

Knowledge and Skills for Providing Reference Services in Archives Institutions

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Abstract

The study aimed to identify the knowledge and skills required for the effective provision of reference services among archivists in archival institutions, especially at the President's Office-Department of Records and Archives Management (PO-RAMD) in Tanzania. The study employed a descriptive research design, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect and analyse data from 43 respondents selected via convenience sampling. Questionnaires, interviews, and documentary reviews were used to collect data. The findings revealed that the majority of PO-RAMD archivists had the knowledge and skills to provide reference services. These include communication skills, collection management, research knowledge, user knowledge, and managerial skills. However, not all archivists had the required knowledge and skills for effective reference. A lack of all the required reference knowledge and skills among a few archivists led to the failure to meet users' needs. The study recommended that the PO-RAMD should provide training on reference services, including knowledge and skills for archivists with inadequate reference knowledge, and emphasise the sharing of reference knowledge and skills among PO-RAMD archivists and others outside the PO-RAMD to advance their knowledge and skills for effective reference service provision within the PO-RAMD.

Keywords: *Reference Services, Knowledge, Skills, Archivists, Archive Institutions.*

1.0 Introduction

Archival reference services are services provided by archive repositories to enable users to access the needed information and other services provided (Oestreicher, 2020). Among the reference services provided by archive repositories are physically assisting users in accessing archives, answering their questions and responding to e-mails and letters from both users and prospective users (Tsvuura & Mutsagondo, 2015). As noted by Millar (2017), archivists are a vital bridge between the services provided by archival institutions and users. Archivists' approachability to users when providing reference services can be motivating or discouraging, deterring users from utilising archival institutions' services. In that regard, archivists need to be knowledgeable and aware theoretically or practically of issues related to archival reference and reference services in archival institutions (Murray, 2017). These include user knowledge, repository holdings, information access, collection management, institutional knowledge and records management (Duff, Yakel & Tibbo, 2013).

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The Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) also recognises the importance of knowledge and skills in providing reference services, stating that it is challenging to meet users' needs if archivists lack adequate knowledge and skills in this area. ACA proposed that archivists consider reference knowledge and skills when providing effective reference services in archival repositories. These are: to identify users' information needs, make reasonable responses to users' requests, observe procedures and policies designed to serve users' information needs, and create and maintain periodic reviews for archivists' self-assessment to provide better reference services to users (ACA, 2012). Through a Graduate Programme in Archival Studies, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) emphasised that archivists should consider various issues when providing reference services. These include knowledge of archival materials and functions, to determine types of user groups together with their needs and rights (SAA, 2023).

The need for knowledgeable, skilled archivists for effective reference services in records and archives repositories has also been observed in Tanzania. The government has introduced various academic programmes in archival management and reference services across schools, institutions, colleges, and universities. For example, Tanzania Public Services College (TPSC), the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), School of Library Archives and Documentation Studies (SLADS), and Arusha Institute of Accountancy (AIA) to prepare and produce skilled, knowledgeable and qualified activists who can serve users to meet their needs in archival repositories through adequate provision of reference services (Nengomasha, 2013). Despite this effort by the Tanzanian government, the study by Yombo and Muneja (2025) revealed that reference services provided in public institutions, including PO-RAMD, were ineffective, inefficient, and unsatisfactory for many users who visited the archive repositories. Users complained of receiving poor services, such as reference services entwined with issues such as wrong information supplied by the archivists and limited time to access services provided (Kilasi, Maseko, & Abankwah, 2011). This scenario undermines adequate provision of reference services and public trust in the archive repositories and the reference services they provide. Hence, the researchers were prompted to conduct a study on how knowledge and skills affect the provision of reference services in archive repositories.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Review

Reference service is the essential archival service that links the archive with its users (Oliver, Jamieson & Daniel, 2017). As stated in The International Council on Archives' Code of Ethics, "Archivists should promote the widest possible access to archival material and provide an impartial service to all users. Also, archivists are responsible for assisting users in accessing and using records, as well as providing other reference services, to efficiently accomplish their missions and projects, such as research activities (Kilasi, Maseko & Abankwah, 2011). To provide better reference services to users, Hensley, Murphy, and Swain (2014) argued that archivists should be knowledgeable about their users, how to serve them, and the collections owned by archival institutions. This brings good relationships among reference archivists, users, sources and services offered (Senturk, 2021).

Lutaaya (2015) conducted a study investigating corporate records and Archives Reference Services and found that archivists needed knowledge of records management, records creators, and records formats, as well as an understanding of users' information needs. The study recommended that reference archivists need brilliant reference negotiation and communication skills. Unfortunately, they failed to explain how reference archivists acquired recommended knowledge. In another study, Miles (2014) found that reference archivists should understand users' needs and be able to synthesise and analyse.

A study by Oestreicher (2020) identified that the archivists needed knowledge and skills for providing reference services, which include research skills, communication skills, leadership skills, computer, collection knowledge, subject expertise, technical skills, as well as an overview of laws, regulations, policies, guidelines and standards for providing reference services to users. Contrary to Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013), Hensley, Murphy and Swain (2014), and Oestreicher (2020) concurred that continuous training, imparted through external or in-house classes, was needed to maintain the required knowledge and skills among archivists.

Anthony (2006) investigated the "knowledge and skills experienced by archivists. The study found that the efficient location of materials and the provision of other reference services to users among expert archivists always rely on their skills and knowledge. Anthony concluded that, to provide effective and efficient reference services to users, archivists require a sufficient understanding of the subject content of collections and the creators of records. Moreover, reference archivists must have sufficient knowledge of the institution, including its history, vision, goals, the roles of each staff member, and the institution's departments and their interrelated functions. In this study, Antony (2006) did not recognise the need to know users, who are, in fact, the key or focus of reference services offered by archival institutions.

Duff, Yakel, and Tibbo (2013) focused on the reference knowledge that archivists should possess to provide reference services. The study aimed to determine the reference knowledge that archivists must possess to deliver reference services to users. Their study describes three types of reference knowledge archivists should have. Each type of reference knowledge has its subtypes. These are interaction knowledge, collection knowledge and research knowledge. According to them, research knowledge is the type of knowledge that requires the archivist to have basic knowledge of collections, and "general knowledge of holdings" is the essential core of the reference archivist, comprising two types of knowledge: domain knowledge and research methodologies. Reference archivists apply reference knowledge proposed by Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013) to the establishment and provision of archive services such as outreach, research consultancy, reader advisory, training, information access, and dissemination to users (Pinto *et al.*, 2017). However, the study by Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013) did not explain whether all knowledge is required by archivists for the provision of reference services. Also, their study kept quiet on how this knowledge is acquired and how it can be shared among archivists.

From the literature above, the provision of reference services cannot be successful if archivists lack knowledge and skills in archive collections, policies and procedures, user services, and research. Not only that, but reference archivists must also be more

knowledgeable and skilled than users about archival collections, policies and procedures, and other issues related to archival and reference services.

2.2 Theoretical Framework of the Study.

This study was guided by the Archival Reference Knowledge (ARK) Model developed by Wendy Duff, Elizabeth Yakel, and Helen Tibbo in 2013, which states that any reference archivist should possess three types of knowledge to ensure the efficient provision of reference services to patrons. These are research knowledge, interaction knowledge, and collective knowledge; each type has its own subtypes. Figure 2.1 depicts the ARK Model:



Figure 1: Archival Reference Knowledge (ARK) Model

Source: Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013)

According to Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013), research knowledge is the type of knowledge that requires the archivist to have basic knowledge of the collection and general knowledge of holding. It consists of three types of knowledge: domain knowledge, research methodologies, and art-factual literacy. According to Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013), artificial literacy includes understanding how to read texts as objects, how to interpret various documentary forms, and how to make connections among multiple genres and genre systems extant in primary source collections. Domain knowledge refers to an understanding of the subject being researched. Research methodologies expertise enables reference archivists to assist users in identifying search tactics and in decoding and making meaning from archival documents.

Collection knowledge includes holdings and the contextual information about them. As previously noted, both users and archivists indicated that knowledge of collections held in other repositories is also essential. Knowledge of the collection is gained through working with it, reviewing finding aids, and accessing materials at the reference desk. Collection knowledge helps the reference archivist to identify materials to answer reference questions

or support research. Users also hold that reference archivists should have contextual knowledge of the collection, such as its provenance (Duff, Yakel and Tibbo, 2013).

Interaction knowledge is another type of knowledge proposed by Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013). This type of knowledge is considered archival intelligence. It is knowledge related to information retrieval, including databases, search techniques, the structure of finding aids, and other archival representations that comprise access systems. Also, it involves knowledge related to communication, including listening skills and techniques for building rapport, as well as understanding information-seeking behaviour. Reference archivists require knowledge of user interactions to understand users' needs and identify relevant materials to meet them. There are three dimensions to this: Knowledge of archival institutions and practices, knowledge of archival access systems, and knowledge of people. These categories, in turn, consist of more specific knowledge. Institutional knowledge includes the archives' rules and procedures that govern access, as well as reference service policies.

The ARK Model was applicable in the present study. This was because the model explains issues associated with archival reference services and the knowledge required by reference archivists when planning and providing reference services to users. These are essential areas of concentration for this study. On the other side of the coin, Sinn (2015) criticised the ARK Model for failing to recognise the role of reference knowledge sharing, especially in the digital era, where knowledge sharing is vital.

3.0 Research Methodology.

The study was conducted at the President's Office-Records and Archives Management Department (PO-RAMD) in Dodoma City, Tanzania, selected due to the results of the survey conducted by Kilasi, Maseko and Abankwah (2011), which observed that the provision of reference services at PO-RAMD was ineffective and inefficient based on the perspective of users. In that regard, the researcher selected these areas to uncover archivists' views on the knowledge and skills needed for reference provision, how reference knowledge and abilities affect the provision of reference services, and how reference knowledge and skills are acquired and shared among archivists at the PO-RAMD. The study employed a descriptive research design because it helps to gain a deeper understanding and expand existing knowledge of the studied phenomena (Creswell, 2014). The study population was archivists. Census approach and convenience sampling techniques were used to select and obtain respondents, whereby the total sample size of the survey was forty-three (43) respondents. Among them, thirty-eight (38) respondents were operational archivists, while five (5) were managerial staff. Primary data were collected through questionnaires and interviews, while secondary data were collected through a documentary review. Quantitative data were collected from operational archivists, and qualitative data were collected from managerial staff. The study's data validity and reliability were controlled through pre-testing of the instruments. A descriptive analysis was conducted on quantitative data, using Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 to analyse and present the data. On the other hand, the content analysis approach was employed to analyse and present qualitative data.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Knowledge and Skills Required by Archivists for Provision of Reference Services at the PO-RAMD.

The study aimed to determine the reference knowledge and skills required of archivists to provide reference services at the PO-RAMD. The researcher began by asking respondents whether they had the knowledge and skills required to provide reference services. All 43 (100%) respondents agreed that they have sufficient knowledge and skills to provide effective reference services. From the interview, the respondents went further, with one stating that all archivists must have sufficient archival reference knowledge and skills to provide adequate reference services, unless it is difficult for archivists to perform their responsibilities effectively in archival institutions.

During the interview, one of the interviewees said:

You know that providing reference services... is an intellectual job, but not a physical job that requires a lot of energy, such as farming and mining; any intellectual job requires technical knowledge and skills, unless you will be wasting your time and nothing can be achieved (Interview with R5, 13th March 2024).

Also, the researcher asked probing questions about why archivists must have reference knowledge and skills to provide adequate reference services in archival institutions. As was revealed in an interview, in which one of the interviewees said:

Having the required knowledge and skills can make it easier to determine your users' information needs, communicate with them, direct them to the sources of that information, market your archives, and improve mutual trust between your users and their institution (Interview with R1, 12th March 2024).

Based on the findings, any archivist was required to have adequate reference knowledge and skills to provide effective and efficient reference services. Without the necessary reference knowledge and skills, it may be challenging to provide the desired reference services to users.

Moreover, at the PO-RAMD, respondents were asked to indicate reference knowledge and skills that they had for the effective and efficient provision of archival reference services at their workplaces. Table 4.1 summarises the extent to which archivists agreed on the reference knowledge and skills they had for effective and efficient provision of reference services.

Table 4.1: Reference Knowledge and Skills that Archivists at the PO-RAMD

Archival Reference knowledge and skills	The extent to which archivists agreed on the reference knowledge and skills they had				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Archival Collection Management	28 (73.7%)	10 (26.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Research skills	24 (63.2%)	14 (36.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Records management knowledge	26 (68.4%)	12 (31.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Negotiation skills	21 (55.3%)	15 (39.5%)	2 (5.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Institutional knowledge	31 (81.6%)	5 (13.2%)	2 (5.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Regulatory frameworks knowledge.	33 (86.8%)	5 (13.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Communication skills	32 (84.2%)	6 (15.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Leadership knowledge	21 (55.3%)	15 (39.5%)	2 (5.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
User knowledge	28 (73.7%)	10 (26.3%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Analytical skills	18 (47.4%)	14 (36.8%)	6 (15.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Technical skills	15 (39.5%)	18 (47.4%)	5 (13.2%)	1 (14.3%)	0 (0%)
Customer care knowledge	15 (78.9%)	4 (21.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Source: Field Data (2024)

Table 4.1 shows that the majority of respondents strongly agreed that they had knowledge of records management, leadership skills, institutional knowledge, regulatory frameworks, customer care, research skills, communication skills, user knowledge, and collection management. None of the PO-RAMD archivists reported lacking the required reference knowledge and skills.

During interviews with interviewees, the researcher discovered additional reference knowledge and skills that had not been identified in previous studies, including the study by Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013), which examined the knowledge and skills needed for

reference service delivery. These were reference interviews, knowledge, and managerial skills. Quotations that follow are what were said by interviewees on this matter:

For adequate provision of reference services through reference interviews, the archivist must have the knowledge and skills to conduct and monitor interviews with users. To know how to conduct reference interviews, create an environment which encourages users to explain their needs to archivists (Interview with R4, 13th March 2024)

Reference services are much affected by managerial issues. In that case, I can see that archivists must be familiar with managerial skills, such as leadership, especially for archivists in top positions at archival institutions (Interview with R1, 12th March 2024).

Based on reference knowledge and skills required for reference services, probing questions were asked of interviewees to determine whether the archivists possessed all the reference knowledge and abilities identified by respondents. The views and arguments provided by R1, R2, R3, and R5 differed from those of R4. R1, R2, R3, and R5 argued that all archivists were required to possess all the identified reference knowledge and skills, since they affect one another.

R4 opposed others' arguments, arguing that it was not necessarily the role of archivists to possess all the identified reference knowledge and skills. On this, R4 said:

"It is not necessary to have all the knowledge and skills mentioned, but archivists must have essential basic knowledge and skills that can help him/her to perform their daily operations, such as customer care, communication skills, searching skills, collection knowledge, and regulatory compliance knowledge (Interview with R4, 12th March 2024).

In conclusion, reference knowledge and skills are essential, and every archivist must possess them to provide effective reference services. Archivists were required to strive to acquire all reference knowledge and abilities identified by all respondents and to share them with others to improve the provision of reference services within archival institutions.

4.2 Ways Used by PO-RAMD Archivists for Acquiring and Sharing Reference Knowledge.

The study aimed to examine how archivists acquire and share knowledge and skills in reference services with others. Table 4.2 summarises the responses:

Table 4.2: Ways of Acquiring and Sharing Reference Knowledge and Skills among Archivists

Ways	Acquiring		Sharing	
	F	%	F	%
Training	38	100	37	97.4
Outreach Programs	23	60.5	24	63.2
Research	15	39.5	13	34.2
Seminars	18	50	20	52.6
Events	16	42.1	20	52.6
Orientations	27	71.1	28	73.7
Study tours	7	19.4	31	81.6

Source: Field Data (2024)

NB: F=Frequency and %=Percentage.

In Table 4.2, the results showed that training, orientation, outreach programmes, and seminars were the most common ways used by the PO-RAMD archivists to acquire new knowledge and share archival reference knowledge and skills with others. It was also observed that PORAMD archivists did not make extensive use of research and events to acquire and share reference knowledge and skills with others. That study tours and seminars were not essential for developing knowledge, but for sharing reference knowledge and skills among PO-RAMD and other archivists working outside the PO-RAMD.

Similarly, interviewed respondents did not hesitate to explain how acquiring and sharing knowledge and skills in reference services catalyse the growth of archivists and professionals. As quoted from R4:

It is necessary to acquire and share reference knowledge and skills among archivists. Because it improves the quality of archivists' reference services, keeps staff up to date, and fosters closeness among professionals in the archive management industry (Interview with R4, 13th March 2024).

Also, interviewees mentioned training, orientations, massive awareness programmes, seminars, and exhibitions as among the many ways used by PO-RAMD to acquire and share reference knowledge and skills with others, as reported by one of the interviewees:

PO-RAMD has undertaken various initiatives to ensure that our archivists acquire diverse knowledge and skills to enhance the operations and services provided by our institution. These include taking archivists to attend either formal short or long courses on archives management practice, conducting orientation programs for new staff, exhibitions, events, seminars, and massive awareness programs that take place through outreach programs and mass media like Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation (TBC) Programs (Interview with R1, 12th March 2024).

Apart from the ways for acquiring and sharing reference knowledge among archivists identified at the PO-RAMD, attending conferences, workshops, and study tours organised by international archival professional associations created room for archivists from PO-RAMD and other areas around the world to acquire and share knowledge and skills relating

to how to serve archival users including attaining efficient reference service provision in archival institutions around the world, as quoted below:

We are members of International Archival Professional Associations such as ESABRICA. So, some of our staff are selected to attend international conferences and workshops organised by professional boards. In the meetings and workshops, they meet with different experts and professionals, where they learn a lot, acquire new knowledge, and share the knowledge and skills they have with others (Interview with R3, 12th March 2024).

Then the same respondent added:

After workshops and conferences, they get a tour of study in different archives and institutions to see how archive management activities, such as reference services, archival access, and use, are conducted (Interview with R2, 12th March 2024).

Generally, the results showed that PO-RAMD archivists acquired new knowledge and shared reference services knowledge and skills through orientation, training, seminars, conferences, workshops, and study tours. For efficient reference services, PO-RAMD management should emphasise the acquisition and sharing of reference knowledge among archivists by creating a better environment, including funding and providing equal opportunities for all archivists to attend conferences, workshops, training, and seminars.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

The provision of reference services is acknowledged as critical to enhancing the utilisation of services designed and provided by archive repositories. (Mathankar, 2020). Apart from finding aids, regulatory frameworks, ICTs, and a conducive environment, reference knowledge and skills among archivists affect the adequate provision of reference knowledge in archive repositories, either positively or negatively (Millar, 2017). In that regard, they aimed to determine the reference knowledge and skills needed and how they affect the adequate provision of reference services among archivists at the PO-RAMD. The findings revealed that 43 (100%) respondents agreed that they knew, and all archivists must have knowledge and skills for effective reference services in archive repositories, including at the PO-RAMD. Similarly, Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013) emphasised that any archivist was required to possess reference knowledge, as it was essential for understanding users' needs and identifying relevant materials to meet them. Unlike Duff, Yakel and Tibbo (2013) and Oestreicher (2020), the study established that without adequate reference knowledge and skills among archivists, the provision of desired reference services to users could face challenges.

Senturk (2021) argued that "archival reference service is still very much an unanticipated activity that depends heavily on the knowledge and skill of the reference staff. The knowledge and skills that PO-RAMD archivists strongly agreed were necessary for adequate reference services in archive repositories included records management, leadership, institutional knowledge, regulatory frameworks, customer care, research, communication, user knowledge, and collection management. However, not all PO-RAMD

archivists possessed all the knowledge and skills mentioned and required for effective reference services. Contrary to other studies strived to determine the knowledge and skills needed for adequate reference services provision such as Senturk (2021) and Oestreicher (2020), the study observed that an archivist does not need to have all the knowledge and skills mentioned but should have necessary basic knowledge and skills that could help in performing daily operations such as customer care, communication skills, leadership skills, searching skills, collection knowledge, and regulatory compliance knowledge.

The study also aligns with Sinn (2015), who criticised the ARK Model by Duff, Yakel, and Tibbo (2013) for not recognising the role of reference knowledge sharing, especially in this digital era, where knowledge sharing is crucial. Acquiring and sharing reference knowledge and skills among archivists worldwide fosters improvement in reference services in archival repositories. The results showed that training, orientation, outreach programmes, and seminars were the most common ways used by the PO-RAMD archivists to acquire new knowledge and share reference knowledge and skills with other internal or external archivists. The study unexpectedly found that PORAMD archivists did not use research or events to acquire and share reference knowledge and skills with others. In contrast, study tours and seminars were not essential for acquiring knowledge and skills, but rather served as ways to share reference knowledge and skills among PO-RAMD archivists and other archivists working outside the PO-RAMD. These results differ from those of Preston (2020), Lutaaya (2015), Duff, Yakel, and Tibbo (2013), Oestreicher (2020), and Senturk (2021). Unlike this study, they did not recognise the issue of acquiring and sharing reference knowledge skills among archivists. Hence, it is paramount to encourage the acquisition and sharing of knowledge and skills among archivists to improve the provision of reference services at the PO-RAMD and other archival repositories worldwide.

However, based on the study and the reviewed literature, it was evident that the lack of required knowledge and skills among archivists at PO-RAMD was not only a factor in the inadequate provision of reference services. Millar (2017) revealed that outdated finding aids, regulatory frameworks, technological obsolescence, and a lack of a conducive environment hinder effective and efficient provision of reference services in many archival institutions around the World. Preston (2020) identified a lack of time and poor time management among archivists in providing such services, while Oliver, Jamieson and Daniel (2017) and Dreyer and Nofziger (2021) revealed logistical barriers, linguistic barriers, technological barriers, institutional barriers, policies and legislation barriers and cultural barriers as the most significant factors hindering adequate reference services provision in archival institutions.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the majority of PO-RAMD archivists possessed the knowledge and skills needed for providing reference services. Adequate reference knowledge and skills help PO-RAMD archivists understand users' needs and identify relevant materials to meet them. However, not all PO-RAMD archivists had all the required knowledge and skills for effective reference services. This may lead to difficulties among archivists in providing effective reference services to users. The lack of required knowledge and skills among archivists

makes it challenging to determine users' needs and user dissatisfaction with services. It undermines public trust in archive repositories and their services. In that regard, the provision of effective reference services and the development of adequate reference knowledge and skills among archivists are two sides of the coin. Adequate reference services require knowledgeable, skilled archivists to satisfy customers. To expand, therefore, for efficient provision of reference services, the PO-RAMD management should invest in ensuring that archivists acquire and share new knowledge and skills.

7.0 Recommendations.

The study recommends that the PO-RAMD provide frequent training for archivists with inadequate reference knowledge and skills in reference services. Training can be provided through short courses, organising seminars and events, conducting tours to other archives, and sponsoring some archivists to attend long archive management courses offered by domestic and international schools, colleges, institutes, and universities. Through training, archivists will gain skills and knowledge about users' nature and needs, tools that facilitate service delivery, regulatory frameworks, the role of technological change in reference services, and increased creativity in providing reference services, thereby improving reference provision at the PO-RAMD. Additionally, PO-RAMD management should encourage senior archivists to share their long-standing experience in reference knowledge, skills, and challenges with junior archivists and other archivists outside PO-RAMD to reduce costs for training young archivists by reducing the need for them to attend conferences, workshops, training, and seminars, which are costly for the organisation.

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