

Digital Resilience: Skills, Competencies, Capacity Building and Institutional Readiness¹

By

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Introduction

It is a privilege to discuss the future of digital culture. Digital culture because digitisation has grown beyond being a fad, fashion, or tradition. It is a culture. Digitality now defines lifestyles and is affecting belief systems. To be digital connotes transition from manual or atom base to liquid or electronic system where digits are synchronised and assigned meanings. Beyond the technical, being digital also connotes the acquisition of certain skills, traits, way of living. Digital resilience therefore assumes an enduring culture of digitisation and its sustainability in all ramifications.

For this workshop, skills, competencies, capacity building and institutional readiness form the critical factors that can result in digital resilience. The extent to which these factors contribute to digital resilience is what this workshop should unravel. This is also the focus of this paper.

Digital as a norm?

To be digital has transcended from an innovation to a norm. Every human service now requires certain degrees of digitisation, depending on the complexity of the process. This is experienced in health, social services, and academic enterprises. However, it is academic aspects of digitisation that is of interest in this discourse, especially the role of the library and library professionals. For knowledge to be acquired and innovations to be realised, digitisation provides easy transition and spiral effects by triggering change from normal ways of carrying out activities/services to a more sophisticated way. This accounts for the current trend in the digitisation of all human services and instruments/equipment.

Digital resilience as a problematic

However, it is pertinent to ask why digital resilience is a problematic. Digital resilience becomes problematic because of the effects of the dynamic transition into the digital world where communication – scholarly and ordinary, become compacted within a digital space that

¹ Keynote Address delivered at the Workshop on “Digital Resilience: Skills, Competencies, Capacity Building and Institutional Readiness” organised by the Plateau State Chapter of the Nigerian Library Association, May 4th & 5th, 2026, held at the JETS SMART Class, ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos.

is driven by information and communication technology (ICT) and is in a constant state of flux. There is a real ongoing transformation from all known traditional means of communication and professionalisation to a digital platform. Knowledge and skills are all being transformed and every actor within the information services ecosystem is expected to acquire at least some basic digital knowledge and skills to remain relevant today. For instance, it is observable that real-time online interaction is gradually replacing physical social interactions in many social relationships. This is enabled by the deployment of synchronous and asynchronous communication using mobile technology in the form of text messaging, electronic mails, social media posts such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.

Scholarly communication is also now largely online, including lectures, conferences (webinars), and publications. To gain access to these spaces and library resources requires certain levels of knowledge and competencies which if not acquired and applied, will make discoverability and accessibility to library spaces and resources impracticable. Increasingly, more research and learning resources are available digitally today than a decade ago. Lectures are available on YouTube through podcasts and videos, some in audio form. Conferences that were physical are now available online through webinars. To discover the resources of a library today, a knowledge of navigating the world wide web is imperative. Information literacy, the use of intelligent systems such as Artificial Intelligence, search terminologies, and hyperlinks are paramount.

Competency as a need

The professional information and library worker and the patron must both embrace the latest competencies in the use of digital resources to discover and access resources. For the professional that aims to offer the best services, knowledge of the tools and facilities for the effective response to the needs of patrons must be acquired. Knowledge of the location of the tools and facilities must also be acquired, as well as knowledge of the use of the facilities and tools. Apart from this, there must be adequate knowledge of the profile of the library patron. Library patrons differ in their need for library resources. There are those who come to the library to only read their books or carry out assignments. There are those who come to the library to access library resources. There are those who come around to find some quiet space in the library for meditation or deep academic thinking. Then there are specific library resources that patrons need: some books (hard or digital or both), some periodicals (hard or digital or both), some to charge out or charge in books.

With the advancement in technology, it is possible for a library patron to know their status in terms of books loaned out, time to return and fines. The library should be able to also provide the patron sufficient information on the resources available without the patron physically walking into the library. This implies a website where all information about the library is available. The website should be interactive with access to key staff available. Each library should aim at providing a 24/7 library service, at least online. Even though attempts are made to provide this type of service through chatbots using artificial intelligence, there is no replacement for human interaction.

To provide these services, library staff require competencies of online interactive mannerisms or ethics. They also need competencies on the use of online communication tools – blogs, question and answer platforms, etc. knowledge and skills in navigating appropriate web sites

for supply of resources is also needed. This implies that the librarian must have adequate knowledge of where to discover and access library resources to meet the direct need of their patrons. It also means continuous self-improvement/training.

The library as an organisation that seeks to offer and provide the best services must also provide adequate training for her staff on recent developments in the provision of effective user-centred library services. Continuing academic and professional learning must be a norm. Onsite and online learning must be taken advantage of. No library staff must be left behind.

This has cost implications and the library must make adequate budgetary provisions to cater for this need. The library should also identify competent resource persons or organisations that can train their staff in attaining seamless integration into the dynamic world of information and library services. These could be drawn from the library, the parent institution, or outside of the library location.

Capacity Building

Capacity building is the enlargement of the capability of staff. It is the preparation and equipping of library staff for optimum service in a dynamic environment. For digital resilience, this translates to deliberate training and re-training of staff on the present and future work expectations.

One critical area of capacity building is readiness for change. This is about the most needed capacity – to be ever ready for change, to be ever ready to adapt to change, to be ready to play a new role, learn new skills, and to ever offer the best information and library services in a dynamic world. This is necessary because technology continues to escalate and it is only a deliberate preparation to accept change that can become the starting point of the resilience. This way, no staff is caught unprepared for change.

Change is constant, but it is only the prepared that can absorb the repercussions of change. Attitudes to change can be dismissive, resistant, or absorbing. To be relevant and offer acceptable service, information and library staff must first be ever ready to embrace change through the cultivation of appropriate mind-set, training and re-training for knowledge and skills acquisition.

Capacity building therefore requires psychological and sociological preparation, training in specific work roles, technical knowledge and skills acquisition in the manipulation of new technology, and the training of patrons in the use of new technology. To support the effective acquisition of knowledge and new skills, the library/organisation needs to have the technology in place, the hardware and software so that staff can have firsthand experience.

This capacity building should be done both in-house and off-site. The in-house training is a continuous training led by the librarian setting an example. The library management should themselves first be trained and updated to embrace every change. The library management team will drive the change. Then, heads of library sections will also take responsibility as leaders to drive the change in their respective sections of the library. The change could be approached in two ways – general and specific. The general involves capacity building for any type of technological change including digital literacy, ethical implications, etc.; while the

specific is for a particular work-related role such as an application for cataloguing and classification, institutional repository, reference searches, circulation module, website development, etc.

The off-site capacity building could be determinant for a sustained culture of digitisation. For instance, automation which preceded the present-day digitisation required trainings by the early adopters of library digitisation in foreign institutions. Automation embraces all aspects of library migration from manual workflow and environment to automated systems which includes digitisation. Digitisation denotes the conversion of processes and documents into digits so that communication can be expedited and ready for manipulation to preferred outcome in a workflow. Automation is the whole, while digitisation is a part of the whole.

Institutional Readiness

Institutional readiness is a *sine qua non* for digital resilience. The institution here refers to both the library and the parent institution. Institutional readiness includes the preparation of infrastructure and budget to fund an unfolding digital environment. Infrastructural readiness involves the provision of digital friendly library spaces, parent institution, seamless internet connectivity, and modification of library and other structures that were constructed before the digital environment became a reality and normality. For many institutions, they would need to modify their buildings to provide for adequate electricity charging ports, and internet category cables.

There may also be a need to replace furniture that would not allow for maximum concentration while using the library in a digital environment. The furniture in a digital library should reflect the need for both individual and collaborative reading spaces, as well as spaces for computer laboratories, computer workshops, video conferencing, virtual reality, augmented virtual reality, podcasting, and open spaces with green. Green nature should be reflected within and around the library as it portrays environmental sanity in a digitsphere. This is a critical institutional need.

On budget, the institution and the library must budget for migration into the fully digital environment. Budget for infrastructural development, staff and patron training, and sustainability should be considered. Financing the remodelling of old library buildings could be cumbersome for a library budget. Therefore, institutional support is needed. Support from philanthropists, friends of the library is also advocated. But the library must prepare its need and convince potential sponsors that it can manage the budget and produce a stand-out renovated structure. In preparing needs-assessment, the library should have a clear vision of its goal by putting it down in writing. This would be developed into architectural briefs. After this, a team should be formed to realise the vision by providing detail needs-requirements. The team should comprise of the librarian, an architect, electrical engineer, civil engineer, and quantity surveyor as key members. It is preferable to draw the team from the institution.

Training budget should include costs for local onsite training, online training, and off-site. Embracing and sustaining digitisation to the point of resilience requires constant updates to the knowledge and skills of library staff. Patron also must be trained so that they can easily adopt change. There must be advocacy on the part of the library. The advocacy is to sensitise

the change and produce a process for embracing new technology and innovations. All these have cost implications.

Also needed is budget for subscription to software, renewal and insurance in some instances. Even if the software is open source, budget head should be created for support. Acquisition, servicing, and replacement of hardware must be budgeted for without which digital innovations cannot be sustained. Along with the budget for hardware is training component at the point of acquisition.

Significantly, the cost of seamless internet connectivity must be built into the budget. This includes the initial cost of acquisition/subscription of the package, renewal, and physical infrastructure, which will service the internet connectivity such as routers, servers, radios, and fibre-optic cabling.

Another significant readiness that the digitally resilient institution must be is disaster preparedness. This involves budgeting, training, and provision and management of library spaces that will facilitate easy evacuation in a case of disaster. The librarian should ensure that all library furniture and equipment are of the highest quality. The facilities should also be periodically monitored for perfect functioning and detection of faults. Repairs and replacement of deteriorating facilities should routinely be carried out.

Conclusion

Digital resilience is first building future-ready personnel. Then the services and facilities, and the institution. Soft skills such as competencies in programming, data sciences, artificial intelligence and all emerging technological applications are no longer optional. They are necessary if librarians will adequately respond to needs of patrons of the next generation who need library services more than before but may not think that they do because of their ability to easily discover and access digital resources. Head librarians must make capacity building an ongoing investment and should encourage their staff and patrons to be digitally resilient. Librarians should also motivate their parent institutions to cultivate the necessary environment for digitality through advocacy, training, and budgetary provisions. The time has come for librarians to rise and soar above the rising tide of innovations and have a safe landing.

Thank you.