

CREATING ENABLING CLIMATE FOR THRIVING OF SECRETARIAL PROFESSION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper is purely based on the review of literature on creating enabling climate for thriving of secretarial profession in Nigeria. The paper covers impediments to thriving of secretarial profession which include government policies, scheme of services, education, technology, interlopers into secretarial profession, absence of regulatory body, secretarial ethics and breaking through the barrier. Suggested solutions to these challenges are proffered along with the discussion of these challenges.

Introduction

Every profession needs a congenial climate to thrive, and secretarial profession is not an exception. In every organization, the climate is deliberately planned to engender success both to the organization itself and to individual workers in the organization. By organizational climate, we are referring to the meanings attached to interrelated experiences at work. In the same vein, organizational culture is a construct that exists alongside organizational climate and is defined as the basic assumption people have about the world and the value that guide life in organizations. In other words, organizational culture and climate explains how people in organization behave when influenced by values, norms, attitudes, and perceptions.

The way in which organizational culture shapes and controls employee behavior is evident in the way managers perform their four functions of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. Have you noticed how managers attempt to create or influenced organizational culture? When managers organize ceremonies and rites, they tend to recognize incidents of importance to the organization as a whole and to specific employees (Berger and Luckman, 1967). The most common rites that come to mind are rites of passage, of integration, and of enhancement. Rites of passage determine how individuals enter, advance within, or leave the organization. Rites of integration such as announcements of organizational successes, office parties, etc., reinforce common bonds among organizational members. Right of enhancement, such as award nights, employee promotions etc., let organizations publicly recognize and reward employees' contributions (Jones and George, 2003).

These overtures notwithstanding, workers and professional groups understand that the managers do this to ensure that the corporate goals of the organization are achieved and will not hesitate to “go to war” against such individuals and groups if that goal is threatened. That is why workers are conscious to do all they can to improve their welfare and they can only achieve this through professional groupings.

Professional associations are very important groupings in organizations. Apart from benefits of professional developments, certifications, professional advice, job opportunities, they lobby for interest of members and influence change in the industry. Without professional associations, organizations can only do little and if allowed, do nothing except those things that keep milk and honey flowing for the organization. There is no doubt too that certain professions are more influential than others and differ considerably in the eyes of organizations as they are given preferential treatment. It is, therefore, very important that APSSON is strengthened to be able to enjoy the support of the industry of practice.

Secretarial Profession

Secretarial profession is very important in every organization be it a company, an institution, ministry, association, or club. Secretarial practice cuts across every sphere of human activity. The secretarial profession has been around for about 500 years. In the Roman empire, secretaries were usually educated men who took dictation as “Scribes” and acted as trusted advisors. In the Bible the Scribes were those regarded as very enlightened. The secretarial role emerged because of the natural need for prominent persons to whom confidential matters could be entrusted. In early modern times, members of the nobility who controlled trade and commerce needed secretaries as confidants to handle their correspondence. As commerce and trade expanded, people of wealth and power, government and businesses need trusted agents to handle correspondence in private, confidential, and public matters. In modern times, men with broad general education occupy the secretarial profession not only because of complex management activities but because continuing education is imperative to career success.

As a profession, the secretary has evolved as business and work environment change. The environment in which this change is glaring is technology. Due to technological explosion, the secretary is involved in all kinds of activities that a thin line exists between the secretary’s core role and that of other workers from other fields. For instance, typing, word processing, spreadsheet management, records management, desktop publishing, to mention but a few, are now having other professional followers. The implication is that other professionals can do, sometimes better than the secretaries, especially the ill-prepared ones. The other environment worthy of note is the administrative milieu in which the secretary practices. In Nigeria, paper qualification takes centre stage.

The system ignores people with lower qualifications and secretaries have nothing other than Higher National Diploma.

Those who have a degree in secretarial administration, and they are few indeed, as only one University in Nigeria – Rivers State University – offers it, search for jobs other than secretaryship due to the dichotomy between HND and Degree certificates. The salary structure is skewed in favour of degree holders and so are the duties attached to such jobs. On the contrary, the environment in the developed economies is different because emphasis is placed on productivity not on a salary structure that recognizes qualification only. Furthermore, the 21st century secretary's titles and roles have transformed into administrative professionals - administrative assistants, office coordinators, executive assistants, and office managers. Their roles and responsibilities which require skills in management functions and technology include: (1) project management, (2) integrated computer software applications, (3) organization and scheduling (4) Internet/intranet communications and research (5) document preparation, storage, and retrieval, with emphasis on electronic recordkeeping (6) customer service and (7) public relations (IAAP Editor, in Mambo, 2014).

Contrary to the Nigerian situation, where the nomenclature of administrative professionals is nonexistent, administrative professionals in the developed countries are handling wider variety of duties which according to Bogen Schneider and Slack, (2011), include purchase of office equipment and supplies, plan meetings and special events, work closely with vendors and suppliers, create presentation and give them as well, interview, orient and supervise other staff, write and edit documents, schedule events and facilities, coordinate direct mailing, maintain multiple schedules and calendars, handle messages and correspondence (with voice mail, e-mail and regular postal mail), maintain computers, files, directories, and databases. The secretary with high soft skills which are as critical as technical knowledge and experience can quickly move into office manager, administrative and general affairs role and more often take up the project management and human resources functions.

Impediments to Thriving of Secretarial Profession in Nigeria

Numerous challenges confront secretarial profession in Nigeria and there is no doubt that these issues will attract attention in this conference. If the truth be told, challenges impeding the progress of secretarial profession in Nigeria are the most important to the Association of Professional Secretarial Staff of Nigeria that need to be addressed in this conference. In tackling this sub-topic, we will draw all other ancillary anecdotes that will make our discussion complete.

Government Policies

Policies on qualification and career profession of Secretaries remain the same for decades. The career path of secretaries was, *ab initio*, faulty because it

was conceived as a junior cadre where professionals cannot go beyond a certain grade level irrespective of their qualifications. Secondly, the qualification required for the profession was commercial certificate achievement in shorthand and typing and other commercial subjects. Though HND in Secretarial studies was introduced in the Seventies, the dichotomy between HND and degree graduates stifled the growth trajectory of secretaries. As we are discussing here, it is not even clear whether the dichotomy between HND, and Degree holders have been truly abrogated. Even if this were to be so, the HND holder in secretarial studies would rather prefer to enter the administrative officer cadre since the secretarial cadre has a ceiling imposed on it. Thus, government, especially the Ministry or Establishment, needs to reconstruct the secretarial cadre to ensure that a professional secretary can rise to the post of a director with experience and advanced degrees.

We hereby propose scheme of service for Secretarial staff which should merge with that of Administrative Officer Cadre at level 15. This is to avoid further controversies, and this is also as important as the enactment itself. As for the junior secretarial staff that enters the secretarial cadre, they should climb the ladder as specified in Fig. 2 and terminate at grade level 14 as is currently the case.

Confidential Secretary Cadre	Administrative Officer Cadre	Grade Level
Confidential Secretary/Bilingual Secretary Grade I	Administrative Officer II	08
Senior Confidential Secretary/Bilingual Secretary	Administrative Officer I	09
Principal Confidential Secretary/Bilingual Secretary II	Senior Administrative Officer	10
Principal Confidential Secretary/Bilingual Secretary Grade I	Principal Administrative Officer	12
Assistant Chief Confidential Secretary	Assistant Chief Administrative Officer	13
Chief Confidential Secretary	Chief Administrative Officer	14
Assistant Director (Administration)	Assistant Director (Administration)	15
Deputy Director (Administration)	Deputy Director (Administration)	16
Director (Administration)	Director (Administration)	17

Fig. 1: Proposed Secretarial Scheme for Graduates

Confidential Secretary cadre	Grade 1 level	Admin officer cadre
Confidential Secretary Grade v	05	-
Confidential Secretary Grade iii	06	-
Confidential Sec. Bilingual Sec. Grade II	07	-

Fig. 2: Entry for non-graduates

The Challenge of Education

Education is another area where secretaries are disadvantaged. There are no postgraduate qualifications in secretarial studies not only in Nigeria but anywhere in the world. In Nigeria, secretaries desiring higher qualifications enter business education programme but find it difficult to advance in their secretarial profession because those interpreting our rules claim that higher degrees in business education are meant for teacher educators. This should not be so. Those who have advanced degrees in education courses in other disciplines such as chemistry, computer, physics, etc., climb to the position of Director in their respective ministries.

According to the Association of Professional Office Managers in Mambo (2014) individuals who wish to become office managers should earn a degree in business administration. What this tells us is that qualification for secretarial job cannot necessarily be limited to secretarial degree. Technological development has transformed the secretarial environment to information processing environment requiring computer software packages for electronic communication rather than paper, file, and pen. However, the need to open the qualification training for advanced secretarial position to administrative, technological, and philosophical education paradigm should be the trend. As supported by Ali, Burcu, and Murat (2012), the general trend in sectors where secretary profession is present should be considered in terms of the employment status of the work force, changing professional qualification and innovation regarding technology, organization, and customer demands. By extension therefore, secretarial workers should not be restricted to a cadre with a ceiling if continuous education is liberalized as suggested here.

Talent Mismatch

Talent mismatch is another challenge because those who are trained to do conventional secretarial jobs cannot perform to the level required of administrative professionals which requires IT skills of the 21st century office. It, therefore, means that continuous education and training must be embraced by secretaries if they must break through the ceiling imposed on them by the salary structure in our system.

Technology

The technology challenge is an enormous one. Technology has changed our ways, our work, our lives, and the system we are used to in the home, in the offices and in the society. Every profession is affected, and secretarial profession is not an exception. The challenge of technology to the secretarial profession can be discussed from two perspectives. Firstly, the nature of work has changed to information processing environment with machines such as computers with their software where capabilities are limitless; mobile devices which shift the work away from physical office locations have destroyed time-bound activities thereby

creating virtual offices, making work deadlines achievable anywhere at any time. The scenario where the secretary is entangled with boxes of files, telephone landlines, paper, pen, stencils duplicating machines, has collapsed giving way to a complex and interconnected ecosystems in almost all office environments.

The other perspective worthy of note is that everybody can now do the work of the secretary or so it seems. People process their own documents, answer their own phones, organize, and store their own records. In offices today, computer operators are employed as secretaries. The truth is that computer operators who have mastered the office suit – Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access - can comfortably produce all kinds of document that the office requires. Apart from computer operators, every worker, from the administrative staff to the accounting, engineering, marketing, medical, legal staff, etc., all can make use of the computer to solve their problems. The question is: which profession has witnessed such a monumental encroachment as the secretarial profession? The challenge is to ensure that secretaries outperform any other interlopers into their practice.

Regulatory Body

The challenge posed by the absence of a chartered body to advance the knowledge and practice of secretarial profession through regulating standards and maintaining ethical practice is a very serious one. The absence of a chartered body to regulate standards and ethical practice in secretarial profession has limited the advancement of the profession in Nigeria. I commend Association of Professional Secretarial Staff of Nigeria (APSSON) for laudable steps taken so far. I understand that the bill is awaiting Mr. President's assent. Please, do not rest until it is assented.

Loss of Jobs

The global labour trend points to disappearing jobs and emerging new work. According to international Labour Organization, more than 212 million people are already out of work. Specifically, more than 1.6 million secretarial and administrative assistant jobs have vanished since 2000 (Fretzeig, 2020). Moreover, it is projected that 20% of that population will disappear by 2028. The world of work has gone full circle and like it or not, employment seekers face the reality of today's workplace which is temporary as there is no guarantee that full employment is in the offing. Loss of jobs is being recorded in every profession. The third industrial Revolution is the Shift Age which came with digital systems communication and rapid advances of computing power that have accentuated new ways of generating, processing, and sharing information and it is responsible for the globalized community the world has become. With the arrival of Internet of Things (IoT), and Artificial Intelligence (AI), more jobs will be lost, and more profession disappear. For instance, it is reported that IBM Watson Software gives better legal advice than lawyers and it is feared in the USA that, come ten years'

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time, young lawyers will have no jobs. There is also software that is said to perform cancer diagnosis four times more accurate than any human and doctors are jittery. It is also being predicted that there will be no need of referees in football matches sooner than later and referees are rethinking the fate of their profession. Therefore, the secretaries should brace up to rethink their profession. For instance, the essence of working in the civil service is to become a director and ultimately a permanent secretary. Those who work in companies want to occupy the post of the chief executive officer. If the secretary cannot become a director, permanent secretary or a chief executive officer, then something must give. Secretaries must wake up to the reality that there is no M.sc or PhD degree in secretarial studies. What is necessary is to pick up advanced degrees in administration to seamlessly transit into the administrative cadre at the Director level provided the cadre I earlier proposed is adopted. After all Secretarial Administration is administrative just as Public Administration and others.

Secretarial Ethics

Secretarial ethics plays a significant role in creating an enabling environment for secretarial profession to thrive. It is true that computer operators claim they are doing the job of the secretary and the other officers who produce their documents feel that the secretary can be dispensed with. Can they also outperform the secretaries who were fully prepared and live and breathe secretarial ethics? I doubt it so much. Secretarial ethics bind the profession and are pivotal to the very core responsibility of the secretary. Secretarial ethics are built on the principles of equity, justice, liberty, dignity, and truth. It can take a full lecture to enunciate the role of ethical practice in the profession but the crucibles in which the secretarial ethics interplay include:

- Confidentiality
- Loyalty
- Reliable
- Honesty
- Work unsupervised
- Responsible
- Co-operative
- Flexibility
- No bribery
- Multi-tasking

Breaking through the Barriers

I carefully avoided speaking to the sub-themes of this conference because I know the attention of the speakers and the conferees will be drawn to them. However, it is pertinent that we understand very clearly that ‘man is the architect of his fate’. We cannot possibly make *omelette* without breaking eggs. As

secretaries, you must take the bull by the horns. If we agree that the profession is saddled with bottlenecks – and there are many- subordinating type of job, low esteem not only by others but by the secretaries themselves, low pay, career path littered with obstacles, dearth of education pathways, neglect by policy makers who are direct beneficiaries of secretarial services and orphaned by the system, then secretaries must take their own destinies into their hands. How can they achieve this?

Education is a liberator. It was Malcolm X who was quoted as saying that education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today. Always strive to update your qualification in order to be ready for the next level that you desire to be. Since graduating from secretarial school, many of you may have never returned to take another degree or a higher degree. Many continue to complain till today that there is no advanced degree in secretarial administration, or that if they acquire higher degrees other than secretarial ones, the system will not allow them to convert. These are excuses. Remember that other HND holders go through the same hard times, but they eventually convert to administrative officer cadre. You can do the same. With the approval of government that HND and degree becomes equal, the problem is reduced.

It is very necessary that secretaries embrace changes as they occur. Do not remain with the skills you acquired years ago. Update your skills, especially digital computing as the future office is fast transiting to digital and knowledge economy. I listened to many secretaries lamenting of the neglect of shorthand. The skills needed in the office of today and the future have changed. It is very necessary to note that office administrator position such as office assistant, personal assistant, administrative assistant, office manager or secretary requires office skills such as communication filing/paper management, bookkeeping, typing (50 words a minute, slightly higher than the global standard of 39 wpm), equipment handling, customer service, research, analytics, project management, technology savvy and self-motivation. Shorthand skill is no longer mentioned but if this beautiful subject still appeals to you either for its versatility or special personal need, keep improving on it.

Conclusion

There is probably no profession that suffered and is still suffering from neglect as the secretarial profession. This association is doing great in her efforts to right this wrong. This is not the time to despair. The way forward is continuous education, embracing new technologies, acquiring new skills adopting best secretarial practice, pursuing self-development, and taking up opportunities. I dare to say – if secretarial profession refuses to change, change your profession. Do not allow a bad situation to break you. When Prince Charles III, the now King of Great Britain visited Lagos some time ago, he advised: *“if life de show you pepper, my guy, make pepper soup”*.

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