

## **STRATEGIES FOR QUALITATIVE SECRETARIAL SERVICES IN THE NIGERIAN LABOUR MARKET**

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### **Abstract**

This write-up tries to reveal that the demand/need for employment of confidential secretaries is drastically declining in the labour market. Gone are the days when every establishment, no matter how small sought the services of professional secretaries. This is due to the introduction of computer and accessories in the country where every Dick and Harry who has the least experience in computer claims to have the capability of rendering secretarial services. This notion has even affected the number of students going in for the course. It has also affected the number of institutions offering the course in addition to forcing some institutions to change the course name to 'Information Technology', 'Office Management', etc. The paper also tries to enumerate the similarities and differences between a Professional Confidential Secretary and Computer Operator. In addition to the duties of a confidential secretary, it goes further to explain that although there is a distinct difference between a professional Secretary and a computer operator in the services being rendered, for the professional secretary to thrive well in the Nigerian labour market, there is need to strategize and tremendously improve the quality of services being rendered by the professional secretary. The write-up also goes on to outline some of the major areas to be strategized such as enhanced service delivery, innovations, display of professionalism, self development/enhancement, etc. Conclusively, the writer believe that with concrete strategized qualitative services, instead of going into extinction, the sky would be the limit of our professional secretaries in the Nigerian labour market.

### **Introduction**

The Nigerian labor market is experiencing major changes. Organizations are going through profound transformation brought about by globalization, regulatory changes,

privatization, instability of business environment, etc. Organizations have to develop competencies that will facilitate their positive response to these challenges and provide quality services to the Nigerian public. This they would achieve by employing, retaining or posting of staff equipped with requisite skills to initiate, maintain and sustain positive developmental changes in the organization. According to Atueyi (1995), "there is a wide departure from the traditional business enterprise to the evolution of international and multinational organizations operating in the Nigerian economy".

There is no doubting the fact that the secretary is the wheel on which the executive's activities revolve. He/she is often referred to as the executive's 'alter-ego'. The effectiveness of the secretary affects the efficiency of the boss and in the long run determine the overall efficiency of the organization.

However, for the professional secretary to thrive in the competitive labour market as ours, and to excel in his/her career as a secretary, the onus then lies on him/her to improve the secretarial services which he/she is rendering in the organization. This improvement should be strategized in such a way that the secretary could be valued, appreciated and sought for in the labour market.

Unfortunately, some of our professional colleagues do not care whether or not their output justifies their pay or existence as professional secretaries or if the levels of their services are being appreciated by their employers. No wonder some employers while reprimanding secretaries would always use the phrase "*I am yet to see the difference between a professional Confidential Secretary and a Computer Operator*" disheartening!

### **Secretary Defined**

This means different things to different people/organization each meaning dictating the duties/qualities of the Secretary in question. Let us look at some definitions of a secretary: According to dictionary definition, a secretary is defined as "a person who works in an office, working for another person, dealing with letters and telephone calls, typing, keeping records, arranging meetings with people, etc. Furthermore, the American National Secretaries Association (ANSA) (1988) defined secretary as "an assistant to an executive possessing mastery of office skills and ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, displays initiative, exercise judgment and makes decisions within the scope of his/her authority".

From the above definitions of secretary, it would be observed that secretaries are expected to have excellent administrative skills in order to be able to still thrive in a highly competitive labour market as Nigeria's. It is very important that a professional secretary having gone through some years of training as a secretary should show a great distinction in the quality of his/her output when compared with that of a computer operator who just had a crash computer training by the roadside.

However, it is disheartening to know that some of our professional colleagues are dragging this profession to the mud through their nonchalant attitude in the manner they go about their official assignment, thereby giving room for superiors/employers to even prefer employing/working with computer operators than with professional secretaries.

In our opinion, such superiors/employers may not be blamed. It is true that we have some difficult bosses, or even fastidious ones but some of our professional colleagues, having received specialized professional training really need constant improvement of the quality of their output to justify their professional status and the ever changing needs.

## **Duties and Qualities of a Professional Secretary**

### **Duties**

The duties of a secretary vary a lot depending on the organization as well as the schedule of duties assigned to the secretary in his/her place of work. However, we have the following as some of the general/ancient duties of a secretary as stipulated in the Schemes of Service:

- a. Taking dictation and reproducing them in typed script.
- b. Receiving visitors, enquires and telephone calls on behalf of the officer to whom the Secretary is attached.
- c. Performing all other office routines.
- d. Supervising subordinates in the office.
- e. Taking notes at meetings
- f. Organizing the work in the office
- g. Maintaining discipline among subordinates, etc
- h. Managing the boss (psychologically and administratively)

With the current advanced technological development, and the global dynamic inter network connectivity, the duties of the secretary have also drastically changed from the ancient routines to a more complex, sophisticated and interesting ones. To this effect, for the secretary to meet up and survive or thrive in the ever increasing competitive Labour Market, he/she needs a total upgrade in his/her qualities as a Secretary.

### **Qualities**

In order to meet up with the challenges on board, the secretary is expected to possess certain qualities. Her attitude, manner of approach and communication ability always affect the overall image of the organization as he/she is seen as the mirror of the organization. A good Secretary who wishes to excel in this ever competitive Nigerian labour market must have a good working relationship with other employees,

organizations, etc. He/she must have the eagerness or zeal to continue learning in order to keep abreast with occupational developments.

The qualities of a good secretary can be summarized as follow:

- i. Pleasant disposition
- ii. Accuracy and thoroughness
- iii. Adaptability to changes/developmental trends
- iv. A neat and simple appearance
- v. Effective communication skill
- vi. Mastery in the use of all office equipments
- vii. Tactfulness
- viii. Friendliness
- ix. Loyalty and truthfulness
- x. Initiativeness
- xi. Flexibility
- xii. Self confidence
- xiii. A good sense of humour
- xiv. Punctuality
- xv. Ability to work without much supervision
- xvi. Ability to manage difficult bosses/clients
- xvii. Ability to resolve conflicts among staff/crisis management
- xviii. Possession of interpersonal skills
- xix. Level headedness
- xx. Team building skill, etc

### Differences between a Professional Secretary and a Computer Operator

For the purpose of clarity, there is need to differentiate between a Secretary and a Computer Operator, both in qualification and output

S/N	Professional Secretary	Computer operator
1.	Must have a higher educational qualification from a recognized higher institution in specialized secretarial specialty or its equivalent	Has no specialized training or higher educational qualification in secretarial specialty
2	Had his/her training from a recognized higher institution	Had her training from a roadside computer center.
3	Has mastery of professional secretarial typing rules, formatting ethics, etc	Has no formal training in professional secretarial typing rules, formatting ethics, etc.
4.	Relies on the training he/she got from the higher institution in discharging her secretarial duties	Relies/depends on the professional secretary for training on secretarial practice
5	Has knowledge of shorthand and makes use of it, etc	Knows nothing about shorthand and does not use it,etc

## **The Need for Strategic Qualitative Secretarial Services**

The following are some of the reasons why secretaries should support the idea for improved strategic qualitative secretarial services in the Nigerian labour market:

- a. According to Centre for Management Development Journal for 2009 Training and Development Programmes

*“Organizations (both private and government owned) are facing increased challenges in the business environment. They have to take measures that will ensure high performance and the survival of their enterprises. They are compelled to search for strategies that will help them stay ahead of competition and respond appropriately to a host of other challenges. One of the challenges facing organization is to link growth with strategies in service delivery which will help them remain unbeatable in the business environment”.* Hence, the need for the organizations to employ highly competent staff including secretaries that will help actualize their dreams of being unbeatable. In this situation, only Secretaries with outstanding professional capability shall stand the test of time.

- b. Secretaries perform crucial roles in the realization of corporate objectives. They interact with super-ordinates, subordinates and general public. So in order to achieve the desired objective of the organization, and also to excel in service delivery, they need to put up well strategized qualitative secretarial services in the discharge of their duties.
- c. When Secretaries opt for strategized Secretarial service delivery, it will eliminate the fear of being laid off or being disadvantaged by reform of any sort.

## **Recommendations**

The way forward in the struggle for survival of the secretarial Profession in the Nigerian labour market include the following bold steps:

1. **Enhanced/Improved Service Delivery**

The secretary should aspire to upgrade the ways he/she renders services to the organization so as to remain unbeatable. This should be seen in the manner he/she promptly responds to execute assignments given.

2. **Innovations**

A secretary should be able to introduce newer ideas in the organization. He/she should be able to compare the pattern of work in the organization and that which is obtainable in other organizations and be able to determine areas that need update, amendment or complete change. This, however, he/she does in consultation with the boss.

3. **Display of Professionalism**

Any secretary who wishes to outshine in this competitive Nigerian labour market should be sure to always display a high level of professionalism in his/her discharge of duties, especially in the following areas:

- How he/she responds to phone calls
- How he/she interacts with visitors/clients and other staff
- How he/she typesets documents (minutes, speeches, letters, memos, etc adhering to the professional typing rules/regulations)
- How he/she prepares (documents) for major events like meetings, etc.
- How he/she manages his/her boss.

**Self Development**

This involves training and retraining to be able to meet up with developmental trend.

- Since Secretaries are potential managers, there is need for us to equip ourselves with managerial skills and techniques needed to succeed in a challenging and volatile work environment.
- Updating ones educational qualification by going back to school.
- Attending conferences/workshops in related fields just like the one being organized by APSSON
- Seizing every opportunity to get updated with technological development, internet or other computer aided applications.
- Being ready at all times to accept corrections and learn from co-staff even from subordinates.

**Take Good Care of Your Self:**

One can only think of improving or giving his/her best in service when he/she is in good health.

Just like in every other profession, the secretarial profession has its own health hazards such as low back pain as a result of long hours of sitting down, or improper sitting position, eye problems due to constant use of computer systems, constant tiredness (stress), mouth odour as a result of shutting one's mouth for a long time while in a meeting, arthritis of the phalanges, etc

In all these, there is always a way out of the situation such as:

- Going for medical checkups when necessary.
- Adjusting one's furniture (table and chair) to meet the need for one's comfort. It should be in the appropriate height as such that the legs rest comfortably on the floor.
- Taking the right posture while at work.
- Taking out time to carry out some routine body exercises
- Positioning the monitor and other working materials well to avoid eye strain, neck or shoulder pains, etc.
- Taking out time to control the brightness of the monitor or looking for a screen shield.

- For mouth odours, it could be controlled by brushing the mouth last thing at nights and in the morning, intermittently drinking water or slightly opening the mouth once in a while for circulation of fresh air. Also, taking little edibles with good flavour for fresher breath once in a while, etc.
- Taking out time occasionally to relax and rest.
- Believing your Maker/Creator to see you through.

### **Conclusion**

It is worthy of mention that a lot of computer operators are competing and seriously measuring up well with some of our professional secretaries in this age. If drastic steps are not taken by my professional colleagues, the computer operators will dominate the labour industry/market thereby robbing us off the benefit of our 5 – years of training in a university/polytechnic. This is because in a bid to minimize cost and maximize output, some of the employers would readily go for the smart computer operators since their pay will be less. We as the professional secretaries must not allow this to happen. We must not allow the dignity of our noble profession to be snatched away from us just like that. We should not give room for incompetence, for our employers to toss us around simply because we do not worth our onions.

This is a time to prove to all those who look down on secretaries that we are distinct and as the new generation secretaries, that we can be relied upon for a better secretarial service delivery.

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