

Into the information age: Computerization of the Copperbelt University Library

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This book describes the experience of the Copperbelt University Library and how they went about computerisation. Six present and past library staff at the Copperbelt University, Zambia, document their experience of automating library services, from 1993 to 1999. They worked closely with the advisor to the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), who also wrote the Foreword. All the contributors are well qualified to produce such a work given their profiles at the end of the book.

Expectations raised immediately one reads the title of this book are to establish:

- what steps were followed during the computerisation process;
- what transpired at each stage;
- what hardware and software were used;
- challenges faced in terms of hardware and software limitations, costs and user skills;
- the way forward for Africa i.e., what can we learn from the Copperbelt University Library experience?

The message that is communicated to fellow-librarians and those with an interest in the development of libraries in Africa is presented in nine chapters. An overview of the Copperbelt University Library environment is given, the driving forces towards the decision to automate, the role of donors and how they provided funds and influenced the computerisation process, system design and implementation, maintaining and updating the existing databases, automating the circulation system, stocktaking, and the introduction of electronic information services, plus assessing the whole process, and looking at the future needs of the library. In reading this book one is given the practicalities of how the computerisation process was carried out, including the computerisation of the various modules/functions.

The contributors also present their experiences of the review exercise in the newly computerised environment, how the transition from a manual to an electronic environment was undertaken, and their concluding remarks.

The book addresses the need for librarians to share realities and challenges and how these can be dealt with. Each chapter examines and evaluates stages in the computerisation process, the initial strategies, the procedures for updating of the databases, automating the circulation system, the changes in stocktaking procedures, and the introduction of the e-based information services.

This book is a contrast to library computerisation projects undertaken in the more affluent areas, which differ vastly from what is described in this book. Experiences from an African environment are documented so as to act as a source of reference for other African libraries. Useful references, most of which are from within the region, plus Appendices are also provided, an encouragement for interested readers. Other useful features include the tables with factual data, reflecting the effort by the contributors in producing this kind of work. It is mentioned that there is "no need to reinvent the wheel when computerizing"; however, some of the problems faced by this library are highlighted in the 9th chapter.

The book has been written in such a way that the reader with some knowledge of computerised library systems and its terminology will be able to understand it. However, it might seem daunting to someone who has only worked with manual library systems, or who has not been exposed to computerised library systems.

Lessons to learned in computerisation process include that:

- without external financial assistance, library automation in the African environment is unlikely to happen,
- there is a need to place staff training and development at the heart of library computerisation activities;
- library automation is not a once-off project, but rather a continuous process that needs maintenance and expansion;
- there is need to ensure that adequate funds will be available to maintain the existing system and improve its capabilities in future years;

To a large extent, the reader will learn much through reading this book, but more would definitely be achieved if other libraries in the region could also document their experiences so that readers have a comparative view. The reviewer recommends that library and Information professionals, lecturers and students of library automation in developing countries (the majority of which are in Africa) read this book.

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