Chapter 14
Information Needs and Access in SMEs

INTRODUCTION

To ensure survival in today’s competitive business world, small-sized enterprises require access to accurate and relevant information both at the start-up stage and during their day-to-day operations. SMEs generally tend to be information intensive thus various interventions may be required on the part of management to ensure that the information needs and resources of the enterprises are met and well managed. However, Kirk (1999) doubts whether managers are able to exploit the wealth of information that surrounds them. Given the range of SMEs’ needs, it is important to ensure that the information they require to maintain their competitive advantage is both accessible and usable. The managers of SMEs, in turn, also require different aspects of information to plan, organise, staff, administer and control activities in
ways that best achieve the enterprise’s objectives. In the digital economy, successful enterprises are expected to produce high technology goods and services; hence high quality information and effective systems are necessary to achieve such ends.

Studies on the information needs of SMEs in parts of Africa showcase the range of information required by SMEs, including information on suppliers, potential customers, standards, acts relating to business ethics and practices, business directories, price lists, etc. SMEs also need knowledge pertaining to management, commercialization and information technology; international trade knowledge; and information about foreign markets (Ntsala, 2000:167-171). In Asia, a study on the IT needs of SMEs in Singapore (Hong Kong) and the Philippines found that SMEs require information relating to credit; the technology market and business opportunities; skills and management training; business exchange/matching; technical assistance in project development; consultancy and advisory services; material sourcing; and research and advocacy. SMEs were also found to need information on (The Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation -APEC, 1995).

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The SMEs’ further expressed a desire to be informed about the main trends in technology, particularly the (The Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation -APEC, 1995):

- Rise of e-business and the likely growth in demand for online trading services
- Evolving power of broadband
- Potential of ICT in helping SMEs become high-performance organisations.

As can be seen, SMEs need information that would enhance business growth; government information on licensing; information on tenders; information on taxation and tariffs; information on productivity, sales, and distribution; export information; and information on education and training. Further information requirements include:

- Credit, potential investment and business opportunities
- Market trends and new products
- Viable business projects
- Customers, and quality assurance
- Consumer needs, legislations and judicial decisions.
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