

SECRETARIAL PROFESSIONALS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TRANSFORMATIONAL AND LIFELONG LEARNING

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Abstract

Secretarial professionals are people who provide secretarial support in businesses but the professionals are part of the workforce for which there has been little consideration or activity to ensure there is a career pathway or professional development opportunities. This negative attitude most often come from within the professionals resulting in lack of value of self and the role. Organizational attitude to professional development for secretarial professionals is also another notable barrier as shown by researches. The lack of required professional development by Secretarial professional has contributed to the perception that this type of work (provision of service) is largely considered non-professional or even unskilled. Though there are courses which prepare Secretarial professionals for employment into any organization, there may still be a knowledge gap due to the nature of their various roles more especially where the professionals were not exposed to a wide variety of learning experiences. This paper aims to explore how those knowledge gaps can best be filled through professional development or transformational and lifelong learning.

Keywords: secretarial profession, transformational and lifelong learning

Introduction

We are living in an age in which adults, particularly those in or seeking employment, are expected to engage in education, training or learning throughout their lives. Such learning is believed to make individuals more productive, more adaptable and better citizens, and thus promote both the national economy and social well-being. Secretarial professionals are not an exception.

Unfortunately some researches were of the view that presently, there is an undervaluing of the Secretarial role, and there are limitations around the career pathway options for Secretarial professionals. Both of these factors as indicated in the research, are enhanced by lack of required professional development for the role which of course also adds to lack of value placed on the Secretarial profession by employers and the secretarial professionals themselves.

Predominantly, over half of the limitations, according to Kimberly (2011), came from within the professionals themselves. These limitations were based on their own fear of failing, the belief that continues learning wouldn't help them

because the environment in which they lived or worked is unsupportive for a variety of reasons or quite simply that they did not want to undertake "study". These limitations often lead to a lack of value of self and the role. (Lloyd 2010).

This is contrary to what secretarial professionals are known to be. In the opinion of **Burge (2006)**, great secretarial professionals proactively look for ways to improve their skills. To them, he said, transformational and lifelong learning makes the difference. According to him, his more than 20 years of research shows him that, without a doubt, educated secretarial professionals are more valuable to employers, more capable of handling multiple challenges and emerging job expectations, and even better equipped to adapt to the fast-paced business world. What's more, he said "they usually earn greater professional rewards and enjoy higher job satisfaction".

Secretarial professionals who are not in this group are courting what **Burge (2006)**, called "career death" and job insecurity: fewer opportunities to advance, increased risks of being downsized out of a job, or worse— outright dismissal for failing to stay up to date in this fast-changing profession. What Secretarial Professionals can do to maximize their value to employers in today's business environment, is to take every advantage to stay on top by constantly updating their skills and engaging in professional development through transformational and lifelong learning.

What is Professional Development?

Professional development refers to the acquisition of skills and knowledge both for personal development and for career advancement. Professional development encompasses all types of facilitated learning opportunities, ranging from college degrees to formal coursework, conferences and informal learning opportunities situated in practice. It has been described as intensive and collaborative, ideally incorporating an evaluative stage. There are a variety of approaches to professional development, including consultation, coaching, lesson study, mentoring, reflective supervision and technical assistance. (Lloyd 2013)

According to Bonnie Low-Kramen (2013), Professional development is a valuable tool for both employers and secretarial professionals. For employers, in her opinion, it assures that a prospective or existing employee has the highest standard of professional understanding and technical skill. For secretarial professionals, professional development opens doors to advancement, opportunities and is a valuable learning experience.

In the opinion of Kimberly (2012) also, Professional development boosts the individual's confidence and skills. The reasons for pursuing professional development according to her, is to acquire self-esteem, self-improvement, self-

confidence, high level of pride and self-satisfaction. Personal growth and personal fulfillment are the strongest motivators you can have if you pursue professional development

To Joan (2013), Professional Development is a life-long commitment to continuing education through which the validation of professionalism and current skills can be gained. It also assures that secretarial professionals are staying abreast of new technologies, techniques and issues in the profession. It helps maintain the high quality standards and value that comes along with professional development.

Professional development is about the Secretarial Professionals

“Take a look around any office; it is not hard to find the latest innovations in software, electronic devices and furniture”. Julie (2013) said. But as innovative as those things may have been when they were first purchased, she observed, they quickly became obsolete because another idea inevitably follows resulting in the latest and greatest thing everyone has to have. The same thing can happen to the secretarial professionals. If the professionals don't stay on top of their game and consistently engage in strategic activities to develop and advance their thinking, they'll become obsolete over time and risk replacement as well.

According to Kimberly (2012), every single day secretarial professionals have the opportunity to enhance their professional power or dilute it. He said that, people with the most professional power recognize that they're a work in progress. They know there is always more to learn, ways to grow, and new skills to build. They're neither negative of themselves nor noncritical, but rather “gently honest” with themselves at all times. Professional development, to Kimberly (2012), shows employers, clients and associates that secretarial professionals are serious about their career.

Cheetham (2001) also observed that, to unleash your professional power, you must be a persistent seeker of truth and lifelong improvement. You must frequently evaluate your efforts and your results and recognize when your gifts are fueling your success or signaling there are opportunities for improvement. The more you understand yourself, the more quickly your professional power will grow. In this direction, according to Lloyd (2012), positive attitudes to gain knowledge should primarily be based on building of self-confidence and the value of lifelong learning. The data on motivation to achieve knowledge in Lloyd's research also showed that self-motivation was the most important factor in achieving professional development.

Even though the value of a professional development being recognized in the workplace is important to Secretarial professionals, however in the opinion of Eth

(2013), it is not the panacea to all difficulties for the Secretarial professionals when it comes to professional development. What is critical, according to her, is having a professional development pathway and/or a goal that is being worked towards. That is why, according to Robert (2013), taking responsibility for your own professional development is the key to success because, as he said, if you do not demonstrate that your professional development matters to you why should anyone else believe it matters either?

Thus, as Hosking (2013) indicated, if you want to be satisfied with your work, you need to continuously improve your skill set and grow in different directions. “That is the only way you will really feel challenged over the long term rather than waiting for your organization to come up with professional development opportunities for you” he said. Again remember that it is your job to guide your career into new territory.

For these reasons, it is advisable that secretarial professionals make it a habit to keep an eye out for ways to expand their knowledge and skills, especially in areas that will enhance their long-term career prospects, and then approach their organization about any learning opportunities they want to engage in.

Engaging In Professional Development

Pursuing a professional development through transformational and lifelong learning is one of the best ways a secretarial professional can advance his/her career. Just like the time and energy the professionals put into earning a degree that got them to where they are today, taking the time to sharpen their skills or learn new ones can help them reach the next level at work (Adrian 2011).

Thankfully, Secretarial Professionals don't need an expense account to stay at the top of their game because there are dozens of ways including classes, webinars, and resources out there to continue their education. Here are some of the favorite ways to get smart for less.

Engage in Everyday learning

Learning is part of everyday language and accepted as a key attribute of being human. The phrase, “You learn something new every day”, captures the often accidental and incidental nature of learning as part of everyday human activity. The increasing interest in the workplace as a site for learning **also** partly reflects employers' concerns about the added value of off-the-job training to the achievement of their business objectives, and the realization that it is difficult to isolate the effect of training from other organizational variables. (Lorna et al 2010). Therefore,

secretarial professionals, on their own and in co-operation with colleagues, should seize any opportunity that comes their way, to acquire skills and knowledge in the context in which they are practicing.

Reading, in the opinion Chivers (2001), matters less than *digesting* whatever comes your way. Not everything is worth a “full read”; sometimes scanning is enough to glean the gems of knowledge you need. Chivers further says, comprehension is the essence of self-education, where true lifelong learning happens. She went on to advise secretarial professionals to spend a few minutes today writing down all the learning tools at their disposal, as well as specific resources they believe will help boost their skills, productivity and effectiveness (i.e., books, periodicals, industry-related publications, corporate policies, department memos, the manager's in-box, etc.). This is, perhaps, the first and best way to pursue learning which they can do on their own, at their own pace, and every day.

Enroll in Formal training

Formal education, according to Lorna (2013) is any education provided by a recognized institution, following a planned course of study. The term is used to distinguish formal education from education obtained through experience and general reading. This type of training, is different from other lifelong-learning techniques, largely because it involves reviewing a large amount of information in a condensed timeframe and a trainer, who is often a “subject expert”, qualified to share new ideas that might not otherwise been heard. Formal training therefore mean education obtained through an accredited source such as high school or university/college, as opposed to on the job training or street smarts provided by the "school of hard knocks," as in life's experiences. Of course, true lifelong learning usually involves a commitment to pursuing formal training— whether it is higher education (like a college degree, Diplomas and Higher National Diplomas etc) or any number of professional seminars and courses available to secretarial professionals.

Formal training is an important part of human and organizational life. It specifically forms an important part of Secretarial profession. The formal training is said to be successful if what is expected to be known by secretarial professional undertaking it are known. According to Odiome (1970) almost any well planned and completely executed course will draw a favourable response from those who attended it. He went further to state that one of the problems confronting secretarial professionals is that many of the courses they enrolled in do not change or meet the required objective. It is therefore advisable that the training pursued must be the one that will be of benefit in both short and long terms.

Belonging to professional associations helps make connections

The foundation of any business has to be the ability to exchange ideas and really listen to ideas from others. It is important to broaden our minds, share ideas and gain a mutual understanding according to **Mandelberg (2011)**.

Associations, as **Mandelberg (2011)** observed, are one of the most valuable, inexpensive and under-utilized resources we have. They give us the ability to affiliate with others who have common needs and interests. In his opinion, Association events are also where you can find people too quickly and easily relate to, people you can share frustrations and success with, people who care about your experiences and people whose experiences you want to learn about.

Even though Social media rules the world, however none of that diminishes the importance of a long-time standard business practice — belonging to a professional focused association. This is because, as Bonie (2013) said, “today's globalized environment needs individuals who are committed to lifelong learning and who are willing to build relationships in a cross-cultural world. So given the global nature of the workplace, membership of professional organizations and networking has never been more important than it is today.

A few of the many benefits associations offer as identified by **Mandelberg, (2011)** include providing a window into the future of your profession; gaining insights from colleagues who have been there before; improving your skills and those of your colleagues; finding solutions to problems you don't have to figure out how to fix; leveraging the work of others for your own benefit; developing a community of practice you can call on for help, advice, collaboration, and many other things too big, too time-consuming, and too expensive to do on your own.

In actual fact, this is what NAPSSON is set out for NAPSSON is committed to increasing members' personal and professional efficiency by hosting National Seminar that deal with topics related to the current business environment such as this. Participation in a Professional development event such as this, gives us a unique opportunity to meet, interact with people from organizations, and better understand why and how we think and operate differently.

However, it is not enough just to be a member; you must step out of your comfort zone and embrace the tasks NAPSSON presents to you by taking part in various working groups at both branch and national level. Don't be a passive bystander, be pro-active and embrace every opportunity to become a better person and a more capable employee. The world is changing and our profession cannot sit

behind in the office like a dinosaur.

Networking

Times are tough, and volatility seems to rule the markets. The workforce is more age-diverse and changing more rapidly due to technology than ever before as observed by i.c MICHAEL (2013). In the reign of LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube, etc., you can say that social media now dominate all business activities. There's therefore no professional alive today who wouldn't rather be a great networker because it's really just about being an excellent communicator and all-around good person and, truly, who *wouldn't* want that.

Roy Sheppard (2013) said that “I meet a lot of people. It's my job”. I came to realize many years ago that “who you know determines who you become in life”. Behind every successful person is a sound and well nurtured network. **The most successful people are always the best connected.** They have invested in their future by realizing the importance of “getting out more”. Therefore the most significant opportunities in your future life as a secretarial professional will almost certainly come about as a direct or an indirect result of who you meet and get to know. And (very importantly who they know); both inside your organization and across your industry. It's not only the quality of your work. For others to recommend you, they need to know, like, trust, value and respect you as a person that is why the need for effective networking. (Roy 2013). Effective networking is about being an excellent communicator and all-around good person. **According** to Fertik (2013), effective networking is not shameless self-promotion to everyone you meet but about finding and meeting precisely the right person for your needs at the time and also thinking about what you have to offer that person not just what they can do for you.

When it comes to Networking, as advised by Novati (2013), never underestimate your own power. As she observed, it's easy to think especially when we're less experienced or in the presence of those much more established than we are that we have nothing to offer. “Be confident that's almost never the case and be humble enough to offer what you can” she said. Because, as she observed, sometimes it's a perspective that you're uniquely qualified to give or perhaps it's a connection you'd be glad to make or it could be as simple as forwarding an article that would make a highly relevant and useful read for the other person.

In networking, also, according to Hosking (2013), you don't need to change who you are before you can be an excellent networker though it is important that you care how you're perceived. To him, you are to watch for conversational cues to know when to ask a question, inject a comment or smile, say thanks, and graciously take your leave but also advised that, you ask trusted friends to tell you about any verbal tics or habits that might make you seem less than professionally graceful.

“Knowledge Sharing” Within the Branches

Theoretically speaking, Novati (2011), Knowledge sharing is an activity through which knowledge (i.e. Information, skills, or expertise) is exchanged among professionals, in these specific case Secretarial professionals. In addition, Knowledge sharing means interaction and exchange of information, experience and best practice to reach common objectives and obtain better results. The sharing of knowledge constitutes a big challenge for networks and more especially “Branches of this association” because people tend to resist sharing their knowledge with the rest of the secretarial professionals. In fact one of the biggest obstacles as observed by Novati (2011), is the common notion that knowledge is personal property.

But shared knowledge according to Novati (2011), offers different vie points and possible solutions to problems. To promote knowledge sharing and remove knowledge sharing obstacles, Novati (2011) advised that, organizations (Branch Executives) should encourage discovery and innovation at the end of which, the result will be the creation of a common organizational culture. To create a knowledge sharing culture, Mariachiara (2011) suggested, it is necessary to encourage Secretarial Professionals to work together more effectively, to collaborate and to share - ultimately to make their knowledge more productive. “Organizations” (Branch Executives),as she said “can then try and organize seminars, round table discussions, and focus groups within their branches, because if the old paradigm was “knowledge is power”, today the situation is evolving and “sharing knowledge is power” is in their personal interest”.

If it is understood that sharing our knowledge helps to do our jobs more effectively, then it will helps to retain our jobs, helps in our personal development and career progression, rewards us for getting things done and then knowledge sharing will become a reality and can bring with it many positive benefits”.

Why Organizations Should Support Professional Development and investment in Secretarial Professionals

It was noted by Lloyd, (2010) and Truss et.al. (2009), that, there appears to be a perception within some organizations that transformational and lifelong learning is not required by Secretarial professionals. This lack of recognition of the value of lifelong learning in this field means that achieving it is not often part of any professional development plan of the organization.

In fact, in most organization, as McEwen, (1997) observed, secretarial professionals are a traditionally under-trained and under-served group of extremely bright and resourceful people even though as he said, they have succeeded in their

roles *in spite of* the lack of support and training rather than *because of* it. This is true coast to coast, in organizations both large and small.

As a trainer of assistants, Bonnie Low-Kramen (2013) said “I hear regularly from staffers whose companies have never offered any training for the secretarial staff. Managers will argue that they cannot quantify the return on investment (ROI). I argue that these staffers are the backbone of your company and that supporting them to develop their skills is very smart business”.

This is why according to Lloyd (2013), **Secretarial Professionals are always hungry to learn because they** know that they need to commit to life-long learning in order to stay at the top of their game. CEOs and business leaders should recognize this need and invest in their secretarial professional development.

Bonnie (2013) also observed that, secretarial professionals all love what they do. They unabashedly and unapologetically love their work in support of others because *they know better*. The Professionals, to her, are some of the brightest, most organized and resourceful people on the planet. That is why, as she said, not everyone is cut out for this demanding work. “They are very far from being “just” anything. The smartest people in the business world know to invest in the true power of the assistant.

In one of Lloyd study conducted in 2012, she found out that “it is worth considering that an organization which supports their secretarial professionals with professional development opportunities may gain benefit from the outcomes as was demonstrated in Brenda's case study where her manager commented on her excellent work as she took on a wider range of tasks to support him”. These outcomes, she stated, come from more confident secretarial professionals who value themselves and their role, feel valued and may be able to contribute in a more constructive and effective way.

McEwen, (2012) opined that the benefits of providing professional development opportunities for the Secretarial team go far beyond the actual knowledge that the professionals gained. Management of organizations, he said, “should note that the professionals will feel a sense of ownership in the organizations and a feeling of loyalty since, by this act, the management is, demonstrating her belief in their talents and respect for their value”. On top of all that, he observed, the most important benefit of providing training is self-confidence and self-esteem, which are priceless.

While compensation has always been an excellent incentive for employee retention, the number one motivator for the secretarial staff costs nothing. To Secretarial Professionals, training is a strong demonstration of respect as **Joan**

Burge (2006) observed. Therefore, in Joan's opinion, the most profoundly and meaningful investment an organization can make in secretarial professionals and in anyone for that matter, is to believe in them enough, trust them enough and support them to learn. Knowledge he said, is power, and it is also a bottomless source of loyalty, commitment and profits.

Conclusion

Secretarial Professionals play a significant role in supporting the growth and success of their organizations. They continue to rise admirably to the challenges and changes that have reinvented the roles they fill in their organizations. **Employers are supposed to value secretarial professionals who demonstrate a commitment to ongoing education because these types of professionals bring enhanced skill sets and new ideas to the organization which in turn increase productivity and positively impacting on the whole progress of the organization.** Employers can maximize and better utilize the collective skills, competencies, and knowledge of their office professionals by supporting their continued growth, and in particular by increasing the level of involvement and support for their Professional Development.

Unfortunately as discussed in the paper, Secretarial professionals themselves, tend to get so focused on their daily activities and forget to carve out time for professional development and networking. It's essential to make time for these opportunities, if the professionals are to maintain a competitive advantage.

Recommendations

- **Employers should invest in the training of Secretarial Professionals through** supplemental in-house classes and workshops in both soft skills and hard skills
- **Employers should also support event attendance by sponsoring** Secretarial professionals to attend at least one professional conference or workshop per year.
- After their participation, they can be asked for a short presentation to the staff about the conference and what was learned.
- **Promote networking by** providing regular opportunities for networking and the sharing of information among the Secretarial Professionals including provision of space and funds.

- Secretarial Professionals should utilize any opportunity that comes their way to engage in professional development.
- Institutes of higher learning, such as universities, polytechnic and colleges of education should introduce courses relevant to secretarial profession or where obtainable improve on it to meet the present challenges in business.

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