

An Exploratory study of infopreneurship as a job option for Library and Information Science students: A literature review

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Abstract

This paper reviews literature covering infopreneurship. The paper defines infopreneurship, discusses its importance and areas of infopreneurship, and explores its future. It further discusses how students can be motivated to be infopreneurs, the suitability of a curriculum for infopreneurship, and the challenges facing infopreneurship.

Keywords: Infopreneurship, economics of information, information brokerage, information consultancy, information intermediaries, Library and Information Science, LIS jobs

Introduction

The term ‘infopreneurship’ is a relatively new term in the discipline of Library and Information Science (LIS), although its function has been in existence ever since the beginning of information consulting and brokering. The term infopreneur is considered to be neologism portmanteau and is derived from the words ‘information’ and ‘entrepreneur’ (**Infopreneur, 2010**). ‘Neologism’ is a newly coined word or phrase that has not yet been accepted into mainstream language (**Neologism, 2010**). ‘Portmanteau’ is used to mean a blend of two (or more) words or morphemes and their meanings into one new word (**Portmanteau, 2010**). Coulson–Thomas (2000), in his article entitled “Developing and supporting information entrepreneurs”, describes infopreneurs as information entrepreneurs. Berry III (1994) also refers to infopreneurs as information entrepreneurs in “Enlighten those Entrepreneurs”, as does Du Toit (2000) in her article, “Teaching infopreneurship: students’ perspectives”. It is therefore to this regard that the study assume that there could still be challenges of coming up with one term for the field i.e. infopreneurs or information entrepreneurs.

Presently, the challenge that has arisen in the commercial field is to come up with a generally acceptable definition of what an entrepreneur is. A recent study conducted by Kobia and Sikalieh (2010) states, “The submission of this paper is that an agreed definition of entrepreneurship has yet to emerge.” In another statement, they comment on, “another interesting observation arising from the lack of an agreed definition on entrepreneurship”. The two quotes point to the fact that there is no universally accepted definition of entrepreneurship. As it stands, the only agreeable definition is that of the term ‘information’.

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McCreadie and Rice in Ikoja-Odongo and Mostert (2006) describe information as a commodity or resource. They go further to characterize it as a physical commodity that can be produced, purchased, replicated, distributed, manipulated, passed along, controlled, traded and sold.

Because this is social science study, definitions from the social science field will be used in this paper. Du Toit (2000) defines the term ‘entrepreneur’ as that particular individual in society who takes the lead as well as the risk in mobilizing the production factors (natural resources, human resources and capital) in specific combinations to produce products and services for his or her community. In accepting this definition, we intentionally turn a blind eye on the challenges faced by professionals in the commerce field.

A closer look reveals that information is defined as a resource and an entrepreneur is defined as someone who mobilizes production factors to produce products and services. Combining the two terms shows the individual who is behind the whole process happens to be an information entrepreneur, also known as an infopreneur – the person willing to take all the risks (as alluded to by Du Toit, 2000) with information products and services. Berry III (1994) states that, “We are overrun with information entrepreneurs around here. They want to put everything we do at LJ in some new database and then bring it out as a new information product, usually on a CD-ROM”. An example of such a people is researchers who use information to produce information products and services, often in the form of an article in journals.

Given this background, an infopreneur is therefore perceived to be an individual who sells information (Chandler, 2007). Thus, someone who sells information products and services. This concurs with Berry’s (1994) assertion that infopreneurs produce information products and services. It is noted in the Wikipedia that an infopreneur is an entrepreneur who makes money selling information on the Internet (Infopreneur, 2010).

Information intermediaries (information brokers and information consultants) conduct their services in the same manner. According to Ocholla (1999), information brokers and consultants indirectly or directly receive material and moral remuneration for the provision of information products and services to consumers. He states that often, an information intermediary links information products and services to information consumers. It is believed that there is a strong link between infopreneurship and information intermediaries; it is also believed that the two are actually one and the same thing, particularly by those involved in the transaction of information products and services. Thus from this point in the paper, ‘infopreneurs’ will be used interchangeably with ‘information intermediaries’.

This paper focuses on exploring the importance, areas, future and challenges of infopreneurship, the suitability of the curriculum, and how students can be motivated to be infopreneurs, as alluded to earlier.

Importance of infopreneurship

Infopreneurship is important and beneficial in many ways. The importance of information intermediaries (infopreneurs), as viewed by Christozov and his colleagues (Christozov et al., 2008), are as follows:

1. **Cost and time saving.** Generally one is likely to consult the library, Internet, newspaper, etc., in order to find the information one is looking for. Because of their expertise and experience in the field, an information intermediary or infopreneur saves the time and costs that would have been incurred by the user if another route were taken (Christozov, 2008). This is also confirmed by Frank et al. (2001), who opine that infopreneurs anticipate and assess information needs, and deliver value added information and services in a timely way.
2. **Reliable.** According to Kobia and Sikalieh (2010), “The need to survive drives individuals to engage in entrepreneurial activity thereby bringing about entrepreneurship.” In so doing, they maintain a good reputation and are noticed by more potential clients. Christozov et al. (2008) explain that infopreneurs function in the business world where recognition through good service is a major asset. This means that they provide the right information to the right people at the right time. Trudell (2008) adds that information intermediaries or infopreneurs are those individuals clients turn to when there seems to be no way out.
3. **Accurate information.** As highlighted above, information is of great value; there are many studies in the field of Library and Information Science that touch on the issue of information value (e.g. Du Toit, 2000). Accuracy is a major factor in determining the value of information alongside reliability, relevance, timeliness, proximity, comprehensiveness and understandability. With the skills and knowledge that infopreneurs are supposed to have, the information they obtain to support user needs has to be accurate. According to Klanènik and Blazic (2010), “Information brokers traditionally aim to find and explore information offered by various information suppliers. They receive queries from users and strive to return the information required by the user.”
4. **Advice on certain pieces of information.** The provision of advisory services is a major aspect of infopreneurship. It is well known that advisory services are often provided by knowledgeable and skilled people. Frank et al. (2001) is of the view that as an infopreneur, one needs to give advice and counsel to his or her clients based on their unique information needs.
5. **Value of information provided.** The amount of information provided by consultants has value because one would not charge a fee for providing a service unless one is sure that the information is valuable. Frank et al. (2001) confirms that the kind of information provided by the infopreneur is value added information.

Areas of infopreneurship

According to Ocholla (1999), ‘areas of infopreneurship’ refer to projects that one may undertake if one decides to pursue infopreneurship. He describes the following areas in his paper:

1. Research (exploratory and evaluative) in information and related fields such as user studies and market analysis
2. Compilation of bibliographic lists
3. Provision of current business information

4. Compilation of directories
5. Publishing
6. Translation services
7. Information repackaging
8. Writing, editing and proof reading
9. Collection management
10. Records management
11. Cataloguing

There are more areas of infopreneurship that can be identified today that were perhaps unknown when Ocholla (1999) wrote his paper, such as Internet providers, e-services, and m-services. In his book, Chandler (2007) emphasizes that the Internet in particular requires a new approach to infopreneurs. He mentions new areas such as the sale of e-books and e-publishing, business analyst consultants, web newsletters, access achieved through subscription, and online solutions through recorded videos, for example on how to reference, how to publish online, how to write a winning research proposal, or what career options there are in the field of Library and Information Science. Further avenues would include information intermediaries operating via chatrooms or offering online conferences through networking services such as Facebook and Skype.

At the University of Zululand, students have been involved in infopreneurship in the provision of computer troubleshooting services, helping junior students write research proposals, essays and reports, and proofreading and editing, to name a few as more will come when the campus survey results are received and disseminated by the end of 2010.

Challenges of infopreneurship

In his paper on intermediaries, Ocholla (1999) discussed some of the challenges faced by information intermediaries as follows:

1. **Smallness.** Most information brokerage undertakings are small, one man businesses.
2. **Urban-centricism and elitism.** What this means is that most information brokerage and information consultancy firms are located in urban areas. The market is a central issue because information is a commodity in a business-oriented environment and consumed mainly by literate and elite communities that reside mainly in urban areas, particularly in developing countries. This projects a sense of exclusivity.
3. **Temporality.** The field of infopreneurship suffers from individuals who are not passionate with the idea of being an infopreneur. If one starts an information business and it fails, that individual will just give up his or her dream of being an infopreneur and just resolute to go for formal jobs. This therefore results in the temporality of the field.
4. **Interdisciplinary factors.** Most of the people who end up becoming information consultants and brokers are drawn from various professions and occupations that do not necessarily fall under traditional information disciplines such as librarianship, publishing, the book trade, archives and records management, communication science, and information and media technology.
5. **Expertise.** Good consultancy and brokerage is facilitated by extensive knowledge, experience, the right attitude and sufficient exposure to the subject. Thus, a great

demand for expert knowledge and skills in the areas of information consultancy and brokerage services are required.

6. **Setting up of clinics.** If other professionals from other disciplines whom we equate ourselves with can do something that can stand the test of time, why is it difficult for information consultants to do so? If doctors can open clinics, then surely information intermediaries can too.
7. **Part-time or full-time occupation.** Whenever a client needs a service from a consultant, their availability is required. Arguably, engagement in consultancy and brokerage services on a part time basis creates the potential for permanent structures in the future. Even though consultancy and brokerage services may be loosely structured at present, there is a definite need for formally structured services.

Curriculum suitability

According to Du Toit (2000), it is important for infopreneurship to be included in the curricula of Information Science. Du Toit (2000) furthers her argument by saying that infopreneurship is action-orientated. The design of a curriculum based on infopreneurship according to Du Toit (2000) should encourage imagination, creativity and innovation, and address the issues of setting a balance between teaching entrepreneurial skills and managerial skills. Entrepreneurs identify needs in changing environments; they create and innovate using an active imagination (Du Toit, 2000).

It is imperative for infopreneurship to be included as a subject in the Department of Information Studies so that graduates from South Africa and all over the world under the Department of Library and Information Studies/ Science can opt to be infopreneurs (Du Toit, 2000). Christozov et al. (2008) from the State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies highlighted that designing and launching an entirely new program that leads to a bachelor degree is a challenging job for every school, especially if the program is a new one for the school and across the globe. Christozov et al. further highlights from their university highlighted above they included in their curriculum the course of information brokerage or infopreneurship. The reason for this inclusion was to help unemployed information professionals find new career paths (Christozov et al., 2008). They argued that at the time, this attempt at offering information brokering or infopreneurship as a regular discipline was designed to meet demand. The growing interest in this burgoing field is an indication of the recognized need for such professionals.

Du Toit (2000) is of the view that people who design lectures for such a new discipline must be experts in the field as they need to provide sufficient information to enable their students to start their own businesses. When considering the curriculum of a course in infopreneurship, one should look at the knowledge and skills an infopreneur would need in order to be successful. The course content should focus on two aspects, namely the teaching of creative and analytical skills and the teaching of business basics. This serves to confirm part of what was said above: that it is a challenge to launch a new program in a university.

Infopreneurship curriculum at the University of Zululand

It is believed that the curriculum of Information Studies at the University of Zululand could potentially push students to pursue careers as information intermediaries or infopreneurs. It is indicated in the Faculty of Arts Prospectus (2010) that a module 'Infopreneurship' is offered to students (both students doing a BA in Information Science or a Bachelor in Library and

Information Science) in their final year in the department. We believe that students from the Department of Information Studies at the University of Zululand are equipped with knowledge that could enable them to follow infopreneurship as a career choice, e.g. knowledge in general management, knowledge management, information seeking, information ethics, marketing and publicity, computer applications/literacy, electronic publishing, infopreneurship, which are also identified by Ocholla (1999) as areas of infopreneurship.

The module/course Infopreneurship aims to provide students with the knowledge and understanding of the economic and business implications of information services, transfer and use that can enable them to pursue infopreneurship. We believe that the module/course alluded to acts as a supporting system for those who seek to be successful infopreneurs.

Christozov et al. (2008) highlighted that the aim of the curriculum they use is to train students on specific qualifications needed by information intermediaries or infopreneurs. A list of the modules that make up their curriculum includes: information management; probability and statistics; system analysis; theory and practice of consulting; mathematical foundations of information brokerage; law and legal regulation; and information brokerage. The curriculum from the university in which Christozov and his colleagues are based differs from the one at the University of the Zululand. This suggests that the management of the Department of Information Studies from the University of Zululand should look at the curricula of other institutions in order to help strengthen the field of infopreneurship.

How can students be motivated to pursue infopreneurship?

Literature (e.g. Ocholla 1999, Du Toit, 2000, and Frank, 2001) reveals many suggested ways to motivate LIS students to pursue infopreneurship. Frank and his colleagues (Frank et al., 2001) identified one motivating factor, that is interdisciplinary research which emphasizes familiarity with many fields. They note that information is no longer location dependent. Thus, essentially, one can operate a business anywhere and everywhere - in a garage at home or in the backyard - largely through the ICT enabled virtual space. Increased access to information has made everything possible for infopreneurs. Du Toit's (2000) motivating factors include a low economic growth rate as an enabling factor for infopreneurship. Ocholla's motivating factors (1999) also include unemployment. For example, a recent calamity in the corporate world was the 'recession', where many employees lost their jobs. The point is that if an individual is unable to find employment but has the qualifications and knowledge required to make it on their own, they tend to set up their own businesses. In this instance, unemployment could motivate them to become an infopreneur.

Ocholla also notes the willingness of information consumers to pay for the services of an information intermediary. Individuals, organizations and countries are increasingly accepting the importance of information and knowledge for their survival, and therefore invest a great deal in information as a commodity. One of the definitions of an infopreneur is an individual who takes risks by capitalizing on such an opportunity. He also notes the inability of existing information provision centers to cope with or provide the information services needed by clients. The best way to beat competition is to capitalize on areas where one's competitor is lacking or on the competitor's weak points. Traditional information providers or intermediaries such as libraries, bookshops and individuals with a traditional information service mindset cannot cope with present day information needs. For example, would a traditional library satisfy the information needs of a web/ library/Patron 2.0/3.0 ?(see

<http://www.lis.uzulu.ac.za/research/conferences/2010/DIS%20conference%20FT%20Kwany%20et%20al%202010Sept%2015%20edited.pdf>) Where do you think such a user will go for information services?

Ocholla also points to dead end jobs as a motivating factor. These are jobs that do not offer individuals the opportunity to expand the knowledge they have or to grow or develop their careers. People normally abandon these jobs and look for something else, such as infopreneurship. Increased demand for specialized information services, which is also mentioned by the same author, is closely linked to some of the factors mentioned. People who know what they want and can afford specialized services usually refer their problems to specialists. For example, if one suffers from an eye problem, one will go to an optometrist and not to a general doctor or a clinic. The same applies to individuals who need specialized information services that cannot be ordinarily provided. Other factors mentioned by Ocholla are the recognition that information is a commodity and can create wealth, and interest in self employment where people want to be their own boss. Du Toit (2000) observes that students are more interested in being their own boss, a preference that is shared by many if they can manage self-employment.

Future of infopreneurship

According Tenopir (2006), users' expectations often grow faster than one can meet them, and the more one provides for people, the more new and progressive things they will expect. This means that the future of information intermediaries or infopreneurs depends on the users' needs and how they (infopreneurs) ensure that these needs are met. The better the services and products, the more customers will flock to their offices and vice versa. Coulson-Thomas (2000) is of the view that there are plenty of opportunities to make money as an information intermediary (infopreneur). Infopreneurship as highlighted by Du Toit (2000) above is action oriented. Du Toit (2000) argues further by saying that the driving force behind creativity and innovativeness is infopreneurship

Twenty years ago, Warner (1990) estimated that there were probably more than 1,000 information entrepreneurs in business in the U.S. and Canada, and this number must have exponentially grown since. A study by Bothma and Britz in 2000 observed that there was a very strong tendency towards entrepreneurship in South Africa, and many students preferred to set up their own businesses as information consultants, information brokers, or information analysts rather than to work for the government, parastatals, or big corporations. This is a positive attitude that should be encouraged by all stakeholders. More research needs to be done in this field in order to establish where we are at the moment and the challenges that need to be overcome.

Conclusion

The curriculum of LIS schools should provide space for infopreneurship and related disciplines in order to support this important domain. The content of infopreneurship should be spread across several related disciplines, particularly those in the management, legal and business domains, and therefore a well designed curriculum should not focus on an autonomous course or module only.

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