

CAREER PATHS OF SECRETARIAL PRACTITIONERS AND FUTURE ADVANCEMENT

BY

Iheukwumere, Odochi Chinwe-edozie (Maben): Department of Office Technology and Management, Abia State Polytechnic, Aba, Nigeria; E-mail: chinwedoziel@gmail.com

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**Uteh, Chioma Kate (Maben): Department of Office Technology and Management;
E-mail: chiomaute@gmail.com**

Abstract

Despite preconceptions that the work of secretaries could be extinguished due to technological advancements, secretaries are still relevant in modern offices more than ever as technology has provided new sources of information and its management. The secretaries are the biggest support for the administrators in all levels of management and they are considered as the office workers with the superiority of office competencies. The main purpose of this work was to critically examine the career paths of secretarial practitioners and future advancement. The work examined among other skills requirement for secretarial practitioners, the future of secretarial profession and the challenges of the profession. The work concluded that advances in information and communication technology and increased computerizations, changes in organizational cultures and organization theories have greatly influenced moves towards redefinition of the secretarial role and skill requirements; hence the secretarial roles should expand to accommodate rapid organizational change and business needs. It was recommended among others that secretarial practitioners should understand that for job advancement to the top that personal skills trump technical ability, hence one of the ways forward lies in honing ones soft skills which will likely help one to stand out from the crowd.

Keywords: Career, Career path, Secretary, Secretarial practitioners and Future advancement

Introduction

Despite preconceptions, either by academics or the general public that the work of secretaries could be extinguished due to technological advancements, secretaries are still found in organizations today. Zuin & Findlay (2014) argues on the future of the secretarial role and noted that the growth of technology is changing the role of secretarial practitioners, but it is still as important as ever. There will always be a need for secretarial practitioners, either in the more traditional role of diary management or as office managers, project managers, event managers, etc. Today secretarial practitioners are expected to multi-task as well as being multi-skilled. They usually have the most important problem-solving skills and are the first to know exactly what is going on in an organization.

Historically, people drifted into secretarial work after studying basic shorthand and typewriting, often beginning in the typing pool and progressing from junior to senior secretary, then to personal assistants. For others it was stopgap between school and marriage; hence it was regarded as a profession for women (Cox, 1998). Secretarial work can be described in professional terms and it is usually done by addressing communications and administrations (Pringle, 1989). Describing what a secretary is may be very complicated as it has a relation to the nature of office work which covers an amazing variety of jobs and functions (Iheukwumere, 2006). (Pringle, 1989) noted that it is due to the continuous efforts to acquire recognition as skilled workers and to improve the conditions of the secretarial profession that it becomes feasible to answer the question, "what is a secretary?" by developing a job description. The term secretary signifies a notary, scribe, etc; it is a title that was applied to various confidential officers, and embraced as part of the root of the word, the idea of secrecy (Johnson, 2012).

The Oxford Dictionary defines the secretary as one who is entrusted with private or secret; one whose office is to write for another, especially one who is employed to conduct correspondence, to keep records and to transact various other businesses for another person or for a society or public body. She is an administrative professional

whose work consists of supporting management, including executives, using a variety of project management, communication, and organizational skills. National Secretaries Association defines a secretary as an important office person of the work setting, who is the biggest support for the administrator in today's administration of business world, which is getting complicated everyday, who provides the opportunity to use communication power, activity gains and the whole working period more effectively (Ohwerei, 2021).

According to Adam (2015) technology has provided new sources of information, new ways of collecting, storing, and processing information, as well as new methods of communicating information. This means that information needs have changed and will continue to change as new technology becomes available. The term secretarial practice has always been used to include knowledge, skills, procedures and methods of work to be performed by an office assistant. Persons with secretarial skills find employment in all type of organization. The application of modern technology advancement has brought about revolution and greater effectiveness in day to day working of the office. Due to this, procedures have become more streamlined and office work has become more interesting and challenging. Secretarial profession has undergone tremendous changes in advancement of the way it used to be in the past due to the consistent improved technology day in, day out.

Due to these challenges faced by professionals and managers in the past on how they try to shape or position the roles and responsibilities of the secretarial title which has a lot of misconceptions. The confusion other practitioners have about the concept of secretaryship is an illusion, in that they assume that since majority of the working class uses computer threatens or invades the work of a secretary. Most people normally and even including most educators who are not in the field of secretaryship does not recognize the position, because since time in memorial most universities have never created a higher education in secretaryship. Even students who study secretaryship in higher institution are sometimes discouraged by other colleagues because they do not see the career prospects due to modern technology.

Skills Requirement for Secretarial Practitioners

The secretarial profession demands skills that nobody else can have without studying secretaryship, that is by way of practicing typing and shorthand. Typewriting/keyboarding skills as a field of study teaches prospective secretaries about how to type with speed and accuracy; how to type memorandum, reports, tables, letters, etc; how to correct written errors and mistakes, which has to do with comprehension, English grammar and spellings; adhering to all the standards and practices under typewriting skills, such as paragraphs, spaces, designs of business letters, creative typing, clear and admirable presentations of work, punctuation etc. (Halici & Kasmoglu, 2017). The principles and standards of keyboarding are not known easily by any other ordinary persons; thus not just anybody who uses computer should be referred to as a secretary. Shorthand is another skill that a secretary should possess in order to write fast and then transcribe them into plain English text for ordinary persons understanding. Shorthand is a secret writing whereby if you have never studied or learnt it, you can never read or figure out what s being written or said.

Advances in Information and Communication Technology and increased computerizations, changes in organizational cultures and organization theories have greatly influenced moves towards a redefinition of the secretarial roles and skill requirements; hence the secretarial roles should expand to accommodate rapid organizational change and business needs. According to Giles, La Valle, & Perryman (1996) in order to fulfill the 21st century secretarial roles, secretaries are expected to have a range of social and behavioural skills and attributes. Secretaries are expected to be very good communicators, both orally and in writing, and have good presentation skills such as tact, diplomacy, ability to persuade, and to give advice and feedback, among others (Onamade & Adedayo, 2012).

The secretarial profession has been greatly affected by the advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). ICT is now common place and most secretaries have found that they must have at least basic word processing skills to do their job. Technology should not replace flair and intuition; rather it should remove

unnecessary obstacles from the work of a secretarial practitioner to enable her to concentrate fully on writing with the flair and drive that all good writing should possess (Yakubu & Ugwu, 2015). For a secretarial practitioner to be successful in her career today, she must be proficient in a variety of computer software applications and technological skills such as spreadsheet, database management, presentation, desktop publishing, video conferencing, etc., (Idele, n.d). As secretarial roles and functions become broader, secretaries will need to be more competent in a broader range of technical, social and technology skills, as most people have argued that this is likely to become a profession with higher entry requirements.

Roles and Responsibilities of Secretarial Practitioners in Modern Offices

Today, secretary is the biggest support for the administrator in all levels of management and they are considered as the office workers with the superiority of office competencies, who are capable of taking responsibility without directly being commanded, who can implement the decisions and responsibilities taken, who can take decisions within the limits of her authority, who is self-confident and follows up the necessary precautions towards increasing effectiveness and efficiency, who keep pace with technology and who is regarded as the vision of the organization (Halici & Kasmoglu, 2017). In contemporary sense however, a Secretary is referred to as a person who acts as a personal representative, responsible for the accurate conveying of information to his or her employer and the accurate execution of instructions. There are various kinds of Secretaries some of which are Private or Personal Secretaries, Administrative Secretaries, Company Secretaries, Office Secretaries, Medical Secretaries, Executives or Administrative Assistance, to name but a few.

Understanding the importance of secretarial practitioners, firms should work with qualified people who are educated on this area and value their work. Secretaries should be at least knowledgeable as their managers about the business area of the firms and play an active role in communication; they should fulfill the secretarial services required of them properly and help both internal and external customers within the scope of her authority and responsibility. Secretaries have seen their job descriptions change since the days of answering phones, typing, taking dictation and making coffee. Today, executives may type their correspondence and answer their own phones, freeing up secretaries to assist with running the office in other ways, some secretarial duties may include training new employees, filing and distributing information, creating databases and spreadsheets, scheduling meetings and conducting research.

With the restructuring of firms in the late 20th century, the roles of secretaries were transformed as most firms adopted a flatter structure and, in many cases eliminated middle management (Zuin & Findlay, 2014). Secretaries took on greater visibility and assumed duties previously performed by middle managers; the secretarial role became more specialized, concentrating on software and equipment knowledge (Adam, 2015). As a result of these changes, secretaries now have the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities to perform tasks more demanding than traditional clerical assignments with effectiveness and trademark efficiency (Ezenwafor & Okeke, 2012).

The activities of the secretary may vary greatly from the employer and will depend on a number of factors such as: the secretary's own intelligence, the position of her boss, the size and nature of the organization, the status of the boss and his ability and willingness to delegate work, the personality of the executive, that is, his education, emotional material and stability, etc (Pitaloka & Economics, n.d). The duties performed by secretary vary from one organization to the other and from one department to the other. These duties include among others:

- Providing administrative, secretarial, advanced clerical, and pragmatic support; relieving departmental head of administrative work such as investigating and answering complaints and providing assistance in resolving operational and administrative problems;
- Planning and organizing work activities by recommending improvements in work flow, procedures, and use of equipment and forms; implementing improvements as approved; developing and revising office forms and report formats as required; organizing and maintaining filing systems;
- Drafting and/or typing, word processing, format, edit, revise and process a variety of documents and

forms including reports, correspondence, memoranda, agenda items, agreements, ordinances, resolutions, technical and statistical charts and tables and other specialized and technical materials from rough drafts, dictation, modified standard formats, and brief verbal instructions;

- Proofreading, verifying, and reviewing materials, applications, records, and reports for accuracy, completeness, and conformance with established standards, regulations, policies, and procedures; ensure materials, reports, and packets for signature are accurate and complete;
- Participating in the collection, compilation and analyzing of information from various sources on a variety of specialized topics related to assigned programmes; participating in the preparation of reports that present and interpret data, identify alternatives, and make and justify recommendations.
- Maintaining accurate and up-to-date office files, records, and logs for assigned areas; developing, preparing and monitoring various logs, accounts, and files for current and accurate information including manual and computer logs, other specialized or technical documents processed; maintaining and processing payroll records;
- Utilizing various computer applications and software packages; developing, entering data, maintaining and generating reports from a database or network system; creating and administering mailing lists; designing, maintaining, and utilizing data to develop reports using spreadsheet software; creating, formatting and revising charts, graphs, flowcharts, worksheets, booklets, brochures, and forms using appropriate office ware;
- Attending to a variety of office administrative details such as ordering supplies, arranging for equipment repair, transmitting information, and keeping reference materials up to date; organizing and maintaining office and specialized files in accordance with office rules and regulations;
- Maintaining calendar of activities, meetings, and various events for assigned staff; coordinating activities and meetings with other departments, the public, and outside agencies; coordinating and arranging special events as assigned; scheduling meetings; coordinating arrangements and setting up meeting rooms; notifying participants; preparing and/or assembling meeting materials;
- Serving as secretary at meetings and committees as assigned; arranging and coordinating meetings for boards, commissions, and outside agencies; assisting in preparing and distributing agenda packets and correspondence; attending meetings and taking, transcribing, and ensuring proper distribution of minutes and verbatim transcripts;
- Processing mail including receiving, sorting, time-stamping, logging, and distributing in-coming and out-going correspondence and packages;
- Providing lead supervision and direction to assigned clerical and office support staff; preparing work schedules; providing work assignments, instruction, and training; providing information and feedback to appropriate supervisory staff regarding performance of assigned staff.

Future of Secretarial Profession

Secretaries are administrative personnel who help keep offices running smoothly, organize meetings and perform clerical duties. In recent years, their job description has been changing as technology and labour reassessments alter the dynamics of the modern office environment. According to the US Bureau of Labour and Statistics (BLS) the employment of secretaries is expected to decline by 9% between 2019 and 2029 but individuals with computer software experience should have good prospects as well. Secretaries constitute one of the largest labour forces in the job market. Secretaries work in office environments, helping to facilitate the storage and flow of information and to maintain smooth office functioning. Secretaries must have knowledge of software and office technologies as office environments become more and more automated.

The future looks bright for secretarial practitioners in the 21st century as a result of major changes in the way the world of business operates due to a future of smart machines, streamlined work spaces, communication networks, management-oriented responsibilities, greater authority and increased professional prestige (Daily, 1993). The secretarial practitioners with an open mind to continue to grow and develop in the dispensation will

have exciting opportunities for advancement. Secretarial practitioners have to be committed to lifelong learning as technological expertise will be critically important (Adam, 2015).

Considering the restructuring of businesses globally, the secretary of the future will be one of information manager whose major work will be done through information and Communication Technology (ICT) with very little human contact. Secretarial practitioner of the future should be one who will not be a mere creature of routine, but will make her own openings for advancement; whose energy and initiative will diffuse itself throughout the whole organization, bracing it up to full concert pitch, until by and by she will not only be recipient of her superior orders, but their valued adviser as well, in whom ever-growing trust and confidence is reposed (Adam, 2015).

Adam (2011) opined that secretarial students must understand that the study of secretarial course is a business subject and can upgrade their studies in the future into business course programmes such as management, information management and technology, project management, strategic management, etc, as they have upper hands in everything that they do in the office. Hence, the advancement of secretarial practice to professionals goes beyond Diploma qualification status to Degree, Master, etc, which may earn a secretarial practitioner the management or senior executive level post within the administrative functions in any modern firm. Secretarial practitioners should be proactive in their profession to be abreast with the trend since technology has improved work efficiency within work environments.

The 21st century secretary according to the National Office Management Association (NAOMA) should not be confused with a typist (someone that knows how to touch-type but does not know shorthand), a junior stenographer (one who knows shorthand as well as typing and can take and transcribe dictation), a stenographer (one who is proficient in all these skills, knows proper letter format, and deals with various office routines). Job titles have changed due to advancing technology which has changed the image and responsibilities of today's office workers. Over the years professional Secretaries International (PSI) has been trying to find a more appropriate name to replace the title 'secretary' but yet no appropriate name has been agreed upon. To this effect, titles such as office assistants, information manager/specialist, administrative assistants, executive secretary, personal assistants, etc., will continue to be used as a title for a secretarial practitioner.

Challenges of Secretarial Profession

Secretarial profession has become more vast and highly demanding than it used to be in the past.

Skill Shortages: There are gaps and mismatches in new skills which are closely linked to the changing secretarial role, and the new areas of work for secretaries. In the present office environment, employers need secretaries to be flexible, adaptable, proactive and willing to exploit opportunities to broaden their own role (Zuin, 2015). Some employers reported considerable resistance to change amongst some secretaries, and an unwillingness to step out of rigidly defined occupation boundaries (Zuin, 2014). Hence the need for people with right attitude rather than with specific skills is also related to the difficulty in secretarial profession. Employers want secretaries who are prepared to change.

Perception of Secretarial profession: Research have shown that reasons for choosing secretarial career constitute to that challenges faced in the profession as most students saw the profession as a quick way to obtain a career but only a temporary career that would eventually move to other career options (Adam, 2015). Others choose the profession because they did not have the academic skills to pursue other careers. Another myth that goes on people's mind is that secretarial profession is for only ladies or women; therefore the profession is always looked down by male counterparts; hence it is obvious that majority pursuing the profession are mostly women.

Lack of Career progression: The career path of secretarial profession has been limited due to the fact that most universities are not interested or do not have the expertise to develop and grow this important profession as most universities are not running programmes in secretaryship but only polytechnics are running secretarial programme at ordinary national Diploma (OND) and higher national Diploma (HND). Hence the career

aspirations and top management positions in the economy has no reference to the secretary in the decision making process as the professionalism of secretary is not factored in as part of the development decision making within the economy. The issue of secretarial job design has also been attributed to lack of career progression (Zuin, 2014).

Cultural Diversity: One of the challenges of the secretarial practitioners will be to cultivate an appreciation of cultural diversity. The secretarial practitioners of the future will interact with people from different parts of the world. This means learning about other culture, protocol and being proficient in other languages.

Awareness of some IT Packages: This has become a problem as most of the packages are more advanced and require secretaries to undertake more sophisticated functions.

Lack of Professional Bodies: The low image accorded to secretarial profession will be drastically reduced if there is an association to champion the course of secretaries.

Conclusion

Advances in ICT and increased computerizations, changes in organizational cultures and organization theories have greatly influenced moves towards redefinition of the secretarial role and skill requirements; hence the secretarial roles should expand to accommodate rapid organizational change and business needs.

Recommendations

1. Business educators as well as training and education providers and governments need to adapt to a changing environment by keeping the best of the old and using it as a base for building and to respond positively to the new in order to survive and grow.
2. Old secretaries who are casualties of new technology should avail themselves the opportunity of being retrained in order to learn and know them better; and those intending to join secretarial profession should take courses that actually matches the growth of ICT; which will soon make them masters in the future and more marketable in the employment sector.
3. The secretarial practitioners should understand that for job advancement to the top, that personal skills trump technical ability, hence one of the ways forward lies in honing ones soft skills which will likely help one to stand out from the crowd.
4. Professional secretaries should make efforts to professionalize secretaryship by the formation of a strong and virile association of secretaries as this will influence the inclusion of secretarial programmes in the university degree programmes. And this will in turn encourage more people especially males to choose secretaryship as a career.

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