

EMERGING ROLES OF SECRETARIAL PROFESSIONALS IN BUILDING NEW COMPETENCIES AND CAPABILITIES

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Introduction

It is with an admixture of humility, pleasure and pride that I stand before you today to present this keynote address. I am humbled because I know I stand before seasoned professionals; some with decades of experience under their belts, people to whom there is hardly anything new under the secretarial sky. I know I am addressing members of an exemplary professional body, fresh from the grueling and exhilarating experience of national registration, legislative enactment and presidential assent. I am proud because I am one of you. I graduated in Secretarial Administration from Federal Polytechnic Bida in 1981 and became a polytechnic teacher the following year. Over the past 41 years, I have trained hundreds of secretarial and administrative personnel now scattered around the world, and their progress must be a source of satisfaction to me as their teacher. Therefore, in both humility and delight, I stand before you today, a proud man with strong secretarial background, proud that you, my dear sisters and brothers, have kept the secretarial flag flying and unflagging. I am confident that at this conference, we shall endeavor to reach new frontiers in our rapidly evolving profession.

Let me start by commending the leadership of the Association for choosing a conference theme which is not only timely also inescapable given the circumstances and juncture at which humanity finds itself at the present time. Several years ago, the firm prediction was that the secretarial profession was destined for oblivion. The advent of information technology introduced new implements, practices and realities which at first, appeared to encroach on secretarial redoubts. However, two or three decades on, secretarial practice remains alive and kicking and it has continued to evolve from its hitherto lowly servile station to a high brow profession for Jacks of all trades, masters of all. Years ago people also predicted that all offices would be automated, paperless and virtual; and that secretaries would be gone. Today offices are largely automated, barely paperless and partly virtual (Ademiuyi & Ademiluyi, 2023). Offices are both online and on ground. And secretaries remain in place, sometimes with new titles, greater authorities and enlarged responsibilities. That is why the theme of this conference is indubitably apt.

From Papyrus to Artificial Intelligence

It is not my place to pontificate here by giving a lead paper address. That role is already being effectively covered by, a thoroughbred professional with the depth of knowledge and breadth of experience needed for the exercise. My role is limited to that of keynote address presenter. That function restricts me to directing

participants' attention to the areas which demand scrupulous attention and aspects to which they need to train their minds and their pens in order to engender resolutions that would edify the conference. Let us start with the fundamentals of the conference theme and the sub themes. Who is a secretary? What do we mean today by secretarial profession? How did it originate? How has it evolved from what it used to be? In what direction is it heading? What are the best strategies for developing secretarial growth mindset in the digital age? How do we enhance best practices in secretarial practice in contemporary Nigeria? What strategies are best for secretarial education, training, skilling and re skilling? How can we improve business writing and effective communication among secretarial professionals in the era of artificial intelligence?

Oxford Dictionary defines a Secretary as an official who conducts the correspondence of an organization and keeps its records. Cambridge Dictionary perceives a secretary as someone who works in an office, writing letters, making phone calls and arranging meetings for a person or an organization. Dictionary.com defines the secretary as a person employed to handle correspondence and do routine work in a business office, usually involving taking dictations, typing, filing and the like. The Linguistic Society of America describes a secretary as a person, usually an official, who is in charge of correspondence, minutes of meetings and related affairs of an organization, company, association, among others (Chopra & Gauri, 2016). Buseni (2013) and Malabi (2014) trace the origins of secretarial profession to ancient Egypt where Kings and senior noblemen entrusted scribes with private and confidential matters. Competence and proximity to power made the scribe a powerful man in his own right. Shorthand and penmanship were the major implements of secretarial practice. Other secretarial tools of ancient Egypt included chisel for making inscriptions on stones, papyrus and stylus for making marks on clay and wax tablets.

Alvin and Henry (2013) aver that Romans were the first to employ highly educated and powerful men as scribes to take dictations. Indeed, great political and social leaders were expected to be secretarially competent. Julius Caesar, for instance wrote an account of his military campaigns in shorthand. The scribes also sometimes acted as confidential advisers and counselors to those in power. In fact, the name, Secretary, has its origin in the Latin word, Secernere, which means to set apart, to distinguish. Its passive form secretum, means having been set apart, safeguarded or protected. This subsequently developed the connotation of something private and confidential. The implication is that secretarial career has always been a distinguished profession, for people who have been set apart for their knowledge, skills and capacity` to protect personal and public confidences. Ancient Roman scribes were charged with responsibilities of protecting the personal and business confidences of powerful people. They were also entrusted with the topmost secrets of their societies, cities and empires.

From the Renaissance, men involved in the daily correspondences and businesses of powerful people were called secretaries. With the industrial revolution and the attendant multiplication of bureaucracies in public and private sectors, new words were increasingly coined to qualify secretarial professionals. Such words include, Confidential, Private, Personal, and Medical, among others. In 1870, Sir Isaac Pitman started a school for training shorthand writers to work for professional and commercial men. With the invention of the typewriter in the 1880s, women began to enter secretarial field; consequently, the word, Secretary began to be associated with women. However, with the feminization of profession, and in line with the gender bias of the era, secretarial profession gradually became less ostentatious and influential; a trend which is now being reversed in the information technology era. Information and Communication Technology has engendered transformation in human life and ways of life. To the secretarial profession, the transformation has been a magical and unquantifiable blessing. In tertiary institutions, the name has changed to Office Technology and Management. The requisite skills are different, institutional admission requirements altered; the grueling training, especially in respect of shorthand has mellowed. The duties, functions, roles qualities, competencies, demographics, technologies have either all changed or are rapidly changing (Terver, 2022). With all these changes, the responsibilities of the secretary are also evolving. Job opportunities, authority are also being rapidly recalibrated. The new name, OTM, implies that newly trained secretaries are not only scribes, with the communication capabilities implicit in that name, they are also technologists and digital experts. All these transformations engender changes which the conference is bound to address.

The Challenge of Change

What, for instance, are societal and corporate expectations of secretarial professionals in the new age? With the internet and the computer being the new tools of choice, are secretaries still expected to be corporate subordinates, perpetually tied at the hip to their supervisors or superiors? Or are they now back to what they used to be in the years of yore, as counselors and advisers, respected for their knowledge and uncommon skills? Are they now autonomous professionals in their own right? Is the graduate, ICT savvy secretarial professional of the new age still necessarily a woman, the 'office wife' of an inevitably male boss, perpetually at his beck and call, attending to all his whims and caprices?

Ademiluyi (2021) identifies the requisite qualities of an effective secretary as including loyalty, sincerity, punctuality, sociability, high personal standards, orderliness, cheerfulness, alertness, confidentiality, work enthusiasm and good health. Are these qualities still in secretarial vogue or have the 21st century realities modified some of them? What qualities should secretarial trainers like me focus on as the profession marches into its future? How does the computer operator differ from the secretary? What are the career progression pathways for the technology

savvy secretary in public and private sectors in the new age?

Ademiluyi (2021) further identifies twenty competencies needed for secretarial and administrative best practice in the Nigerian context, while Agboola (2016) has delineated those competencies into hard and soft skills. For secretarial practice, hard skills would include keyboarding, shorthand transcription, word processing, photocopying, while soft skills would cover creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, empathy and leadership skills. How have these changed in the last few years? Is shorthand truly dead and buried as a secretarial implement, given the new advent of voice transcription? Is confidentiality still the acid test of secretarial professionalism? How can secretaries optimize confidentiality in the face of the challenge of internet hacking and technology malevolence? What should secretarial educators emphasize today? What academic, social and personality attributes should they harp on? What do we mean by secretarial mindset in the technology era, and how can this be acquired, nourished and optimized?

Now that communication practice has been transformed, what are the implications for interpersonal connections, human relations and inter office interactions? Should telephone ethics remain as they were twenty five years ago? Should secretarial teachers begin to teach text messaging and social media interaction techniques? How can secretarial practitioners optimize contemporary communication media for effective organizational communication? Are students being adequately taught to organize meetings and conferences using social media platforms?

What techniques should be used for secretarial reskilling? How can the internet be employed to acquire current cognitive, affective and psychomotor competencies? Finally, in the new environment created by information technology, to what extent should secretarial professionals adhere to time honoured secretarial ethics and ethos? Are female secretaries and secretarial students safer today from sexual predation and male aggression than they were in the past? What are the effects of modern office environment on secretaries' physical, social and mental health? The ICT age has engendered the challenge of techno stress. How can techno stress be minimized and effectively managed? Oladoye (2018) describes secretaries as crisis managers per excellence. What are the crises of the new age, and how can secretarial practitioners manage work generated crises in their offices and their homes? Finally, where is secretarial profession headed? These, ladies and gentlemen, are the posers to which, in my humble opinion, this conference must find answers.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the Information and Communications Technology age has only just been born. It is a neonate, not yet in its infancy. The implication is that far greater changes are in the horizon, some of which can, and must be anticipated. The new frontier of information technology is in artificial intelligence. Just say it, and it

is done; just think it, and it is effected. Speeches are already being transformed into transcripts; thoughts may soon be transcribed, given the quantum and direction of artificial intelligence. If all these technological signposts are reached, what becomes of the secretary? There were scribes on the planet two thousand years ago when Jesus Christ was with us. When Jesus returns, will he find secretaries on the planet? That dreadful challenge is for us to reflect on here and now.

For centuries, secretaryship was one of the most elevated professions in civilized human experience. It is not an accident that many of the most distinguished members of the human race had secretarial background and experience. Julius Caesar, the great soldier, scholar and statesman was also an accomplished scribe. American President Woodrow Wilson, scholar and author of the League of Nations which subsequently transformed to the United Nations, had secretarial background. So did President Constantine Chernenko of the Soviet Union (Russia). Chief Obafemi Awolowo was a typist and Shorthand writer, so was Adam Oshiomhole, former governor of Edo State. Secretaries have become university vice chancellors, polytechnic Rectors and Provosts of Colleges of Education. We have a duty to keep the profession afloat by identifying new directions while sustaining relevant, old best practices. It is only in this way that the new generation – and even, Jesus, when He returns – will find a vibrant, rebranded secretarial profession on the planet of earth. Thank you. God bless you. God bless our profession.

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