Privatisation of S&T Information Services : The INSDOC Experience

RPS Dhaka and Kamlesh Arora

INSDOC, New Delhi - 110 016

Abstract

The paper discusses the INSDOC's experience in privatisation of information products and services. It discusses the elements of privatisation in routine jobs of data entry, data validation, editing, etc., for database creation and library automation projects, by contracting/sub-contracting such jobs to private parties and using the staff for taking up new projects. It concludes that privatisation of information services is economically viable and has proved successful in INSDOC.

1. INTRODUCTION

The R&D infrastructure in India is fairly well developed. The country is spending about Rs. 6000 crore every year on its sprawling R&D systems. The R&D efforts are being supported by an equally well developed information infrastructure in the country. Almost all the 3000 odd R&D institutions in India have an in-house library or information centre. Besides, there are several large national information resource centres catering to the information requirements of users/organisations which are not fulfilled by their in-house information facilities.

Before we discuss the INSDOC experience in privatisation of information products and services, it is desirable to review the various components constituting the information market, the share of government and private investment, economic viability of the market and future trends in the information trade.

1.1 Information Market

Private investment is an index of economic viability of a market. The private investment is not influenced by factors like social obligations: the main driving force is 'profit'. Investment is made only on activities from which there are definite indications of adequate returns. This is true even for hitherto social welfare services—health, transport, communications, education and training—which now attract private investment.

It is estimated that each R&D organisation or a large project spends about 10 per cent of its budget on its library and information requirement. Based on this, it is estimated that there is an information

market of about Rs. 600 crores in the country and about 90 to 95 per cent of this amount is spent on acquisition of foreign and Indian information products, salaries, equipment, infrastructural expenditure and other recurring expenditure. The share of information services including new services in this market is estimated to be around one to two per cent only, i.e., six to ten crores every year. This amount is shared by a large number of government and public sector organisations. In this context, the number of orders and corresponding revenues collected at INSDOC for various traditional services may be seen in Table 1.

An important factor impeding the growth of information services market in India is the lethargic information collection and use habits of Indian S&T information user community. The in-house library is the ultimate source of information for them and a large number of scholars tend to think that what is not available in their library does not exist. That is why they limit their literature survey work to the information searched by themselves manually and personally. The advantages of information technology have not yet been tasted by them. The low level of information usage in India explains the generation of orders of photocopies of only 40 to 45 thousand as a whole in India as compared to 2800 thousand in UK.

The biggest hindrance to the entry of private investment in information services is the difficulty of accessing information resources. No private entrepreneur can afford to start information services by acquiring information resources at a huge cost. On the other hand, huge resource bases have been built over the years by libraries in government institutions. Until recently, these were easily accessible as a national asset, open to everybody. Now some of the institutions are moving towards some kind of restrictive policies. More often, these resource bases are not easily accessible to private information vendors to generate products and services for business purpose or, these may be so costly as to render these private information services less competitive in the already small market. Therefore, a rapid growth in private entrepreneurship in traditional information services like document photocopies, abstracting and indexing services is not foreseen. However, a few private entrepreneurs have come up for providing on-line search of information, translation and value-added information services to a few selected industries in a narrow band of disciplines. The number of such private

Table 1. Information services : Orders and revenue collected at INSDOC

Activity	1993-94		1994-95	
	Numbers	Revenue (Rs. in lakhs)	Numbers	Revenue (Rs. in lakhs)
1. Networking based online services	56 nodes	13.495	19 nodes	12.358
2. Literature search	511	6.862	475	3.947
3. DPS/Reprography	19,913	10.604	21084	8.13
4. Training	12 Courses	3.114	10 Courses	5.255
5. Translation	5978 pages	7.531	5628 pages	7.148
6. Publications	198 Subscribers	5.091	208 subscribers	5.401
7. Printing, DTP, etc	7604 pages	4.355	4888 pages	2.552
8. Library services	401 members	2.497	660 members	8.524

enterprises is too small at present to be noticed and it appears that they are not economically very sound yet. The modern information technology has tremendously helped them to start their business with a very small infrastructural support and by increasing efficiency and decreasing overhead costs, they can become good competitors to Government supported organisations.

2. INSDOC's EXPERIENCE

INSDOC has recognised the essentiality of introduction of a private element in the execution of customer services to increase efficiency, reduce per unit cost and to improve timeliness. A case study of the following services of INSDOC may prove the above point.

2.1 Translation Services

INSDOC provides translation services to customers from 18 foreign languages into English. It has about a dozen staff members for major languages like Russian, German, French and Japanese. In addition, a panel of about 100 experts is maintained and utilised from time to time for carrying out translations from 18 foreign languages. The average productivity of a staff translator calculated on annual basis works out to about one page per day which in other words mean Rs. 500 per page. Whereas, the productivity of panel translators

calculated on order-to-order basis comes to about two to three pages a day and a translator is paid at the rate of Rs. 45 to 65 per page. If the order is urgent, the panel translator is paid fifty per cent higher rate. Comparative data of staff translators and panel translators is given in Table 2.

INSDOC's 40 years of experience indicates that the panel translation system has better efficiency and maintains timeliness of service at significantly reduced cost.

2.2 Document Supply Service

About 20 per cent of the orders received by INSDOC are served from its own library and 60 per cent orders are executed by physically collecting documents from other libraries in Delhi, Calcutta, Madras and Bangalore. Previously a staff car used to go along with two or three persons to collect documents from various libraries. The documents were returned to the respective libraries after photocopying the required articles at INSDOC. This procedure was time consuming, labour intensive and costly. As the actual cost could not be recovered from the customer, the service was provided with a considerable element of subsidy on each order.

In view of this situation, a new system was introduced on experimental basis initially for a few selected libraries. In this

Table 2. Productivity of staff & panel translators (Number of pages per day)

Item	1991	1992	1993	1994
Staff productivity	1.1	0.8	0.8	0.7
Panel productivity :				
Russian	2.3	2.0	2.2	2.1
Japanese	1.2	2.4	1.8	1.3
German	2.7	2.2	2.0	2.6
French	2.2	2.6	1.6	1.3
Chinese	1.5	1.7	1.0	2.0

new system, an unemployed youth has been assigned a contract in which he collects the order slips from INSDOC marked for a particular library, searches the documents in the library, gets relevant items photocopied in the library itself, pays the required charges and supplies the documents to INSDOC. In each case, the contractor is paid Rs. 5 per order plus bus fare and the cost of photocopying; his income comes to about Rs. 2000 to 2500 per month. The concerned library also gets some revenue out of the service. Due to this element of privatisation, INSDOC is able to execute document supply orders within 48 to 72 hours at a significantly reduced cost.

2.3 Database Creation and Library Automation Projects

In recent years, INSDOC was assigned several projects of creation of databases and computerisation of libraries in various organisations. Initially, the projects were being handled by a team of staff members. The projects were usually delayed. It became difficult to accept new assignments until the staff was freed from earlier projects. Therefore, INSDOC changed the strategy and empowered the project leaders to get a part of assignments completed by sub-contracting to private parties. The project leaders were delegated financial and administrative powers to make them fully responsible for the execution of their projects. The jobs of classification and cataloguing for library automation projects were assigned to post-graduate scholars of universities @ Rs. 4 per record. Each student used to earn about Rs. 1800 per month and it was observed that the productivity of

these scholars was significantly high and the projects were completed within scheduled time. Similarly, all the jobs of data entry, data validation, editing, etc., were also sub-contracted to private parties—mostly unemployed youth. It released some of the staff members from project teams and they were able to undertake new assignments.

The assignment of identified jobs to private parties on sub-contract basis has become one of the most popular tools with the project leaders at INSDOC. They are no more handicapped with the shortage of expert manpower. For example, in one single project of INSDOC, namely 'Multimedia-based Photo-Identity Card' project, about 125 persons were assigned different contractual jobs. It is estimated that a sum of about Rs. 35 lakhs has been spent in such contracts and the project is on schedule.

3. CONCLUSION

Introduction of private element in the execution of information services at INSDOC can in no way be compared with private investment in information services and products. However, it has been established without any doubt that even the privatisation of information services accomplished in a very limited way at INSDOC did generate greater efficiency, lower per unit cost and improved timeliness. The INSDOC experience also supports the hypothesis that information services could become profitable business venture provided the level of consumption of information which is comparatively low at present improves further.