

## **SECRETARIAL PROFESSION IN NIGERIA: AN ENDANGERED PROFESSION?**

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### **Introduction**

The theme of the conference broadly addresses how secretarial profession can thrive in Nigeria. And by thriving, it connotes growing or triumphing and which implies two-end possibilities – to thrive or not. Considering the present technological and economic climate, one may ask -can secretarial profession thrive or not? This is the motivation for coining the subtitle the discourse – Secretarial profession in Nigeria – an endangered profession?

Already, no fewer than 50 jobs in the advanced world have been declared extinct, due to processes of automation resulting from technological advancement, and among these are scribe, switchboard operator and telegram messenger (Stacker.com, 2022). Similarly, in Nigeria, Myjobmag.com (2022) makes a list of 10 jobs that may likely be extinct in Nigeria, including, cashiers, factory workers, bank tellers, librarians, and typists. Others are computer operator, postmaster, telephone boot operators, traditional printers, and receptionists. The reason adduced for this prediction is a continuous development of technology in artificial intelligence, robotics, and automation, which now require fewer human efforts. As secretary role is largely defined to be supportive of management, then there is the dire need to consider the future of secretarial profession in Nigeria, especially with the climate that is now being technology-driven. This paper interrogates the question of whether secretarial profession is an endangered profession in Nigeria.

### **A cursory Look at the Secretarial Profession**

APSSON is a professional association for secretaries in Nigeria, and it is needless to bother ourselves with yet-to-solve authoritative definition of a secretary, but to take a cursory look at the view of this association on who is a secretary and the critical role. A secretary has been defined by APSSON (2022) as someone who performs basic clerical, organizational and office responsibilities for a company, department or executive and stress that businesses of all sizes employ secretaries to help manage the front office and handle administrative matters and notes that the duties of a secretary are often unseen by the public but can be vital to helping a company stay organized and on track. From this view of a secretary by the Association, secretarial profession comprises the trained personnel that handle

office management and perform administrative functions for the executive. Therefore, the secretary is highly trained to handle office information management, personnel, and organizational managerial functions of planning and organizing. This is the modern secretarial role that makes the secretary of today versatile, though must embrace technology to be effective, while playing the traditional role of supporting the executive.

### **Is Secretarial Profession endangered in Nigeria?**

This is the crux of the matter – looking at the future of secretarial profession in Nigeria. Will secretarial profession thrive or extinct in Nigeria? The answer is not a handy one, because it is an aged-long question which has engendered bi-polar views – the pessimistic and the optimistic stance. The pessimists assert that due to economic and technological climates that oppose the growth of the secretarial profession, there is no future for the profession. Peril (2011) posed two scenarios – the impact of economic recession and new technologies on the secretarial profession. It was reported that around two million secretarial staff lost their jobs in the United State of America (USA) owing to the recession in the economy and a discovery that the bosses could take advantage of technology to carry out some secretarial works on their own (Jacobs, 2015). Similarly, in Nigeria in recent times, under the guise of casualisation, and a fallout of automation, many secretarial staff of financial institutions lost their jobs (Adetayo, 2021). This is sending signals that with time secretaries could be replaced with technology and that the profession would no longer be required in employment.

However, on the optimistic standpoint, secretarial profession has come to stay. Commenting on the widely circulated concerns that the introduction of the computerised word-processing and voice recognition systems would replace the secretaries, Peril (2011) assert that this has not happened since the early 1960s and that the secretaries of today have come to terms with the fact that technology is rather a facilitator of their jobs and has not succeeded in making the profession out modelled. Hence, by leveraging on the capabilities of technologies and the updates, secretarial profession would still stand tall in the future. It is highly sensible to align oneself with the optimistic view of the future of the secretarial profession in Nigeria, but this should be done with caution. From research, (Oborah, 2021), there are threats and weaknesses that mitigate unhindered thriving of secretarial professions, though there are similarly the strengths and opportunities for the profession. Oborah (2021) graphically and empirically depict this analysis as follows:

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
➤ Strong digital curriculum contents	➤ <i>Lacks inclusiveness</i>
➤ Diversification in curriculum contents	➤ <i>Insufficient practical instructional facilities</i>
➤ Entrepreneurial course orientation	➤ <i>Inadequate teaching and technical human resources</i>
➤ Comprehensive communication contents	➤ <i>Lacks state-of-the art in technologies</i>
➤ Core Office management skills orientation	➤ <i>Insufficient enrolment</i>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
➤ <i>Advancement in ICT</i>	➤ <i>Interlopers</i>
➤ <i>Diversification</i>	➤ <i>New technology</i>
➤ <i>Innovations</i>	➤ <i>Economic Downturn</i>
➤ <i>Professionalisation</i>	➤ <i>Government policy</i>

Figure 1: SWOT Analysis of Secretarial Profession in Nigeria, Oborah (2021)

According to Oborah (2021), The SWOT factors assented to in the study were critically thought out and buttressed by literature. For instance, Peril (2011) asserts that the fear of secretaries being replaced by technology has not happened since the early 1960s and that the secretaries of today have come to terms with the fact that technology is rather a facilitator of their jobs and has not succeeded in making the profession out modelled. The recent review of secretarial (OTM) curriculum and window of inclusion of local contents has provided a rich curriculum of secretaries in Nigeria, hence a veritable source of strengths. The graduates of the OTM programme have a sound pre-practice education and a future opportunity for the profession.

However, there is a caution - secretarial profession in Nigeria is under threat and unless some priority actions are taken, the expected future may be a mirage. There are many people who claim to be secretaries (interlopers) but are not, meddling with secretarial practice. Traditionally, there was confusion (conflict) between the role of typist, clerk-typist, junior stenographer, and secretary (Cark, 1984). Secretaries by training can perform the role of the rest, whereas the other officers

cannot perform some role of the secretaries though they sometimes meddle, and secretaries see this as interloping. This conflict still exists today even at a very high level. With manual typewriters and perhaps shorthand already out of the scene and the computer now has taken over, the computer operators' role do conflict with the secretary's role as well as officers on the executive officers cadre in the Nigeria civil service. This conflict potentially is damaging to the future of secretarial profession as the chunk of their functions would be taken away by these 'ally' office workers.

A spillover effect of role conflict in the secretarial profession would be a proliferation of professional bodies which might not actually be streamlined with secretarial profession. In addition, if many professional bodies in the same profession ensued, the unhealthy competition is bound to occur, and could threaten healthy professional development.

The threat of advancement in ICT is a phenomenon to be watched. Continuous advancement in new technology potentially renders the current skills become obsolete. This implies continuous training and retraining for a sustainable future for the secretarial profession.

### **Creating Climate for Thriving of Secretarial Profession**

No doubt, with the downturn in economic situation and continuous disruption in technology being witnessed globally (Nigeria inclusive), secretarial profession needs certain climate to thrive. Oborah (2021) has adduced that for secretarial prospects to thrive in Nigeria, there must be relevant secretarial education and training, favourable government policy, and professionalization of Secretaryship. From this assertion, the following climate would be necessary for secretarial profession to thrive in Nigeria.

#### **1. Secretarial Education and Training**

Secretarial education has been formally entrenched in the Nigerian educational system, notably at the tertiary educational level, where the course is offered at the National and Higher National Diploma levels in the polytechnics and at the bachelor's degree in the universities. As has been noted earlier, the curriculum for secretarial education which is now re-nomenclatured as Office Technology and Management is versed and comprehensive. However, there seems to a gap in the training aspect that is expected to be practically oriented. The academic content of secretarial (office technology and management) programme appears to be satisfactory but with less practical (training) activities, hence graduates of office technology and management acquire more of academic content to the detriment of the practical (vocational/professional) contents. To create the necessary climate to thrive in this regard, the professional bodies have the

responsibility to ensure that training/certification programmes form part of the initial and continuous professional development for the secretarial practitioners.

## **2. Enabling Government Policy**

At the moment, government policy (legal framework) for secretarial profession is fragmented and needs to be streamlined to the present realities. There is neither national policy nor legal framework for secretarial practices in Nigeria. For instance, the question of definition and nomenclature for secretarial personnel is still a matter for individual organisations. This is not a conducive climate for the profession to thrive in the present technologically organised society.

## **3. Secretarial Professionalism**

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of thriving in any profession is a formidable professional body that regulate and monitor the practice of the profession. Unfortunately, for secretarial profession in Nigeria, much is required to be done get a formidable professional body (with apology to the Association of Professional Secretarial Staff of Nigeria (APSSON)). With the present fragmented 'fight' for superiority of available secretarial professional bodies in Nigeria, the needed thriving climate would be elusive.

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this lead paper is to interrogate the issue of whether secretarial profession in Nigeria is an endangered one. From the presentations so far, it is sensible to align with the optimistic stance that secretarial profession in Nigeria is not an endangered profession. The profession would continue to thrive as long as the right climate – education and training, enabling policy and professionalism are firmly entrenched. And to champion this move, the secretarial educators, government and the professional bodies have the respective responsibilities which should not be neglected at this critical time when other profession align with secretarial profession are facing extinction. This is wake up call for all the stakeholders.

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