals, and tourism activities) in the US respectively (Pooja Monga, 2020). This sort of dittoing is visible in other areas also including content creation and information gathering and dissemination.

This gig model is penetrating into all spheres of work including Library and Information Science. In fact, it offers a solution to large scale unemployment among professionals by offering self-employment opportunities. Only hitch is that you have to possess appropriate skills or facilities to lend your services. For instance, if LIS professionals want to be part of gig economy, they have to sharpen their skills in providing leveraged information, customized information, facilitating access to information, round the clock delivery of information, repackaging information in addition to expediting the flow of information. The specific tasks that can be handled by the professionals are: (i) Compilation of bibliographic lists (ii) Provision of current business information (iii) Compilation of directories (iv) E-publishing (v) Translation services (vi) Information repackaging (vii) Writing, editing and proof reading (viii) Collection management (ix) Records management (x) Metadata preparation (xi) Information curation (xii) E-services, and m-services (xiii) Sale of e-books and e-publishing (xiv) Business analyst consultants (xv) Web newsletters (xvi) Access achieved through subscription (xvii) Arranging online event solutions through Cisco Webex, Google Meet, GoToMeeting, Microsoft Teams, Zoho, Zoom (xviii) Information intermediaries operating via chat rooms (xix) Digital Library development and maintenance (xx) Provision of flexible space for various academic activities etc. (Waweru, 2014).

The flexible space facilities include serene quiet and relaxing reading space, ideal places for literary endeavors, carrels with quick Internet access, printing and copying facilities, referencing services, makerspaces and related accompaniments

Though gig economy is fast catching up both in the developed and developing countries, it is not an unmixed blessing. Temporary, part-time, and casual work arrangements certainly have their benefits. They offer the ability to proclaim independence and control over one's work and life. It also provides an opportunity to lay your hands on something new. This pattern of work gives an opportunity to cooperate with veterans in the profession. But it is no substitute for a full-time, permanent job with a stable salary, benefits, and opportunities to grow as a full-fledged library professional. The yearning for a government/permanent job is deeply rooted in the psyche of budding professionals. For them, gig economy provides a precarious job landscape. Professional associations also clamour for permanent appointment for their members. At the same time, we have to come to terms with the emerging reality in the employment sector.

What is needed at this juncture is to equip the budding professionals to survive even in such a changing scenario. This calls for a drastic change in the curriculum of library schools so as to instill self confidence in the mind of the students. Entrepreneurship education (nay, inforpreneurship education) in academic curriculum is an important factor in encouraging effective youth entrepreneurship. A culture of experiential learning will provide students an opportunity to learn from the professional world and thereby assist them in their entrepreneurial journey. The curriculum should be designed in such a way to enable the learners to function in an increasingly digitally transformed world driven by new age technology like Cloud Computing, Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Robotic Process Automation, Augmented Reality, Data Analytics, Natural Language Processing and so on. While libraries will always remain as community-oriented places of access, they will also rise to the challenge of the gig economy and constantly develop and shape new ways to support and upskill their patrons. What is required on the part of the professionals is the ability to adopt the changes and adapt themselves suitably to rise to the occasion.

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