SUPPORTING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF SMALL AND MICRO BUSINESSES: A SOUTH AFRICAN CASE-STUDY

by

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Meeting: **101 Africa**
  Simultaneous Interpretation: **Yes**

Abstract

There are over 2 000 public libraries in South Africa and, collectively, they provide a network of service points that has the potential to reach most urban communities, though the needs of those in rural areas are still largely unmet. Since the establishment of the first democratic government in 1994, small and micro business enterprises have become a significant factor in the development of the South African economy, but the information needs of owners are often unrecognised, or not appreciated, by primary suppliers of business information in South Africa. In the Western Cape there are estimated to be over 120 000 small and micro-enterprises; however successful development is not easy and each year, of the estimated 20 000 people trying to start a new small enterprise, almost half will fail within a short time. Lack of adequate research and consideration of appropriate business information is a significant factor in the failure of many.

In an initiative in the Western Cape of South Africa, the idea of using public libraries as a channel for business information for small and micro businesses resulted in the establishment in the year 2000 of Library Business Corners, which aims to provide business information services and expertise directly to the local community. With several years of experience, Library Business Corners has evolved from a "top-down" into a "grass roots", community-driven, approach and the idea has also been adopted elsewhere in South Africa. Alongside this development there have appeared other services addressing the same, or similar, groups of users, often concentrating on the use of Information and Communication Technology.

A key element in developing an effective service is the quality of staff and their contact with intending users. The opportunities and problems of the Library Business Corners approach are identified and consideration is given to a response to the emergence of similar services: is the best strategy collaboration, competition or coalescence? The "Balanced Score Card" model is used to assess the vision and

strategy of the present services and consideration is given to ways in which information literacy in a community can also contribute to small and micro enterprise development.

Background

The inauguration, in 1994, of the Government of National Unity initiated major changes in the governance of South Africa, its social, education and welfare services. In broad terms the mandate of the government was, and remains, to transform the country into a democratic state, to correct the injustices and inequalities of the past, to alleviate poverty, and to promote a better life for all. However, despite the efforts of post-1994 administrations, substantial differences between the population groups when access to the basics of life is considered. The huge backlog in human resource development, one of the most striking legacies of the apartheid years, is reflected in the Human Development Index rankings, which place South Africa as 121st, in the Medium Development range, out of the 177 countries included in the survey, with an index of 0.653 (United Nations Development Programme 2006). The World Bank Group analysis (World Bank Group 2000) also indicates that the gap between rich and poor in South Africa is one of the largest in the world: the social circumstances may be characterised as that of two extremes of society, one being a minority of largely white, affluent, people and the other characterised by poverty and underdevelopment. Unemployment and underemployment strongly affect the capacity of breadwinners to improve the economic circumstances of themselves and families. The response from the South African government was the *White paper on national strategy for the development and promotion of small business in South Africa*, which sought to encourage circumstances in which small and micro-enterprises can develop: "The stimulation of Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprise (SMMEs) must be seen as a part of an integrated strategy to take the South African economy onto a higher road - one on which our economy is diversified, productivity enhanced, investment is stimulated an entrepreneurship flourishes" (South Africa, Department of Trade and Industry 1995). In particular, the need for improved access to information was recognised as one of the critical needs of small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs). Such information is essential for gaining access to sources of finance, advice on appropriate technology, training and guidance on setting-up, establishing and developing businesses.

Frequent references to the information society have been made by government and other leaders especially since the vocal plea by President Mbeki (then Deputy President) at the G7 Information Society Conference in Brussels in 1995. There he urged rich countries to assist poor countries to enjoy the benefits of the information society (Mbeki seeks on-ramp 1995). As a consequence, the Information Society and Development Conference was hosted in South Africa in 1996. The theme of information society has enjoyed prominence ever since then in speeches and statements by government leaders. Former Education Minister, Kader Asmal, conceded in a speech in 2002 that the South African government does not have as yet a coherent policy on the information society (Asmal 2002). He suggested that an information society "involves the integration of the information technology, telecommunications and the information sector" which accompanies the emergence of a new and networked society. He reiterated the government's belief that information communication technologies (ICTs) are "key drivers for economic growth and socio-economic upliftment" (Asmal 2002). At the inaugural meeting of National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS), the Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture,

Science and Technology advised that one of the main tasks for NCLIS would be to "integrate local needs and ideals with those of the global information society" (Sonjica 2004).

There is thus ample evidence of both the need for innovative ways of assisting the development of small and micro-enterprises and of recognition by government of the roles that channels for information flow and the availability of sources of relevant and reputable information can play in economic development. However, some commentators have questioned whether the strategies pursued by the South African government have had the desired effect of encouraging and developing small business capacity (Kesper 2000).

The genesis of Library Business Corners

In 1996, the South African government passed the National Small Businesses Act (South Africa 1996), later amended in 2003 (South Africa 2003). This legislation put into effect many of the strategies identified in the *White paper on national strategy for the development and promotion of small business in South Africa* (South Africa, Department of Trade and Industry 1995), including the development of a National Small Business Support Strategy. The provisions of the Act included the establishment of a comprehensive service, Ntsika Enterprise Promotion Agency, to act as an intermediary between government, the private sector and Service Providers by providing or creating points of access to non-financial information related to markets, training, information services and advice on appropriate technology. It was intended that the development of what were to become know as Local Business Service Centres (LBSCs) should act as the immediate point-of-contact for entrepreneurs and local businesses. LBSCs could be established as private organisations, non-governmental organisations or community-based organisations. However, in a recent study, Chalera (2006: 183) concludes that the roles of these and the various agencies developed to support SMMEs in South Africa are often confused in the minds of potential clients and providers of major services, such as finance houses. He also notes that there is some scepticism at provincial level about the extent of Ntsika's knowledge of the local business communities and about its ability to function effectively (Chalera, 2006: 204). This tends to confirm an earlier study by Ladzanil:

> The LBSCs, defined in terms of their functions, are owned by the local business people and managed by the local people. Their services include training, marketing and linkages, counseling and referrals and information gathering and dissemination. . . .The major challenges to these centers are in developing SMMEs in rural communities. These SMMEs operate in a sea of poverty and unemployment; most of them are survivalist enterprises; there is poor infrastructure, outflow of wealth to larger urban centers and reduced access to markets (Ladzanil, 2001: 5).

At the National Small Business Conference, held in 1996, vigorous discussion about the viability of establishing a country-wide network of LBSCs highlighted the opinion that the original plan was considered far too costly to implement.

During subsequent discussions in Cape Town, it was noted that a possible channel for the distribution of information already existed within many communities: the public library network. Providing reliable statistics on the number of "public" libraries in South Africa is surprisingly difficult because of inconsistency in definition and the existence in some areas of community-supported as well municipally-supported services. It is generally accepted that there are over 2 000 public libraries in South

Africa and, collectively, they provide a network of service points that has the potential to reach most urban communities, though the needs of those in rural areas are still largely unmet.

A proposal for a pilot project to establish LBSCs through the public library network was accepted for funding by the City of Cape Town. Central to this idea was the recognition that the "core business" of librarians is the dissemination of information, of which business-related information clearly forms part. The Cape Metropolitan Council also accepted a request for support for a similar approach, to be developed by the Cape Town Small Business Centre. The focus, in each case, was on provision of access to Information and Communication Technology-supported services (ICTs), with hardware and network capacity supplied by external providers.

In the Western Cape there are estimated to be over 120 000 small and micro-enterprises; however successful development is not easy and each year, of the estimated 20 000 people trying to start a new small enterprise, almost half will fail within a short time. Lack of adequate research and consideration of appropriate business information is a significant factor in the failure of many.

Several problems with the idea became apparent: levels of computer awareness were not high amongst the community and many librarians also lacked training in the provision of business information and the use of computers to locate information. Furthermore, the reliability and support for the networking services by the providers was inconsistent. Following a review, it was decided to focus on the provision of business information largely in paper form; however, this strategy also quickly presented problems because of a lack of books and other resources that were relevant to the needs of entrepreneurs and owners of SMMEs. In particular, it was recognised that the reading level of materials often assumed a tertiary education and that much of the material was published only in English or Afrikaans. Additionally, the locus of ownership of the service was also unclear and resulted in librarians feeling that they had no role to play in the making of decisions that might affect their abilities to provide salient information for their communities.

A decision was made in 2000 to re-launch the idea, using the name "Library Business Corners" (LBC), and to adopt a "grass roots" approach to provision, with *facilitation* (as distinct from *control*) from a central point.

The LBC model has been adopted in other parts of South Africa, the Western Cape team offering advice and guidance on establishment.

Setting up a Library Business Corner

The practical exemplification of this "grass roots" approach is that the request for the establishment of a Library Business Corner usually comes from librarians. Because of their strong community involvement, they are well-placed to know the needs of their communities and the availability of other sources of information. Thus, the focus is on making relevant business related information accessible for prospective or existing entrepreneurs in particular communities.

Contact with the Library Business Corners team, based in Cape Town, commences the process of establishment. During an on-site visit, a member of the team presents the LBC concept in detail, the resources that can be provided and a suitable location in the library for a dedicated "corner" is identified. Thereafter, a funding application is completed by the librarian-in-charge, together with a request for a list of all the business-related books and other materials that could be made available in the library, up to an agreed Rand value. From this, the librarian-in-charge makes a selection, bearing in mind local needs. The materials are processed on receipt by the LBC team

and then delivered to the library. Most of the public libraries in the Western Cape now have LBCs established; many are in small towns.

If an LBC is to assist a community to raise its awareness of self-employment opportunities it must also provide opportunities for training, by identifying members of the community and organisations that can provide workshops and other events at a suitable level. It should also be gathering case studies about entrepreneurship and successful innovations within the communities served. In addition, an LBC should be able to direct enquirers to other local and national sources of information, especially those available through the use of ICTs.

A view from the ground

The Western Cape includes 24 municipalities and more than 130 towns and villages, separated by largely rural areas. To aim to support business enterprises and entrepreneurship is a laudable objective but one that is doomed to failure *if* it is based on the goal of providing contact points in every community. Early on, the difficulty of this model of provision was recognised and it was accepted that a "hub and spoke" approach should be considered. This works by establishing a "hub" at a public library in a large community and linking this "hub" to the "spokes", which represent the services in the smaller communities. By having a clear pattern of referral, requests that cannot satisfactorily be answered at a "spoke" level can be passed to a "hub" and from there, if necessary, to the LBC team in Cape Town or some other suitable information source. This model is attractive because it is less costly and can, potentially, be easier to facilitate. It is also easier to focus in training on the respective roles of services at "hub" and "spokes" and to build confidence in the referral system by regular checks on performance. Thus, LBC considers its essential role as a provider of a community-based channel to business-related information.

A further complication is the apparent multiplicity of sources and services that have developed since 1994, many offering apparently-similar services to the SMME sector. In an internal LBC paper, Thomas (2007b) has identified the following categories of service:

National government (departments) including legislation, regulations, prescribed procedures, etc.

Provincial government (departments)

District municipalities

Municipalities including local municipal offices

Parastatals including small-business-support agencies

Non-governmental and Community-based organisations that actively support small enterprises

Financial institutions and business-service suppliers

Sector associations and chambers of commerce

Education and training suppliers offering small-business-related programmes

Published books and articles in the SMME field including international publications and comparative studies

Among these are some that can be regarded as competitors in whole, or in part, for the type of services offered by LBC. Under the provisions of the National Small Business Amendment Act 26 of 2003 (South Africa 2003), the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA) took over the functions of the Ntsika Enterprise Promotion Agency and two other agencies. SEDA describes itself as a "delivery network [which] must reach all regions of the country and integrate government-funded small enterprise support across all tiers of government"; furthermore, it states

that "The mandate of SEDA is to design and implement a standard national delivery network that must uniformly apply throughout the country" (Small Enterprise Development Agency 2007). The web site contains information of a similar kind to that offered by LBC. The Real Enterprise Development Initiative ("Red Door"), which falls under the ægis of the Enterprise Development sub-directorate of the Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism, has also become established in communities in the Western Cape, including those in marginalised areas. It identifies it role as:

"a one-stop shop for new and existing businesses looking for help and advice, from the most basic to the most sophisticated. We aim to:

Help build new businesses;

Help strengthen and develop existing businesses; and

Help create and build more black-owned businesses.

RED Door centres are easy to find in most large communities and towns in the Western Cape. We speak English, Afrikaans and Xhosa and our expert, friendly staff will work with you to analyse your business needs and then develop a customised action plan" (Cape Gateway 2006: What is the Red Door?).

An examination of the resources listed by Cape Gateway as available to local businesses within the Western Cape (Cape Gateway 2006: Resources for small businesses) reveals that there are nineteen, organized into three categories (Government supported, Private sector . . . , Information services), which describe accountability rather than the type of service provided.

Government supported	RED Door	One-stop shop for new and existing businesses looking for assistance and advice.
	Tourism Business Development Unit	Advice and support for tourism businesses, including
	Agri-business Support	Wide variety of support, training and information for all farmers
	Umsobomvu Youth Fund	National government project to create opportunities for youth employment and youth entrepreneurship
	Small Enterprise Development Agency	Project of the national Department of Trade and Industry to support small businesses. They offer comprehensive support and advice on all aspects of running a business, and provide links to finance providers
Private sector and Non-Governmental Organisation support	Cape Craft and Design Institute	Advice, training, networking and exhibition support for any business involved in the craft and design industry
	Clotex	Training for the clothing and textile industry, information on legal issues, finance, computer skills and technology

	Cape IT Initiative	Regional trade association, networking body and a promotion agency for the ICT industry; runs a number of mentoring and support projects for small IT companies
	Business Partners	Specialised investment company for SMMEs, offering finance, property management, mentorship, consulting and on-going business support through industry-specific units
	Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship	Advice and training for entrepreneurs, as well as helping to find finance
	Entrepreneurship Development Unit	Training and support services
	Matie Gemeenskapdiens (Community Service)	Support and training, including basic business skills, for women entrepreneurs and people with disabilities
	Business Beat	Helps entrepreneurs to identify viable business opportunities and develop their business skills
	NICRO Business Centre	Training and support for people wanting to start their own small businesses, especially former offenders, families of offenders and victims of crime. Finance services and micro loans are also available
	Micro Enterprise Network of NGOs (MENNGOS)	Training, support and networking for all small businesses, including a "Women Supporting Women" network
	Zenzele	Trains unemployed people in welding, woodwork, sewing, catering and tourism. It helps graduates to form co-operatives, and also provides business development and incubation services
Information services	Library Business Corners	Available at most libraries in the Western Cape; each provides a wide range of books, pamphlets and other information resources, as well as a place to display business cards and products
	Strategic Business Partnerships for Growth in Africa	Research and development services to promote strategic partnerships and a better regulatory environment for business growth in Africa;

	(SBP)	range of useful publications
	BIG News	Independent newspaper and website specifically to help business owners grow their businesses and create jobs. Regional supplements published in Gauteng and the Western Cape.

What is evident from the information in this Table is that, apart from those that are sector specific (such as Clotex), all are offering information services as part of their portfolios.

It can be argued that the multiplicity of sources is to be encouraged since it should increase the probability of a seeker finding some required information. However, extensive studies of information-seeking behaviour (see, for example, Atkinson and Figueroa 1997) suggest that even those in tertiary education often fail both to follow systematic patterns of searching and to find relevant information. Ikoja-Odongo and Ocholla (2004), in a survey of entrepreneurs in the informal sector of the economy of Uganda, suggested that an appropriate model for information behaviour for this community of users must be grounded on oral traditions and indigenous knowledge and be sensitive to poverty, infrastructure and illiteracy. The research also highlighted the importance of information repackaging and the use of appropriate media for information provision. From the perspective of the Western Cape, and from that of many areas in South Africa, the conditions found in the Ugandan community also apply and the conclusion must be that providing more channels and resources will not ensure that information does reach the entrepreneurs.

A particular weakness has been identified through user studies and the sharing of anecdotal evidence: the lack of business-related material at suitable levels and in a range of indigenous languages. The underlying problem is not solely that of the capacity of indigenous-language publishing houses to respond: it is also the dearth of material written at a level that is appropriate to the circumstances and needs of entrepreneurs and managers of SMMEs. Pallo Jordan, Minister of Arts and Culture, recently acknowledged the complexity of the issues in an answer to a question in Parliament on the need to support publishing programmes in South Africa in languages other than English and Afrikaans (Jordan 2005).

Providing material of an appropriate kind and level is recognised within LBC as being of major importance. Although there may be a common set skills in developing a business plan that can be identified and explained, to gain the credence of aspiring entrepreneurs and managers of SMMEs requires that the framing and exemplification of the skills also be appropriate to their circumstances. To use an example of setting-up a small fishing business to assist a group wanting to set up a vegetable growing business presents an immediate obstacle to understanding, even before the financial and planning aspects have been considered: even though the skills base required may be identical, the process of abstraction from the model is complex. This highlights the need for adjunct roles: those of "re-packager" of information, interpreter and author, or producer, of resources. It is equally clear that, except in a minor way, LBC does not have the capacity to take on either role. Such work requires a multiplicity of publishing skills, including translating ability and copyright clearance, that the team does not possess. It is unrealistic to rely upon the goodwill of those that do have such skills to take on these tasks in a voluntary or community-spirited capacity.

What has become evident is that the list of sources noted by Thomas (2007) is skewed towards providing channels for the flow of information at community, provincial and national levels. Few sectors on the list see their role as that of producing and re-packaging information; even fewer conceive of it as being to re-package, translate and produce information in forms suitable to the variety of communities, language needs and business interests in South Africa. Furthermore, it can be argued that few of the potential users of such services will have the time or resources to identify which of this plethora of agencies can best assist.

The foregoing suggests that the range of development strategies to be adopted by LBC is far from clear: should LBC continue independently, collaborate with others, coalesce or, even, cease?

The balanced scorecard

To gain a perspective on this, it is proposed in further research to conduct an analysis of LBC as it presently functions and then to extend the analysis to consider strategy. The analysis will use the "balanced scorecard" approach first developed by Kaplan and Norton (1992), in a modified form, suitable as a first step in a full strategic analysis.

The essence of the balanced scorecard approach is to examine the work and orientation of an organization from four "views". The means of conducting a full analysis is to consider how best the position and development within each of these perspectives might be measured and to develop and test suitable means of measurement. Thereafter, data relevant to each perspective is collected and analysed. In a further step, the balance between the perspectives is assessed by considering the measurements and strategy developed with the aim of adjusting activity within each perspective in order to bring the model into balance.

The "views", and the main question each promotes in relation to LBC, may be designated as:

Learning and Growth: how can LBC sustain this?

Business Process: at what must LBC excel?

Customer: how does LBC want to be viewed by customers?

Financial: how does LBC want to be viewed by those who support it financially?

There is a basic issue that must be resolved before the analysis can commence: in considering the "views", who *is* the customer of LBC? There are three layers that could, potentially, contain its customer base:

the community of entrepreneurs and managers of SMMEs

the library staff operating LBCs as part of the public library services to the community

the Metropolitan and Provincial managers of these library services.

Furthermore, LBC consists of a small central group (the "LBC team"), that works with librarians, as well as a "points of presence" (POPs) in most of the public libraries of the Western Cape. The team does not "run" the POPs; rather, it services them by working through the librarians who manage the public libraries in the communities. The librarians are, in turn, employed by the Metropolitan or Provincial library authorities. Having previously gained the approval of the library authorities for the concept of LBC, the initiative to establish a POP is "grass roots", coming from the

community through the librarian managing the library in the community, but receives final approval from the library authority. The identification of "LBC" by entrepreneurs and managers of SMMEs is thus with the POPs and with the librarians managing the POPs – not with the LBC team.

From the description of LBC team activities ("to 'set up' an increasing number of library-based information points in Cape Town as well as countryside libraries in the Western Cape, and to 'supply' them with up-to-date material as well as advice and support for their 'outreach activities' to local entrepreneurs" [Thomas 2007a]) it becomes clear that the community of entrepreneurs and managers of SMMEs is, indeed, the end point of service but that the approach to them by the LBC team is indirect: the immediate customers of the LBC team are the librarians running POPs.

This leaves the question of accountability: the "balanced scorecard" approach requires consideration of accountability – in its most basic form, "Finance" – but this can be extended to embrace the general idea of response to stakeholders. Here, the answer is more complicated: since the LBC team supplies resources for service provision it is immediately accountable to those who manage the resources in the community – in this case, the librarians. It is also accountable to the funders – in this case, the Metropolitan and Provincial authorities. The LBC team must also share accountability with those running the POPs for the quality of the service.

As for the Business Process, the LBC team must excel in its selection and supply of resources and with its backup of the POPs for fielding difficult enquiries. Unfortunately, neither aspect is in direct control of the LBC team: the lack of appropriate materials to purchase severely limits what can be selected; however quick and effective the supply process, much of the material will be of doubtful immediate value. The LBC team also requires more specialists in business information if it is to offer full support for POPs.

The reality is that in the near to medium term it is very unlikely that financial support for LBC work will increase. The challenge is to create a sustainable service by the LBC team to POPs using the existing monetary resources or, even, a reduced financial base. In such circumstances, it can be argued that the way to sustain the fourth "view" in the balanced scorecard approach – Learning and Development – is to increase the capacity of those at the POPs to use the information resources already to hand, or available at no cost through ICTs. This implies the need for Information literacy, both at the level of training library staff and at the level of training librarians to teach information literacy skills in their communities and that that training should also encompass some basic understanding of the taxonomy of business information.

The challenge for those who are part of the supply chain for information is assisting the user to find reputable sources that are relevant in content, level and language: this is a task that requires skilled *people* making use of appropriate technology. LBC, both its team and through the POPs, has a role to play – but it may need to adjust how it conducts its business.

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