

# Promoting Occupational Safety and Health in Nigeria Libraries and Information Centres: Issues and Possible Solutions

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The paper examines the promotion of awareness of occupational safety and health and actions that can be embarked to ensure it become an issue in library advocacy as it is not a commonplace in the library industry

**Methodology/Approach:** A thorough literature review of both local and foreign authors on the subject area was carried out and this paved way for analyses of the phenomenon of Occupational Safety and Health Concern as well as Contemporary Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) issues in libraries in general and Nigeria Libraries in particular.

**Findings:** The resultant phenomenon include but not limited to physical discomforts, psychosocial issues such as; stress (i.e. mental as well as emotional) and ergonomics

**Implication:** Suggested solutions to ensure promotion of OSH include developing health and safety policy, developing a voluntary Code of Practice, putting in place a sound occupational safety and Health (OSH) education and training, undertaking researches on occupational safety and health (OSH), information dissemination and monitoring and evaluation

**Originality/Value:** It was recommended that the task of promoting the occupational safety and health of the library workforce, with the overall aim of making libraries occupationally safe and healthy workplaces, calls for a comprehensive plan requiring the development of a collaborative scheme that will put into place a viable health service program.

**Keywords:** Libraries; Information Centres; Nigeria; Occupational Safety; Occupational Health; Developing Countries

**Paper type:** Viewpoint

## Introduction

Every day workers all over the world are faced with a multitude of health hazards, such as dusts, gases, noise, vibration, and extreme temperatures. Unfortunately some employers assume little responsibility for the protection of workers' health and safety. In fact, some employers do not even know that they have the moral and often legal responsibility to protect workers. As a result of the hazards and a lack of attention given to health and safety, work-related accidents and diseases are common in all parts of the world.

Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) is a discipline with a broad scope involving many specialized fields and in its broadest sense, it should aim at the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social

well-being of workers in all occupations; the prevention among workers of adverse effects on health caused by their working conditions; the protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health; the placing and maintenance of workers in an occupational environment adapted to physical and mental needs and the adaptation of work to humans (ILO, 2003).

In many organisations today, managers are faced with crucial issues of occupational health and safety than before. The reason is that the workers just like any other resources require maintenance and care in order to maximize their productivity (Casio, 1996). It is against this background that health and safety should not be viewed as a separate function or responsibility, but as a broader initiative that aims at improving productivity, profitability and competitiveness of

a firm (Pike, 2000). Moreover, there is seriousness of health and safety at workplace illustrated by governments in most countries making it a policy issue particularly in Africa. For example, in African countries health risks and safety programmes in business and workplace are not often measured. It is therefore important to ensure employees are always free from any health and safety hazards because employees who work in a good work environment are more productive.

In any workplace therefore, the safety of employees should be a priority. Whether employees work in a low- or high-risk job, the employers, especially managers should maintain a healthy environment where safety is taken seriously. Managing workplace safety is as important for the survival of any institution as it is for the employees. Libraries and information centres in Nigeria are not in any way exempted from challenges of occupational safety and health for librarians and other workers in these institutions. Although it might seem that libraries generally provide a conducive environment for reading, learning and research, there are issues of occupational safety and health that requires critical considerations. This secondary research paper provides a conceptual definition of Occupational Safety and Health, reviews OSH concerns in Nigeria, examines contemporary OSH issues in Nigerian libraries and information centres, and outlines steps towards the promotion of better OSH in Nigerian libraries and information centres.

### **Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) – Scope and Definition**

Occupational safety and health (OSH) commonly referred to as occupational health and safety (OHS) or workplace health and safety (WHS) is an area concerned with the safety, health and welfare of people engaged in work or employment (Institute for Safety and Health Management, 2014).

The Joint International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) Committee on Occupational Health in 1950 adopted a definition of occupational health. The definition was subsequently revised in 1995 and states:

Occupational health should aim at the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all

occupations; the prevention amongst workers of departures from health caused by their working conditions; the protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health; the placing and maintenance of the worker in an occupational environment adapted to his physiological and psychological capabilities and, to summarize: the adaptation of work to man and of each man to his job. (Guidotti, 2011)

The current approach of OSH is broad and multidisciplinary in nature as it touches issues related to medicine, law, technology, economics and concerns specific to various industries. Among the core principles are (Alli, 2001):

- Work should take place in a safe and healthy working environment;
- Conditions of work should be consistent with workers' well-being and human dignity;
- OHS policies must be established, and enforced;
- There is need for consultation with the social partners (that is, employers and workers) and other stakeholders;
- Prevention and protection must be the aim of OHS programmes and policies;
- Information is vital for the development and implementation of effective programmes and policies;
- Health promotion is a central element of occupational health practice;
- Occupational health services covering all workers should be established.
- Compensation, rehabilitation and curative services must be made available to workers who suffer occupational injuries, accidents and work-related diseases;
- Education and training are vital components of safe, healthy working environments. Workers and employers must be made aware of the importance and the means of establishing safe working procedures.

Kendall (2006) defines Occupational safety and health as the promotion and maintenance of the

highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations; the prevention amongst workers of departures from health caused by their working conditions; the protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health; the placing and maintenance of the worker in an occupational environment adapted to his physiological and psychological capabilities and; to summarize: the adaptation of work to man and of each man to his job. He points out that the main focus in occupational health is on three different objectives: (i) the maintenance and promotion of workers' health and working capacity; (ii) the improvement of working environment and work to become conducive to safety and health and (iii) development of work organizations and working cultures in a direction which supports health and safety at work and in doing so also promotes a positive social climate and smooth operation and may enhance productivity of the undertakings. The concept of working culture is intended in this context to mean a reflection of the essential value systems adopted by the undertaking concerned. Such a culture is reflected in practice in the managerial systems, personnel policy, principles for participation, training policies and quality management of the undertaking.

In a similar vein Occupational Health and Safety has been seen as a cross-disciplinary area concerned with protecting the safety, health and welfare of people engaged in work or employment (Archie, 2010). He states further that the goal of all occupational health and safety programs is to foster a safe work environment. As a secondary effect, it may also protect co-workers, family members, employers, customers, suppliers, nearby communities, and other members of the public who are impacted by the workplace environment. It may involve interactions among many subject areas, including occupational medicine, occupational (or industrial) hygiene, public health, safety engineering, chemistry, and health.

### **Occupational Safety and Health Concern in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, industrial accidents are on the rise as workers are compelled to work longer hours with little or no regard for their safety. At the moment we have people getting injured and maimed at the course of work and nothing is being reported by the employer because they have not had a law that have mandated them to

do so. Employers and employees do whatever they like at the expense of the generality of Nigerians and workers especially. Today Nigerian workers across all sectors of the economy recently have become more endangered and prone to accident which ranges from minor to fatal, as some have lost their lives right in the line of duty, while some have lost vital organs, therefore rendered permanently incapacitated. The issue of safety and health at workplace which once occupied a major place in the programme and plan of employers is now treated with levity (Oyesola, 2011).

Writing on 'Labour and government parley over increasing rate of Industrial Accidents', Olukoya (2009) states that facts emerging from factories across the country indicate that employers avid for profit at all cost is rapidly compounding their care free attitude to health and safety issues at work places. He pointed out that almost on a daily basis; various degrees of industrial accidents are recorded, from minor to major injuries to employees. He laments that workers were often time confronted with the issue of grossly inadequate or no compensation at all and added that employers in these sectors were unwilling to pay compensation to the affected staff. He regretted that factory inspectors and other government agencies saddled with the responsibilities of ensuring safety standard at work places had not helped matters. He pointed out that these agencies were not doing their supervisory role of ensuring that employers meet the required standard of operation and called on government through the Labour Ministry to ensure that workers were provided with decent working environment and that their basic rights were protected.

In a related issue, Arogundade (2012) speaking on duties of employers and employees pointed out that in whatever situation, employers and employees have responsibilities to ensure and maintain minimum health and safety standard in workers places. According to her "employers must provide and maintain safe and health workplace, ensure safety of every operations in the work place, must provide information on the occupational, hazards and control measures in the workplace, provide adequate training and integrate organisational safety and health into business management and work environment. She however pointed out that the government was doing its best to ensure safety at work places and that all labour laws in the country had been reviewed and awaiting enactment.

Section 17.3C of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigerian (2004) states that: the state shall divert its policy towards ensuring that the health, safety and welfare of all persons in employment is safeguarded and not endangered or abused.

In furtherance of this development, the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2006 signed into law a national policy called 'The Nigerian National Policy on Occupational Health and Safety' (Bejide, 2011). This provides the way forward for the elimination or effective control of occupational hazards and the protection of workers against work related illness, injury and disease. This policy is government approach for achieving, inter alia, a national development philosophy of building a united, self-reliant and egalitarian economy through minimizing, so far as is reasonably practicable, the causes and effects of hazards inherent in the working environment

The goals of the policy are to:

- Facilitate improvement of OHS performance by providing the framework for participative OHS protection of workers
- Ensure harmonization of rights protection and regulating various provisions for securing safety, health and welfare of workers in Nigerian workplaces

The OSH policy applies to all Nigerian workplaces including formal and informal sector workplaces. With this policy it is the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the safety, health and welfare of all workers at no cost to the worker.

### **Contemporary Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Issues in Libraries**

It is presumed nowadays that workers who are employed in libraries, offices or in administration work in 'safe' workplaces thus the need for health and safety does not arise. Occupational risks in library workplaces can be discussed under the following headings:

- a. Physical discomforts
- b. Psychosocial Issues - Stress
  - i. Mental
  - ii. Emotional
- c. Ergonomics

### **Physical discomforts**

Physical discomfort is an uncomfortable feeling of mental painfulness or distress or the state of being tense and feeling pain. Verzosa (1999) explains that librarians experience physical discomforts in the workplace some of which have potentially very serious effects on their health and/or safety. She also identified basic occupational risks in library workplaces as too much standing, too much sitting, too much arm-stretching, too much bending, and discomforts resulting from prolonged computer keyboard operation and exposure to dust and dirt, and other indoor pollutants, such as the powder used for photocopying machines, are now linked to some respiratory illnesses, like asthma, and certain types of skin allergy. She pointed out that the library environment can put workers at risk for various injuries thus workers should be aware of health and safety hazards and employers should provide solutions for limiting worker risk. This was further corroborated by New Zealand Library and Information Association (2008) when the organisation points out that promotion of awareness of occupational health and safety is mandatory in libraries so that their workforce can be protected from all likely hazards and be compensated adequately if the contrary happens.

### **Psychosocial Issues in Library Work**

There are many psychosocial issues affecting library work of great importance is stress. Stress is the body's reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment or response. It can come from any situation or thought that makes somebody feel frustrated, angry, nervous, or anxious (Morrow, 2014). The term stress is used to refer both to certain heightened mental and body states. The stress syndrome is known to be widespread among people in the helping professions such as librarians, teachers, and nurses. It is manifested in increased emotional exhaustion, chronic tiredness, accumulating negative attitudes towards clients, and loss of professional commitment. The main causes of librarian burnout have been attributed to many factors which include: insufficient autonomy in making judgment, the lack of opportunity to exercise professional skills independently, and rigidly bureaucratic work constraints.

As a group, librarians are not administration minded. They are used to having people in the higher-ups making decisions for them, telling them what to do. They are, therefore, generally, not risk-takers, nor decision-makers. It is when this situation is altered that anxieties begin. Stress can be grouped into Mental Stress and Emotional Stress. In library workplaces, mental strain is often caused by pressures at work. One factor may be attributed to work overload - too many things to do at too little time, especially for libraries run by very few people. The other extreme is doing the same thing over and over, day in and day out. For those in much higher position, such as Library Managers or Heads of Departments, Units or Section of a library, risk-taking and decision-making could cause undue mental strain. For those who are lost "in limbo" or directionless, lack of career advancement is another mental stress generator, as well as fear of retirement. Organizational climate and culture is also considered a contributory factor to the development of mental stresses among library workers.

In large organization where the library plays a key role, organizational climate is often influenced by policies and decisions on the following activities: recruiting and selecting new employees and developing the terms and conditions of employment; classifying jobs and occupations; negotiating with unions; implementing government regulations that affect the work force; and evaluating performance of workers.

Among the more common emotional stress generators are, time pressure, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, employee morale, and in general, working conditions that generate emotional stress. A few studies on 'Stress issues and management in libraries include those of Oketunji (2013), Lemu (2007), Ajala (2011), Harper (2002), Keppersmith (1992) and Poole and Denny (2001). It was discovered in these studies that Library and information professionals work in not the most ideal and have multiplicity of roles to perform. These situation make librarians experience fatigue resulting in job stress

### **Ergonomics**

Ergonomics is the science and technology of fitting the activities and environment to the abilities, dimensions, and needs of people to improve performance while enhancing comfort and health and safety (Salvendy, 2001). Village

(2008) author of *Ergonomic Design Guidelines for Libraries*, states that many tasks performed by librarians resemble those found in industrial environments. Repetitive motion tasks including reaching, pinching, bending, stooping, stretching...all of these are present in a librarian's daily work and "can be likened to combined assembly and warehousing functions with their attendance problems.

Nowadays, it is practically impossible to find an office or a shop floor without a computer workstation. The need to use computers in libraries increases as computer technology advances and software and computer packages are being developed. As a result, occupational health and safety problems are continuously increasing. This, obviously, can lead to reduced performance and dissatisfaction.

Uwaifo (2008) examines the health risks faced when using computer-based systems by library staff in Nigerian libraries using a survey method. The investigation reveals that the perceived health risk does not predict perceived ease of use of computer-based libraries. Even though a wide range of health hazards were identified in the libraries, the level of availability of ergonomic programmes to tackle them was low. Though the study found that prevailing health risks do not significantly deter people from using information systems means that it differs from other studies yet it offers new insights in the area of IT use by librarians in Nigerian universities.

In a related study on 'ICT Facilities: ergonomic effects on academic library staff Adeyemi (2010) confirm that respondents from both institutions she studied are faced with a variety of ergonomic problems that have led to tension, stress, headaches, and other pain. She pointed out that some issues that led to this include sitting all day, lifting and carrying and improper positioning of computers. She however noted some preventive measures put in place of which are provision of trolleys and elevators, compulsory breaks, and computer monitor protectors. She concluded that good ergonomic assessment and design can ensure library efficiency and increased productivity while Nigerian library schools should integrate ergonomic issues into their curriculum. The formal teaching of this concept she opined would help sensitize library practitioners to emerging global standards.

### **Steps towards Promotion of OSH in Nigerian Libraries and Information Centres**

Making working conditions healthy and safe is in the interest of workers, employers and governments, as well as the public at large. Although it seems simple and obvious, this idea has not yet gained meaningful universal recognition. Hundreds of millions of people throughout the world are employed today in conditions that breed ill health and/or are unsafe

Neglect of OSH in Nigerian libraries therefore, could have a number of effects on librarians: These include:

- absenteeism or tardiness
- accidents resulting in injuries and/or deaths
- chronic illnesses
- low employee morale
- poor performance at work
- increased costs due to workdays lost
- hidden costs due to manpower failure

The lack of OSH awareness in Nigerian library workplaces can also make monitoring and evaluation of absences due to occupational diseases difficult. The result is that the library occupation will continue to be one of those neglected occupations in so far as OSH is concerned.

Given the negative impact of the absence of OSH provision in library workplaces and its consequent effect on the delivery of better library services, library management need to look into the prevention of occupational risks and promote measures that will ensure the safety and health of its library work force.

The task of promoting the occupational safety and health of the library workforce, with the overall aim of making libraries occupationally safe and healthy workplaces, calls for a comprehensive plan requiring the development of a collaborative scheme that will put into place a viable health service program for OSH. This can be achieved the under listed headings:

- a. Developing Health and Safety Policy
- b. Developing a Voluntary Code of Practice
- c. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Education and Training
- d. Undertaking Researches on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)
- e. Information Dissemination
- f. Monitoring and Evaluation

### **Developing Health and Safety Policy**

Libraries in Nigeria need to start attaching great importance to safeguarding the health and safety of its employees, visitors and anyone else who might be affected by their undertakings and therefore, should put in place policies that aim for best practices within the health and safety field. Each library should see that compliance with the requirements of the 'The Nigerian National Policy on Occupational Health and Safety' and all other relevant statutory provisions, as well International Standards, etc., is seen as the minimum acceptable health and safety performance and should reflect in such policy. Libraries should view their staff as the most important asset and therefore should seek not only to prevent injury and ill health, but also to positively promote good health with the aim to eliminate work-related accidents and ill health by establishing and maintaining safe working practices, by providing safe work environments and equipment, and by providing training and information. Library management needs to understand that health and safety is a fundamental management responsibility of equal importance to other management functions thus they should see that health and safety is managed to the same high standards that the Library seeks to achieve in other areas. All libraries must ensure that everything reasonably practicable to prevent injury is done and that action is taken to discover the cause of problems and implement preventative measures while achieving high standards of health and safety at work for all staff irrespective of grade. Furthermore, library management should realised that the successful implementation of the Health & Safety Policy requires the co-operation and commitment of all Library staff thus all employees should be expected to act responsibly and do all they can to prevent injury to themselves, their colleagues and members of the public.

### **Developing a Voluntary Code of Practice**

It is evident that there is no general guideline on the provision of Occupational Safety and Health in Nigerian libraries, the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) which is a regulatory body set up by the government in 1995 and the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) may need to develop and implement a Voluntary Code of Practice for Occupational Health and Safety in Library workplace. The code could be made readily available to library

workers and valuable in improving expectations of workers and assist in raising awareness of rights and employer health and safety obligations at the work place.

### **Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Education and Training**

The law requires employers to provide, so far as is reasonably practicable, a safe working environment for their employees. This includes providing such information, instruction, training and supervision to employees as are necessary to enable them to work safely. The effective communication of health and safety information is central to reducing the risk of injury and illness in the workplace. All employees require information, advice, assistance and training to do their work; fully understand the health and safety risks that are part of that work; and help keep their work environment safe.

On a nationwide scale therefore, the country apex library - National Library should endeavor to develop a concept proposal for consideration of the Congress of the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) to conduct series of initial meetings to forge institutional collaboration in the promotion of OSH program in library workplaces. Libraries and special working groups may be tapped to sponsor meetings or symposia to increase public awareness on OSH concerns. From the country level, these institutional meetings may be expanded to involve libraries in each state of the country with each NLA State Chapter spearheading the program.

The result of the survey may help in the development of a safety plan for the library or libraries affected by the survey. The Plan should contain a general OSH policy statement and includes the improvement of person/job procedures, suggestions to improve the organizational structure and culture, statement of health-related policies, and the development of a staff support system.

### **Undertaking Researches on Occupational Safety and Health**

In the area of research, efforts can be directed at sponsoring researches on occupational risks in libraries, or what general working conditions nurture a healthy workplace for librarians. Research collaborations may be further expanded to include specific types of libraries and the types of occupational hazards common to them.

### **Information Dissemination**

The promotion, advocacy and dissemination of information on occupational safety and health would involve a public information campaign that may take many forms: press releases, public forums or dialogues with those involved in OSH, publication of articles on OSH programs in library workplaces, magazine or newspaper advertisements, brochures, newsletters, handouts, and flyers generating awareness on the need to provide OSH in workplaces. The Nigerian Library Association/National Library of Nigeria may be tapped as clearinghouse or centers of local information for other libraries.

Internet access on OSH information among libraries is one way of reaching out and getting to know more. Linkages with experts and specialists in OSH can be organized through the NLA Forum

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

One last area of collaboration that will require refinement and more detailed attention in time is the area of monitoring and evaluation. The monitoring system should also include establishing personnel policies and standards for libraries that will serve as basis or criteria for evaluating working conditions, particularly in the following areas: guidelines on sickness, absence, and early retirement; policy on smoking control; provisions on sexual harassment, violence at work, and equal opportunities. The LRCN should be made responsible for the drafting of appropriate policy/guidelines

### **Conclusion**

The task of promoting the occupational safety and health of the library workforce, with the overall aim of making libraries occupationally safe and healthy workplaces, calls for a comprehensive plan requiring the development of a collaborative scheme that will put into place a viable health service program for OSH.

First, certain assessment areas need to be covered before a determination can be made as to the existence or potential presence of occupational risks or hazards. These areas may include:

- organizational structure and culture
- nature of work
- role of personnel department
- personnel selection procedures
- personnel working conditions
- sickness/absence procedures

- health-related personnel policies

Second, librarians' professional bodies, unions, lawmakers and government, must do more to raise awareness on the need for health and safety at work. The Nigerian Library Association must do more to come up with a framework to ensure legislation and implementation that ensures every employer has a health and safety policy in place to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. Poor pay is less bad than an unsafe working condition.

The establishment of a task force can go a long way to ensure OSH compliance. The task force should compose of experts in the field of occupational safety and health, such as an occupational health doctor, a hygienist, an industrial psychologist, an ergonomist, a safety engineer, and a toxicologist, should be created to conduct an assessment of the above-mentioned areas. The principal task is to determine the OSH needs and requirements of the library workforce and to evaluate their workplace conditions in terms of the risks the workforce faces while working in such conditions. This can be the responsibility of the National Library Association.

It is hoped that these efforts will serve as a springboard of more extensive discussions and the beginning of closer collaboration among libraries and institutions to draw attention to occupations that are not necessarily in high-risk brackets, but all the same, requiring similar if not the same standards of safety and health as envisioned by the Joint Committee of ILO and WHO for all workers in all occupations.

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