



Business activities and information needs of SMEs in northern Uganda

Prerequisites for an information system

Business
activities of
SMEs

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Abstract

Purpose – This article is a result of part of a doctoral study in the University of South Africa on the topic business information systems (BIS) design for Uganda's economic development: the case of small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in northern Uganda conducted between 2004 and 2007. The study was conducted to establish the characteristics of the SMEs, business activities, business information needs and recommend the important business information needs required for BIS for poor country or region. It was carried out on the assumption that businesses in northern Uganda are lagging behind because of lack of a BIS that could facilitate efficient and effective business information access. This article aims to discuss this subject.

Design/methodology/approach – The descriptive survey research design was used to collect the required data using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interview guide. A sample size of 251 SMEs, 75 information providers and 25 business policy makers in northern Uganda were used. Quantitative data obtained were analysed using Epi Info and SPSS while the qualitative data by use of content analysis technique.

Findings – The findings reveal that SMEs in northern Uganda have varying background and are engaged in diverse/varied business activities with varying business information needs that require a multifaceted approach in the provision of business information. The study recommends that a BIS unique to the SMEs in northern Uganda be designed to provide among others business legal information, business technical information, business economic information, business contacts information and business management skills information.

Originality/value – No research has been carried out on the business information activities and needs of SMEs in northern Uganda with a view to design BIS. The findings of the study will help to shape the planning and implementation of strategic interventions to transform northern Uganda using information as a catalyst for development.

Keywords Information services, Information systems, Uganda

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

According to Ikoja-Odongo (2002, p. 5) and Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (1999), information is a major resource that businesses require and the success or failure of business activities depends on how information is handled and utilised. It is therefore imperative that business information – as an ingredient for business transactions and prospects – be, effectively, provided to the SMEs. This paper reports on the study carried out as part of the doctoral studies at University of South Africa, Pretoria on business activities and information needs of SMEs in northern Uganda. The understanding of the business activities and information needs do constitute an important step in the design of business information systems (BIS). It is on that basis that these aspects were considered in this study.

The development of the small and medium business enterprises (SMEs) has long been regarded as crucial for the achievement of broader development objectives, including poverty alleviation, economic development and the promotion of more democratic and pluralist societies (Henriques, n.d.). SMEs have, variously, been defined but the most commonly used criterion is the number of employees in the enterprise (Kayanula and Quartey, 2000). The Government of Uganda classifies SMEs as business firms employing 5-50 people (small scale) and 51-500 people (medium scale) (Kasekende and Opondo, 2003; Schiffer and Weder, 2001, p. 13; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Whatever definition it takes, SMEs are important to socio-economic transformation and it is estimated that SMEs employ 22 per cent of the adult population in developing countries (Daniels and Ngwira, 1993; Daniels and Fisseha, 1992; Fisseha and McPherson, 1991; Robson and Gallagher, 1993).

SMEs as information user groups

Apart from the number of employees, there are other key factors that characterise the SMEs and these are related to management and the nature of operations. The SMEs may be managed by their owners who are often assisted by family members. In this regard, the decision-making system is quite flexible, informal and dependent on the personal drive of one or more of the executives. By their very nature of operation, the SMEs have a narrow range of products/services and a relatively simple and unsophisticated management structure with a narrow tolerance range of risk. Individual SMEs experience difficulties in achieving economies of scale in the purchase of inputs and are often unable to take advantage of market opportunities that require large production quantities, homogenous standards and regular supply. The SMEs are of different types and sizes, according to Neelamegham (1992, p. 17). The SMEs can be differentiated based on the type of input, market orientation, geographical orientation and technology utilisation. Whatever differences exist in their sizes and types, the SMEs play a key role in the economic growth of – and equitable development in – developing countries.

The role of the SMEs in Uganda's economic development

The value of the small business sector is recognised in economies, worldwide – irrespective of the economic developmental stage. The SMEs' contributions to growth, job creation and social progress are highly valued and small business is regarded as an essential element in a successful formula for achieving economic growth (Vosloo, 1994; Rupert, 1994; World Bank, 1991; Soontiens, 2002). Governments need to focus on

building a strong base of small firms as it is from this strong base that growth will emerge. The development of small industries is the *sine qua non* of industrialisation and, therefore, of sustainable development in a modern society (Soontiëns, 2002). Newly industrialising countries are encouraging the growth of small enterprises because they are the custodians of job creation and growth (Sunny and Lewanika, 1997).

Most developing countries – especially in sub-Saharan Africa – are shifting from command to market based economies. This shift, generally, results in the implementation of policies that support the development of small businesses and entrepreneurship which – in turn – supports economic development (DeAssis, 2005). In addition, the role of the SMEs in developing economies is viewed as increasingly important due to their job-creation capacity. Generally, the contribution of the SMEs to the generation of employment; the reduction of poverty; and the wider distribution of wealth and opportunities, represents a major window of opportunity for most developing countries' economic development. How does this translate into development in the Uganda's situation? What is the nature of Uganda's economy that requires SMEs involvement?

Uganda's economic situation with respect to northern Uganda. Uganda's economy has great potential. Endowed with significant natural resources, including ample fertile land, regular rainfall, and mineral deposits, it appeared poised for rapid economic growth and development at independence. However, chronic political instability and erratic economic management produced a record of persistent economic decline that left Uganda among the world's poorest and least-developed countries (United States, Bureau of African Affairs, 2007). However, according to Newafrica.com (1999), Uganda has settled down, politically, and is on the path to economic recovery. The government of Uganda has been implementing an ambitious and successful programme of macro-economic adjustment and structural reform since 1987 – with strong support from multilateral and bilateral creditors and donors. The government's continued implementation of appropriate fiscal and monetary policies – and its programme of substantial economic liberalisation – has maintained high growth, low inflation, a steadily improving balance of payments and an increasingly vibrant and diversified private sector (Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2002). During the 2003/2004 financial year, Uganda's economy registered a strong growth of 6 per cent compared to a growth rate of 5.2 per cent in 2002/03 (World Fact Book, 2004). Solid growth in 2003 reflected an upturn in Uganda's export markets. According to Suruma (2007), real GDP growth in financial year 2006/07 is estimated at 6.5 per cent, up from 5.1 per cent last financial year (2005/2006). Although this is lower than the targeted rate of growth of 7 per cent, it still represents a remarkable performance of our economy, and is higher than the average growth achieved by the non-oil producing countries in Africa, estimated at 5.2 per cent in 2006 (Suruma, 2007).

Although the government's initiative to fight poverty through its Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) and Poverty Action Plan (PAP) is yielding results, there is still evidence of poverty despite the GDP growth – as indicated above. The international poverty line is \$1 per day and, according to the World Bank (2000, p. 64) and Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (2004a, b, c, p. 12), 37.7 per cent of Ugandans live below the poverty line with the highest incidences

being in northern Uganda (63.6 per cent). A third of the chronically poor – and the disproportionate number of households that are moving back into poverty – are in northern Uganda (Mukasa and Masiga, 2003). In the rural areas of the north, 81 per cent of the population have a real *per capita* monthly income of less than Uganda Shs 6,000 (approx. \$3.3) which translates to Uganda Shs 200 or approx. \$0.11 per day and 42 per cent have a real *per capita* monthly expenditure of less than Uganda Shs 3000 (approx. \$1.6) – that is Uganda Shs 100 or approx. \$0.05 per day (World Bank, 1993, p. 9). The recent survey by the Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (2004a) indicates that northern Uganda has experienced increasing poverty from 60 per cent in 1997/1998 to 63.6 per cent in 2002/2003. While most parts of the country shared in the benefits of growth between 1992 and 2000, northern Uganda was left behind (Uganda, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2004a, b, c, p. 18). Also – with respect to the spread of a cash economy – the central, the southern and south-eastern regions of Uganda have more advantages than northern Uganda. Notable among these advantages is that the central, southern and south-eastern regions of Uganda have more direct access to national economic activities with Kenya and Tanzania, rather than with the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo – both before and after independence (Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2002). The disadvantage that northern Uganda experiences – in not having easy access to many economic activities – is one of the reasons why the focus of this study is on the districts in the northern region.

Leading manufacturers in Uganda, such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Mukwano, Uganda Breweries, Nile Breweries, Britannia, Rafiki, Bata Uganda Ltd, British American Tobacco (BAT), Royal Foam and Vita Foam, Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) Uganda Ltd, National Water and Sewage Corporation, Uganda Revenue Authority, Pride Africa and Private Sector Foundation, have opened regional outlets in northern Uganda to give the region an opportunity to do well in business. However, much more is still required in terms of information access because one of the weaknesses of Uganda's economic development is poor information systems (Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 1999, p. 49). The information infrastructure, including premises and communication networks, are poor. The penetration of the information economy – as shown in the Table I (World Bank, 2005, p. 318) – puts Uganda well below certain developed countries.

For businesses in northern Uganda to prosper, there is a need to access useful information at the right time and in the right format. Businesses require news of exchange rates and the price of credit, while lenders need to request credit histories and authority to draw available funds. Vendors advertise their products and learn about market trends in making productive decisions. All these needs require an efficient information system and services that can only be based on the correct identification of the business activities and information needs.

Statement of the problem

According to Shokane (2003, p. 55), information is a crucial resource in gaining a sustainable, competitive advantage for modern business enterprises. Despite this importance and the structural changes in economic development in Uganda, economic agents in northern Uganda operate in a business environment characterised by fragmented and incomplete information – where an awareness of markets, technology,

Country	Daily newspapers 2000	Radio 2000	Television 2003	Mobile phones 2000	Fax 1996	Personal computers 2003	Internet hosts (secure servers) 2004	Internet users 2003
South Africa	26	336	117	22	3.6	72.6	909	68
Sudan	26	461	386	0	0.9	6.1	...	9
Tanzania	4	406	45	0	...	5.7	1	7
Sweden	410	281	965	282	...	621.3	2,354	573
Uganda	3	122	18	...	0.1	4	2	5
UK	326	1,445	950	122	...	405.7	21,034	423
Togo	2	263	123	...	4.1	32	1	42
USA	196	2,109	938	165	78.4	658.9	198,098	551

Notes: According to the World Bank (2005, p. 313) and World Development Indicators (available at: www.lib.umnich.edu/govdocs/wdi/wdivar/wdivar13.html) Daily newspapers refers to those published at least four times a week and calculated as average circulation or copies printed (per 1,000 people); Radio refers to radio receivers in use for broadcasts to the general public (per 1,000 people); Television refers to television sets in use (per 1,000 people); Mobile phones refers to users of portable telephones subscribing to an automatic public mobile telephone services using cellular technology that provides access to the public switched telephone network (per 1,000 people); Fax refers to facsimile machines connected to the public switched telephone network (per 1,000 people); Personal computers refers to self-contained computers designed for use by a single individual (per 1,000 people); Internet hosts (secure servers) refers to servers using encryption technology in internet transactions (per 10,000 people); Internet users refers to the number of users within a country that access the internet (per 1,000 people). Data for the given countries in Table 1.1 were, selectively, extracted from the three publications indicated to show a comparison in order to highlight the situation in Uganda. ... Unavailable data – The cited documents (World Bank, 2001, 2002, 2005) had no data. Title: Business activities and information needs of SMEs in northern Uganda: prerequisites for an information system

Sources: World Bank (2001, p. 308; 2002, p. 318; 2005, p. 312)

Table I.
Measure of penetration of information economy

policies, regulations and finance is limited. Businesses in northern Uganda fail to receive timely business information (Cochrane, 1996, p. 6). There is no meaningful information system in place to facilitate efficient and effective access to business information by business enterprises. Traders and other small companies are simply “out of the loop” in developing strategic business relationships that occur more frequently in Uganda’s capital city, Kampala (Cochrane, 1996, p. 6). A recent study by the Ugandan Bureau of Statistics (2005, p. 30) established that the majority of business enterprises depended on “word of mouth”. There is no documented study where the business activities of SMEs and their information needs are known. They did not have any meaningful mechanism for accessing relevant information on business resources – a considerable amount of which is available in Uganda. The problem of access to quality business information is, generally, attributed to poor information systems and lack of well defined and articulated business information needs of SMEs (Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 1999, p. 49). These poor information systems and services have necessitated a study to investigate – and to recommend – the appropriate business information needed for any business information system design for the SMEs in northern Uganda.

In order to achieve the aim of the study, the objectives of the study were to:

- establish the characteristics of SMEs in northern Uganda;
- establish the main business activities of the business enterprises in northern Uganda;
- determine the business information needs of business enterprises in northern Uganda; and
- recommend an appropriate business information needs that should be provided if a business information system is to be designed for the SMEs in northern Uganda.

The study was carried in northern Uganda. The choice of northern Uganda was based on the deplorable state in which northern Uganda is in as discussed above. Secondly, no research has been carried out on the business information activities and needs of SMEs in northern Uganda. The findings of the study will help to shape the planning and implementation of strategic interventions to transform northern Uganda using information as a catalyst for development.

Literature review

A review of literature helps in setting up the phase and the direction for the investigation to take. This section thus provides an analysis of the literature on the business activities of the SMEs, business information users and business information needs of SMEs.

Business activities of SMEs

The identification of business activities and the information needs of business enterprises in any economy take a central role in the design of any meaningful business information systems. This is because the business activities of enterprises have a direct relationship with their needs for business information. What an enterprise trades in, directly dictates the information needed. According to Kibera (2000, p. 40), the SMEs

are engaged in a number of business activities – depending on the economic and political environment existing in the country. The SMEs businesses are found in the:

- agricultural sector – the keeping of dairy and beef cattle, poultry, and bees; the milling of grain; and the selling of fruit and vegetables, cash crops and cereals);
- manufacturing sector – furniture making; basket weaving; textile making; and printing;
- construction sector – wood construction; materials making; bricks and block making; painting; and plumbing;
- transport sector – bus and taxi services; bicycle repairs; and driving schools;
- hospitality sector – including tourism: hotels and lodgings;
- professional services – accountancy; legal services; and medical and paramedical services; and
- educational services – schools; training; and consultancy services.

According to the Uganda, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (2004a, b, c, p. 70), the main non-farming activities that SMEs in Uganda are involved in include a variety of activities or sectors. These are: wholesale trade; agro-processing; other services, including the food and drink industry – restaurants and bars; transportation; and construction. What is the situation in northern Uganda? Could the above-mentioned business activities be the business activities carried out in northern Uganda that need to be supported with an efficient supply of quality business information? This question was addressed in this study and the findings are reported and discussed.

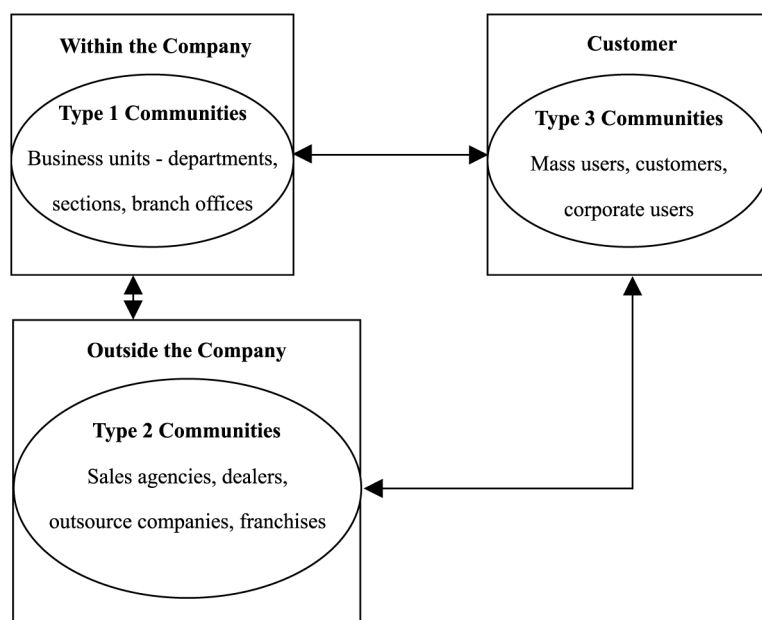
As noted earlier, there is a direct link between business activities and business information needs. This implies that the determination of business information needs of business enterprises is pertinent. An accurate and timely understanding of information needs is a prerequisite for effective business-wide information systems – whether object-based or procedure-data applications (McDavid, 1996, p. 128). “Information needs as a human attribute are the foundation for developing an information system and service provision” (Lill, 2000, p. 42). As a result, business information provision is a dynamic and constantly shifting environment – in terms of the appearance and demise of information providers (Marcella *et al.*, 1996, p. 3). Thus, understanding the coherent relationship that exists between the business information user, the needs and the information system is the point of departure for any attempt to improve the availability of – and access to – business information (Siriginidi, 1996, p. 23).

Business information user, user needs and the system. Mchombu (1994, p. 4) suggests the need to consider the information user as a thinking, self-controlling human being rather than an “empty bucket” to be filled with information. Information services exist by virtue of information users and potential information users (Lill, 2000, p. 38). Users make sense of the provided information in relation to their world, time, place, and problems. Making information-users central in an information system is important because of the different communities involved. Commercial firms operate within a vast consortium of communities. Moahi (2002, p. 244) warns that most information systems that have been designed and developed have been criticised on the grounds that the users have had to adapt to them because their design has not,

entirely, taken user needs into account. Until a specific audience within the community is identified and its information needs are ascertained, efforts in designing an effective information system will continue to be governed by the funding agencies, researchers and the priorities of information specialists rather than being a reflection of the identifiable information needs of the users in those communities (Omekwu, 2003, p. 444). This means that one of the basic prerequisites for any information system design is the careful understanding of the information needs of the users. In order to understand the information-users and their information needs, it is imperative that the different communities – operating within the business enterprise or company – be identified. According to Kodama (1999, p. 149), three types of communities exist. They are the business units within the commercial enterprise, the partners and the customers:

- (1) Type 1 communities are the business units within a company or commercial enterprise. They include the business departments/sections and branch offices/sales outlets. Type 1 communities are contained within the company and their work ranges from routine daily tasks to sharing information and knowledge for strategy development and making decisions – i.e. from top stratum to mid-level and then to lower levels or from headquarters to branches and sales offices. This type of community influences the kind of business information needed as it deals with a wide spectrum of business issues that required a wide array of business information provision.
- (2) Type 2 communities are collective bodies formed with tie-up partners and organisations, like the Private Sector Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and outsourcing companies. These communities share diverse knowledge and information, create businesses and perform work related to everything within the business (Kodama, 1999, p. 149). They may fall under intermediaries to the business enterprises. The transaction of business with these organisations or companies by business enterprises does influence the business enterprises' information needs in many ways. For instance, a business enterprise transacting business with a telecommunication company may require information on their business strategic plans; the cost of services they provide; business contacts for key personnel; etc. This kind of information would help the enterprise plan appropriately to transact business activities with the said telecommunication company.
- (3) Type 3 communities are the customers. Various needs and claims by specific customers do exist. The customers range from big clients to general customers and their needs, routinely, affect the type of business information needed. The need for a certain brand of product by customers can force the business enterprise, for instance, to look for information on appropriate technology to improve the quality of products produced and the services rendered. Diagrammatically, Figure 1 illustrates how these communities relate.

To continually revitalise a company or business enterprise and nurture its efforts to create new businesses in the long run through use of quality information, it is important to take into account that these communities exist – and play a significant role in determining business information needs. This is because if end-user or business firm communities are experts with respect to their information, then the strong positive



Source: Adopted and modified from Kodama (1999, p.150)

Figure 1.
Business community types

relationship between perceived information quality and user satisfaction is a valuable one (McGill and Hobbs, 2003, p. 39). Users' satisfaction cannot be fully met without end-user involvement in the system's design. This study established the information needs in congruence with the three communities in mind.

Types of business information needs

Kargbo (1997, p. 1) observes that many different people in developing countries use business information in different business transactions. Commercial institutions and, especially, investors – small or large – need information about companies and their financial performance as well as reports on political, economic, and market trends. Commercial dealers, business accountants, marketers, and other business participants are heavy users of business information sources. Abidi (1995, p. 53) explains a range of business information needs which include information on market prices, exchange rates, and where to import and export at fair prices. Morant (1995, p. 32) agrees with Abidi by pointing out that the information needs of the majority of businesses fall into two categories: general information, such as phone numbers, travel timetable and road information, and specialised information, like information on the inflation rate, government taxation policies, local and international markets and business management skills. Whatever the categorisation of business information, all business enterprises need business information for different business activities. Larvin and Zelko (2003, p. 6) point out that the most needed information by the business enterprises include:

- *Business contacts.* Information on business and marketing partners, technology providers, public incentives bodies, etc.

- *Available market opportunities.* Procurement and marketing opportunities; markets for products or goods; and services and research information. There is, therefore, a need for business firms to know about the existence of markets and where they can get raw materials at cheaper prices. According to Neelameghan (1992, p. 1), information on marketing strategies is crucial in business operations. That is why it is imperative that information managers should know clients' requirement and anticipate them. Information services will be judged on productivity and quality criteria (Neelameghan, 1992, p. 1).
- *General business information.* Registration, procedures, laws, taxation and tariffs.
- *Sector statistics.* Target markets and prices.
- *Business potential and business trends.* Resources for development; and changes in demand, supply and prices.
- *Adequate information and knowledge.* For new product/service development, design or innovation.

Could these also be the business information needs of the business enterprises of northern Uganda? To ensure that business information delivery service meets users' needs best, the following questions were important:

- Who are the business information users in northern Uganda?
- What are the business activities of the business enterprises?
- What are the business information needs of the business enterprises in northern Uganda?

These were some of the questions that shaped the investigations into the study problem. The findings are reported and discussed.

Methodology

A descriptive research design based on survey techniques was used. The study covered (see map of Uganda in the appendix) the districts of Ajumani for Madi sub-region; Nebbi for West Nile Region; Gulu for Acholi subregion; Lira for Lango Sub region and Kotido for Karamoja Sub-region. The study's population consisted of the SMEs in northern Uganda (those employing five to 500 people), business policy makers (District Chairperson of the Uganda Chamber of Commerce and Industry, District Chief Administrative Officer, Town Clerk and Production and Marketing Officer from local government in charge of trade and commerce) and information providers (libraries, telecentres, resource centres and radio stations). Of the targeted sample of 251 SMEs, 219 respondents participated in the study – giving a response rate of 87.3 per cent; of the targeted 75 information providers, 54 participated – giving a response rate of 72 per cent; and of the targeted 20 business policy makers, 17 participated – giving a response rate of 85 per cent. Generally, the rates indicate a very positive response from the respondents.

To pretest the data collection instruments, a pilot study was carried out in the district of Arua in Uganda and consequently the research instruments adjusted for the main study. After the pilot, data for the main study was collected using refined structured questionnaires for the SMEs and Information providers and semi-structured

interview guide for the business policy makers. Furthermore, data collection also involved the examining the relevant literature to business information provision and SMEs in Uganda. The coded responses from the questionnaires were analysed, quantitatively, using Epi Info and SPSS software. Data from interviews (unstructured questions) was analysed, using the content analysis method. Content analysis is the systematic, quantitative analysis of communication content – including verbal, visual, print, and electronic communication. In content analysis, “a researcher uses objective and systematic counting and recording procedures to produce a quantitative description of the symbolic content in a text” (Neuman, 2003, p. 311). In applying content analysis, the themes of the research were identified – based on the objectives of the study – and responses classified from each of the respondents, accordingly, in order to come up with a quantitative value that would facilitate decision-making. Edwards and Talbot (1999) argue that irrespective of the research design and the methods utilised, a stage of coding and classification of information must be undertaken. Classification simplified the task of obtaining a quantitative value from what policy makers said about the business information needs required for a viable business information system design.

Findings

This section provides the analysis of the findings of the study based on the objectives of the study. Of the targeted sample of 251 SMEs, 219 respondents participated in the study – giving a response rate of 87.3 per cent; of the targeted 75 information providers, 54 participated – giving a response rate of 72 per cent; and of the targeted 20 business policy makers, 17 participated – giving a response rate of 85 per cent. Generally, the rates indicate a very positive response from the respondents. The details of the analysis of the findings are given in the following subsections.

Profiles of the respondents

The respondents included the SMEs managers, information providers and business policy makers. The background information on the respondents is presented in the following sections.

Gender, age, education levels and business experience of the respondents. The SMEs managers who participated were 73.4 per cent male and 26.6 per cent female. Of the 219 participants, 218 indicated their age brackets – i.e. they answered the specific question. The age distribution of those 218 respondents is presented in Table II.

Age bracket	Frequency	%
15-20	13	6.0
21-30	101	46.3
31-40	59	27.1
41-50	34	15.6
51 and above	11	5.0
Total	218	100

Note: $n = 218$ (indicating the number of the respondents who answered that particular question)

Table II.
Age distribution of the
respondents (SMEs
managers)

The information providers who participated were 81.1 per cent male and 18.9 per cent female. Their age distribution is given in Table III.

The findings show that there are still very few females in managerial positions in business enterprises and information provision. A notable finding relates to ages: the majority of both the SMEs managers and the information providers fall in the active – and most productive – age bracket of 21-30 years. This goes up to 40 years before the trend declines. Business policy makers who participated were 94.1 per cent male and only 5.9 per cent female. Their age distribution was as follows: 15-20 years (0 per cent); 21-30 years (23.5 per cent); 31-40 years (47.1 per cent); 41-50 years (29.4 per cent) and 51 and above (0 per cent). This shows that the majority of business policy makers fall in the age bracket of 31-40 years.

The education levels of the SMEs managers and information provider managers were established and are indicated in Tables IV and V, respectively.

Of the policy makers who participated, 52.9 per cent had Bachelor's degrees (none in the field of library and information sciences), 41.2 per cent had diplomas and 5.9 per cent had a secondary level certificate. Since the findings show that the majority of respondents are literate, therefore, the respondents are in a better position to comprehend business issues and concerns with ease.

There is a common saying that "experience is the best teacher." The SMEs managers are able to learn from their business experience to access or scan the environment for relevant information. Business information providers can also learn from their experience – acquired in the provision of information to determine not only the information needs of their users, but also the problems they face in accessing quality information. This study, therefore, established the extent of business

Age bracket	Frequency	%
15-20	5	9.3
21-30	29	53.7
31-40	11	20.3
41-50	5	9.3
51 and above	4	7.4
Total	54	100

Table III.
Age distribution of the respondents (information providers)

Note: $n = 54$ (indicating the number of the respondents who answered that particular question)

Education levels	Frequency	%
Never went to school	14	6.4
Primary	16	7.3
Secondary	73	33.5
Technical college	28	12.8
Business college	47	21.6
Teachers college	12	5.6
University	28	12.8
Total	218	100

Table IV.
Education levels attained by SMEs managers

Note: $n = 218$ (indicating the number of the respondents who answered that particular question)

Table V.

Education levels attained by information providers

Education levels	Frequency	%
Never went to school	0	0
Primary	1	1.9
Secondary	14	25.9
Technical college	0	0
Business college	15	27.8
Teachers college	4	7.4
University	20	37
Total	54	100

Note: n = 54 (indicating the number of the respondents who answered that particular question)

experience of the SMEs managers and the information provision experience of information providers – and the results are presented in Figure 2.

The results show that the majority of both the SMEs and information providers have five years or less experience in business operations and information provision, respectively. For the business policy makers, the least experienced respondent had one year's experience and the most experienced had 22 years' experience in business policy making – in different capacities. The findings indicate that since the majority are less experienced in business management and in information provision, appropriate training may be necessary as part of the business information systems design. However, only 5.9 per cent of the business policy makers had less than five years of work experience.

Language proficiency of the SMEs managers. SME managers were asked to indicate their language proficiency in the one official language used in Uganda, the one national language and the three local languages that are widely spoken in northern Uganda. This was aimed at obtaining a profile of the languages that are most suitable for the provision of information materials, especially for reading. The findings indicate that 87.7 per cent of the respondents can read English – Uganda's official language – quite

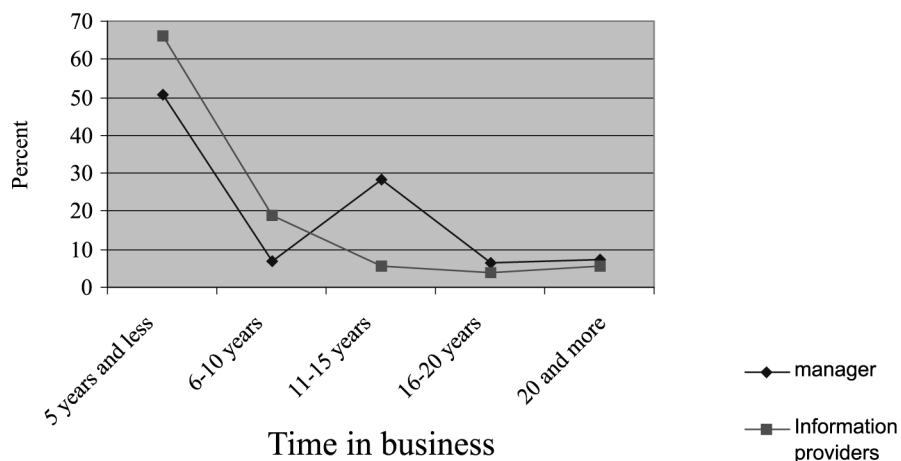


Figure 2. SMEs managers' business experience and information providers' experience in information provision

well, while 32.9 per cent can read Kiswahili – Uganda’s national language – quite well. Of the local languages given, 56.2 per cent of the respondents can read Luo quite well, 6.4 per cent – Lugbara, 5.0 per cent – Ngakarimojong and 16.9 per cent can read another language.

Business ownership. The findings show that the ownership of business enterprises include sole proprietorship – 51.4 per cent; limited liability companies – 20.6 per cent; partnerships – 16.8 per cent; cooperative companies – 5.1 per cent; government-owned – 2.8 per cent; religious organisation-owned – 2.3 per cent; and other – 0.9 per cent. These findings indicate that the majority of the business enterprises fall into the sole proprietorship and limited liability company categories. Religious organisations and the government own very few business enterprises.

Business activities

The study established that the SMEs are engaged in a variety of business activities. The majority are involved in transport services – 21.5 per cent; construction – 21 per cent; lodging services – 18.3 per cent; and property management – 15 per cent. The details are as shown in Figure 3.

The findings show that business activities carried out in northern Uganda are diverse – with the majority being in the service sector such as transport, construction, lodging etc.

In a bid to understand what motivates the SMEs to continue with their businesses, respondents were asked to give reasons for continuing with their businesses. The results are given in Figure 4.

From Figure 4, the findings reveal that the majority – 40.4 per cent – of the SMEs continue to carry out their businesses because of their profitability; ease to run; while means of livelihood were 11.9 per cent. A striking finding – that is worth noting – is that prompt information supply by the Government of Uganda and private sector is not considered by the majority as a motivating factor to continue with a business.

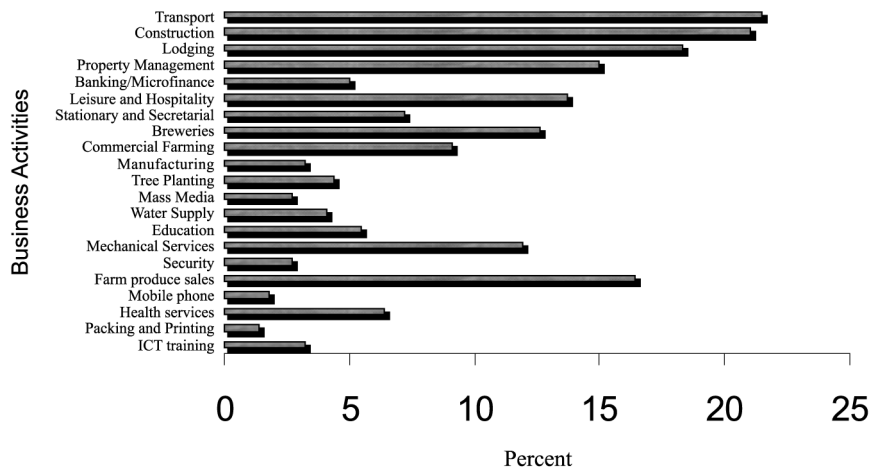
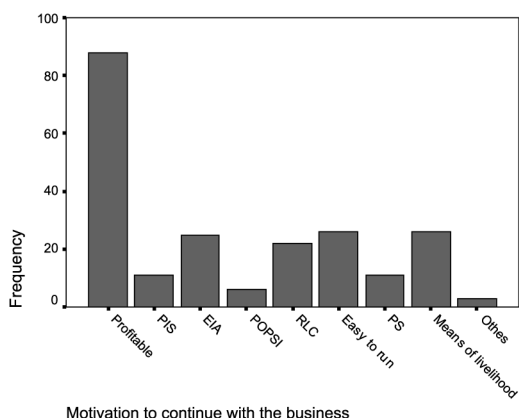


Figure 3.
SMEs business enterprises
in northern Uganda



Key:

PIS – Prompt Information Supply

RLC – Requires Less Capital

POPSI – Private Organisations Promptly Supply the Information for running them

EIA – Easy Information Access

PS – Personal Satisfaction

Figure 4. Motivation to continue with the business

Business information needs

In order to design an information system, it is crucial to determine business information needs – as part of the functional requirements. Respondents were asked to state and rank the business information needs they considered important in their business activities. The results are recorded in Table VI.

The business information providers ranked the information needs of the SMEs as indicated in Table VII.

Business information for SMEs	Most needed (%)	Sometimes needed (%)	Least needed (%)	Not needed (%)
Information on finance/capital/loans	68	14.2	9.1	8.7
Information on business management skills	57.8	18.8	13.3	10.1
Information on local markets	48.4	21.9	20.1	9.6
Information on business competitors	37.3	26.3	21.7	14.7
Information on security	33.5	20.1	21.6	24.8
Information on appropriate technologies	30.7	24.4	22.0	22.9
Information on business laws and taxation	29.4	30.7	25.2	14.7
Information on trade fairs, tenders and contracts	26.7	17.5	24.0	31.8
Information on government policies and regulations	26.3	24.4	30.4	18.9
Information on international markets and foreign exchange	14.7	15.1	34.9	35.3

Note: n = 219 (indicating the number of the respondents who answered that particular question)

Table VI. SMEs business information needs

Table VII.
SMEs business
information needs
according to information
providers

Business information for SMEs	Most needed (%)	Sometimes needed (%)	Least needed (%)	Not needed (%)
Information on finance/capital/loans	51.9	18.5	22.2	7.4
Information on local markets	50.0	22.2	20.4	7.4
Information on business management skills	46.2	20.4	16.7	16.7
Information on government policies and regulations	35.2	27.8	27.8	9.2
Information on security	29.6	24.1	33.3	13.0
Information on trade fair, tender and contracts	28.2	32.1	20.8	18.9
Information on business competitors	25.9	37.0	25.9	11.2
Information on appropriate technologies	25.9	25.9	31.5	16.7
Information on business laws and taxation	18.9	37.7	22.6	20.8
Information on international markets and foreign exchange	11.2	25.9	37.0	25.9

Note: $n = 54$ (indicating the number of the respondents who answered that particular question)

An examination of the results – given in Tables VI and VII – show a similarity of opinions between the SMEs managers and the information providers regarding the SMEs information needs. Both the SMEs and the information providers considered information on international markets and foreign exchange least needed. Although information providers are of the opinion that information on business laws and taxation is sometimes needed, the business policy makers are of the opinion that the SMEs, mostly, needed this kind of information. One of the business policy makers (Okot, 2005) said that:

Most of our business enterprises do engage in businesses without knowing the taxes involved and they, eventually, get frustrated when the government gives them a tax assessment. Accurate information on laws and taxes are crucial.

An information user might have a need for information, but access to that information is something else. Some information is easily accessed, while other information is difficult to access. In view of this, respondents were asked to rate the level of difficulty they experienced in accessing the business information they needed and the results are recorded in Table VIII.

From the results – indicated in Table VIII – the majority of the SMEs managers in northern Uganda felt that the most difficult information to access includes information on finance/capital/loans – 41.6 per cent; information about international markets and foreign exchange – 41.6 per cent; and information on appropriate technologies – 32.6 per cent. The business policy makers that were interviewed agreed that information on finance/capital/loans and, especially, on fair interest rates, international markets, business skills and appropriate technologies, is difficult to access by most of the SMEs.

Table IX indicates how the information providers rated the difficulty in accessing different types of business information by the SMEs.

Table IX shows that information providers find information on international markets; foreign exchange; business laws and taxation; and appropriate technologies most difficult to access by the SMEs in northern Uganda. Although there was a

Business information for SMEs	Most difficult (%)	Sometimes difficult (%)	Least difficult (%)	Not difficult (%)
Information on finance/capital/loans	41.6	27.8	16.0	14.6
Information on international markets and foreign exchange	41.6	16.4	26.5	15.5
Information on appropriate technologies	32.6	19.3	25.7	22.4
Information on business laws and taxation	29.7	26.0	27.9	16.4
Information on government policies and regulations	23.3	26.5	23.3	26.9
Information on business management skills	21.5	28.9	24.8	24.8
Information on trade fairs, tenders and contracts	17.8	16.0	27.8	38.4
Information on security	17.4	15.5	23.3	43.8
Information on business competitors	15.5	19.2	34.7	30.6
Information on local markets	13.6	26.5	32.0	27.9

Note: $n = 219$ (indicating the number of the respondents who answered that particular question)

Table VIII.
Levels of difficulty in accessing different types of business information by SMEs in northern Uganda

Business information for the SMEs	Most difficult (%)	Sometimes difficult (%)	Least difficult (%)	Not difficult (%)
Information on international markets and foreign exchange	37.0	20.4	25.9	16.7
Information on appropriate technologies	35.2	16.7	37.0	11.1
Information on business laws and taxation	33.3	16.7	29.6	20.4
Information on security	27.8	14.8	35.2	22.2
Information on trade fairs, tenders and contracts	20.3	31.5	24.1	24.1
Information on government policies and regulations	24.1	27.8	33.3	14.8
Information on business management skills	20.4	25.9	35.2	18.5
Information on local markets	16.7	29.6	25.9	27.8
Information on business competitors	14.8	33.3	35.2	16.7
Information on finance/capital/loans	14.5	16.0	27.9	41.6

Note: $n = 54$ (indicating the number of the respondents who answered that particular question)

Table IX.
Levels of difficulty in accessing different types of business information by SMEs according to the information providers

difference in the findings regarding the difficulty in accessing information on finance/capital/loans, the findings show some similarity between the views of SMEs managers and those of the information providers (see Tables VIII and IX) – probably suggesting the real situation in northern Uganda. The following section reports on the findings on the means of access to business information by the SMEs.

Discussions of the findings

This section provides an integrated discussion on the research findings – reported and those from the literature review explored. The aim of this section is to highlight the requirements – as they became evident from the research findings – for proposal for a BIS for northern Uganda. The discussion is based on the objectives of the study.

Profiles of respondents

According to the results – presented in Tables IV and V – the majority of the SMEs managers and all the information provider managers attended school and are, therefore, considered to be literate. The literacy level of both the SMEs managers and the information providers and their general attitude towards information was encouraging for the provision of information – as a literate person can read and understand information provided, compared to an illiterate one who cannot. The general literacy of information users is crucial if information is to be provided to the users, but the information literacy of both the information user and the information provider is more important - if access to quality information is to be achieved. Information literacy is the ability to identify what information is needed and the ability to locate, evaluate and use information in solving problems and composing discourse (Evans *et al.*, 1994). It encompasses a set of competences in ICTs skills that will provide for survival and success in an information technology environment (Evans *et al.*, 1994). Arguably, the appropriate interpretation of information and economic incentives - associated with that information – are closely related to educational levels. Entrepreneurs – with a limited education – are disadvantaged, since illiteracy impinges on their ability to comprehend the positive signals flowing in the system and using them to their advantage (Moyi, 2000). Since the level of the SMEs' information literacy was not part of this study, it is recommended that this be covered in more depth in a follow-up research study.

According to the findings presented in Figure 2, the majority of both SMEs managers and information providers have less than five years' experience. An analysis of the SMEs graph shows a sharp decline in numbers from six to ten years and from 16 to 20 years. When Figure 2 is analysed, together with Figure 4, it could be concluded that those who stay in their businesses for a long time do so because the businesses are profitable. However, as noted in Figure 4, easy access to information is a problem. If easy access to information is addressed, there would be fast, quality decision-making that would enhance the profitability of the businesses – hence, less need for changing businesses (this is covered in another paper by the same authors). Secondly, the SMEs managers and information providers need tailor-made training for performance improvement – given the low level of experience they have.

As the majority – 87.7 per cent – of the respondent SMEs managers can read English (the official language) quite well, and 32.9 per cent can read Kiswahili (the national language) well, the training to enhance the access and use of business information would not be a problem as far as the language of instruction was concerned.

Business activities

The business activities of an enterprise directly determine the type of information an enterprise requires. Although the majority of the business enterprises are involved in the service sector, the business activities in northern Uganda are diverse – covering almost the entire sector of the economy (see Figure 3). This situation requires the BIS to be design to take a broad approach. Rather than being restricted to the supply of business information to a narrow spectrum of business activities, it is necessary that the system should provide broad subject coverage. This would be beneficial when a business enterprise's activities overlap which implies that other business activities can

benefit, as well, from the designed business information system. An example could be a situation where an enterprise is dealing in lodging services and at the same time handles ICTs training, especially internet access. This entrepreneur will need information to promote his/her lodging services on, for example:

- the best practices on public hygiene;
- the availability of trained catering personnel; and
- conferences that are due to take place in the country or in northern Uganda.

At the same time the entrepreneur may need information on internet-related issues, like:

- prices of bandwidth for internet access from different companies;
- Internet filtering software; and
- antivirus toolkits that are available and their prices, etc.

Similarly, some of the business activities that should be catered for by the BIS are banking/microfinance, leisure and hospitality, stationery and secretarial, breweries, commercial farming, manufacturing, tree planting, education, mechanical services and health services. This is because these business activities have a wider coverage of areas that need information. However, the researchers believe that the main business activities that need to be supported by the provision of business information should include transport services, construction, lodging services, farm produce sales and property management. This is because they are the business activities carried out by the majority of the respondents in northern Uganda – as indicated in Figure 3. Despite there being many business activities, the most important issue is the business information needs that are discussed in the following section.

Business information for business activities

The findings show that the SMEs in northern Uganda represent a wide spectrum of business information needs (see Tables VI and VII) and this can be attributed, directly, to the diverse business activities taking place. Taken together, financial/capital/loan, local market and business management skills are areas in which the most critical business information is needed. The majority of both the SMEs managers and information providers rated information on financial/loan/capital, local market and business management skills as that which is most needed (see Tables VI and VII). Although the majority know the kind of information that they need to be productive in their businesses, some business managers still lack adequate knowledge about their business information needs. For instance, Tables VI and VII show that although the majority of the SMEs – 60.1 per cent – and information providers – 56.6 per cent – consider information on business taxes and government policies and regulations as needed or most needed, 39.9 per cent of the SMEs and 43.4 per cent of information providers did not consider information on business taxes and government policies and regulations as needed or most needed. Lavrin and Zelko (2003) point out, *inter alia*, that information on taxes is needed by all business enterprises. The policy makers confirmed this when they said that accurate information on laws and taxes are crucial for the SMEs.

Entrepreneurship has much to do with responsibility for profitable opportunities – by bearing uninsurable risks and uncertainty. Uncertainty is regarded as the inability to predict an outcome due to lack of information on the form/basis of a problem (Moyi, 2000). The core quality of the entrepreneur is innovativeness. This requires adequate information on business management skills and future business trends. Many of the SMEs lack an entrepreneurial spirit, appropriate education, training and developmental initiatives – leading them to a confinement within a narrow spectrum of business information needs. According to the findings – as indicated in Table VI – only 29.8 per cent of the SMEs in northern Uganda need information on international markets.

An analysis of the findings – given in Table VIII – shows that although the SMEs need the business information indicated in Tables VI and VII, they face difficulties in accessing this information. For instance, Table VIII shows that information on finance/capital/loans, international markets and foreign exchange, appropriate technologies, business laws and taxation and business management skills is difficult to access. However, it should be noted that information on finance/capital/loans, appropriate technologies, business laws and taxation and business management skills is among the business information that is most needed by the SMEs (see Table VI). Another finding that contrasts the SMEs and information providers' opinion is when it comes to the difficulty in accessing business information. The SMEs consider information on finance/capital/loan difficult to access, while information providers do not consider it difficult to access (see Tables VIII and IX). It is not clear as to why this is so. When one of the business policy makers was interviewed in a follow up, he said:

Most of the SMEs managers do not go to the banks to find out about information on loans. Otherwise information on loans/finances can be easily got from the banks. Secondly, the banks also do not make enough efforts to advertise their loans to the business community. I only see Crane Bank, Stanhope billboards advertising loans whenever I travel to Kampala (Okot, 2006).

This finding suggests that if the BIS is designed and collaborative network is created, the SMEs could easily access information on finances/loans/capital.

Generally, as noted in the findings, the SMEs in northern Uganda mostly need information on finance/capital/loans, local markets, business management skills, appropriate technologies, business competitors and security, but they face difficulties in accessing them. How, then, is this information accessed or how can this information be accessed? These are covered in another paper by the same authors.

Recommendations and conclusion

The needed business information of the SMEs in northern Uganda emanate from the reported findings reported and discussed. Generally SMEs in northern Uganda require:

- information on finance/capital/loans;
- information on local markets;
- information on business management skills;
- information on appropriate technologies;
- information on business competitors;
- information on security;

- information on international markets;
- information on foreign exchange;
- information on government policies, taxes, incentives and regulations; and
- information on tender and contracts.

Put in a specific context, this study recommends that the SMEs in northern Uganda need the following business information that should be, carefully, filtered from the different available sources:

Business legal information

Different kinds of business legal information exist, but that which is important for the SMEs in northern Uganda should include information on:

- national legislation or acts governing the importation of goods and services into the country, including technologies;
- exchange control acts and regulations;
- laws governing the registration of different types of companies, as well as other company laws;
- laws governing the taxation of businesses in the country;
- regulations governing the importing of selected goods/raw materials into the country; and
- international trade conventions.

Business technical information

This should include information on:

- details of relevant technologies available in the country and adequate information and knowledge on these for new products/services development, design or innovation;
- the ICTs, especially the internet and training opportunities for the SMEs and other business partners;
- professional and technical expertise available in the country;
- the status of patents relating to the selected technologies;
- consultancy services that are available in the country and their terms and conditions for services/access;
- types and capacity of major laboratory equipment and production machinery that is available from manufacturing firms and other institutions in the country; and
- local and international standards/norms/specifications relating to the technologies under consideration.

Business economic information

This should include information on:

- national economic indicators;
- local markets, export markets and market trends for identified products;

- comparative costs of identified technologies from different sources;
- performance analysis of approved contracts in the country;
- inflation rates in the country, future economic focus, foreign exchange rates and performances;
- the different types of loans offered by the banks, financial institutions, like micro-finance and government;
- raw materials; and
- business opportunities in neighbouring countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Kenya.

Business contacts information

This should include information on:

- business and marketing partners, technology providers, public incentives bodies, etc.; and
- telephone contacts, e-mail, web addresses (uniform resource locators) of registered business competitors.

Business management skills information

This should include information on:

- business book-keeping and accounting;
- customer care and the provision of quality services;
- writing business proposals and technical reports; and
- business planning and forecasting.

In conclusion, it is imperative that all the business information – as listed above – which is needed by the SMEs in northern Uganda requires well laid down strategy to provide. This study has established the characteristics of the SMEs in northern Uganda, the main business activities, the business information needs and proposed the business information to be considered for a BIS. An analysis of the SMEs business activities and information needs shows that the business community in northern Uganda (the SMEs) have unique information needs that need to be addressed with a specifically designed information system. To achieve this, a multi-faceted approach to information provision is necessary because of the variation in needs, literacy and business prospects. The multi-faceted approach requires careful establishment of the information sources and means used by the SMEs enterprises in northern Uganda. This was investigated and reported in another study by the same authors of this paper.

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