THE SECRETARIAL PROFESSION AND THE CHANGING BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
The secretarial profession has metamorphosed from the old economy to the digital economy where most of its activities are done electronically. The underlying infrastructure is networked computing also known as distributed computing where computers and other electronic devices are connected via telecommunication networks. Such connection allows secretaries to access information stored in many places and to communicate and collaborate with others, all from the convenient of their offices using computers. This paper examines the secretarial profession in the light of changing business environment brought about by technology and discusses the various tools/techniques that should be incorporated into the profession to keep it abreast with modern trends and to also equip the operators of the profession. The paper concludes by making appropriate recommendation to the government and the association for secretaries on how to implement these technologies in the practice of the profession.

Keywords: Secretarial, Profession, Technology, Computers, Telecommunication, Network, Digital Economy

Introduction
The business environment under which today's secretaries operate is regarded as a digital economy and is quite different from the old economy. The digital economy means using Web-based systems, internet and other electronic networks to conduct organization's business inside and outside the office. For decades now, changes have been taking place in all facets of human life including the office environment. This is as a result of technological advancement. Every office in today's business world, be it government, industry or other human endeavors, require fast and accurate information for quick decision-making. As organizations became flatter and leaner, secretaries took on greater responsibilities and assumed duties previously performed by middle managers. The secretary's role became more specialized, concentrating on software and equipment knowledge.

The focus of this paper is on the secretary and facilities available at their disposal. It will be necessary to first gain understanding of who a secretary is. Jennings (1981), Igwe (1992), Oni (1999), Igbinedion (2010) and Ugiagbe (2002) adopted the
definition of the National Secretaries Association (International) as follows: An assistant to an executive, possessing mastery of office skills and ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, who displays initiative, exercises judgment, and makes decisions within the scope of his/her authority.

The secretary has direct contacts with people who visit the office for one transaction or the other and their contact with the secretary can make or mar their relationship with the organization. Igbinedion (2010) stated that Boladele (2002) quoting Winter (1964) expressed that:

A secretary is a warm, endlessly helpful and understanding individual whose sole aim is to alleviate, solve, prevent or soften problem workload and upsets for his/her executive. He/she is the means by which the executive initiates, handles and complete a project.

Mayer (1977) defines a secretary as an executive assistant, who possesses a mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility with or without supervision, exercises initiatives and judgment and makes decision within the scope of assigned authority.

Professional Secretaries International defines "a secretary as an executive assistant, who possess a mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative and judgment and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority."

Prior to the 1980s, secretaries handled all the typing, manual data entry, filing, scheduling and report generation. With the restructuring of organizations in the late 20th century, the role of secretaries is being transformed. Organizations have adopted a flatter structure and in many cases eliminated middle management.

The infrastructure needed to drive today's office is termed **Networked or Distributed computing** which connects computers and other electronic devices via telecommunication networks. Such connections allow the secretary to access information stored in many places and to communicate and collaborate with others, all from their desktop (or even mobile) computers. While some offices still use a standalone computer exclusively, or a network confined to one location, the vast majority of offices around the world use multiple-location networked computers. These may be connected to the **global networked environment**, known as the **Internet**, or to its counterpart within organizations, called an **intranet**. In addition, some organizations link their intranets to those of their business partners over networks called **extranets**. The connection typically is done via wireline systems, but since 2000 more and more communication and collaboration is done via wireless systems. (Turban, Mclean and Wetherbe, ).
Examining the business environment in the light of these changes, (The World Is Flat by Thomas Friedman) argues that the world is flat in the sense that the global competitive playing field is being leveled. Friedman identifies three eras of globalization. The first era, Globalization 1.0, lasted from 1492 to 1800. During this era, the force behind globalization was how much muscle, horsepower, wind power, or steam power a country had and could deploy.

The second era, Globalization 2.0, lasted from 1800 to 2000. In this era, the force behind globalization was multinational companies; that is, companies that had their headquarters in one country but operated in several countries. In the first half of this era, globalization was driven by falling transportation costs, generated by the development of the steam engine and the railroads. In the second half of this era, globalization was driven by falling telecommunications costs resulting from the telegraph, telephones, computers, satellites, fiber-optic cable, and the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW). The global economy began appearing during this era.

Around the year 2000, we entered Globalization 3.0, which was driven by the convergence of ten forces that Friedman calls “flatteners”. In era 3.0, the global, Web-based platform has emerged. Each era has been characterized by a distinctive focus. The focus of Globalization 1.0 was on countries, the focus of Globalization 2.0 was on companies, and the focus of Globalization 3.0 is on groups and individuals (Rainer and Cegielski, 2011).

It is evident from the foregoing that the globalization 3.0 which is currently obtainable focuses on the secretaries (individual) and the devices at his/her disposal to transform the office environment.

**Technological Tools/Techniques for Today’s Secretary**

As a result of changes in the business environment propelled by the digital age, the role of secretaries has changed tremendously from that of typewriting and shorthand dictation, answering of telephone calls and processing of mails. Today’s secretaries are exposed to office technology including the internet that make work much easier and knowledge more accessible (Edwin, 2008). In order to properly prepare the secretary for the demands of today’s office, the secretaries should be knowledgeable in the use of the following technological tools/techniques in carrying out her day to day activities (Rainer and Cegielski, 2011).

**Search Engines and Metasearch Engines.** A *search engine* is a computer program that searches for specific information by key words and reports the results. A search engine maintains an index of billions of Web pages. It uses that index to find pages that match a set of user-specified keywords. Such indexes are created and updated by webcrawlers, which are computer programs that browse the Web and create a copy of all visited pages. Secretaries can actually use four main search engines for almost *all*
their searches namely: Google (www.google.com), Yahoo (www.yahoo.com), Microsoft Network (www.msn.com), and Ask (www.ask.com), KartOO (www.kartoo.com), and Dogpile (www.dogpile.com)

Publication of Material in Foreign Languages. Secretaries can use automatic webpage translator to translate information written in any languages on the Internet. Such translation is available to and from all major languages. Some major translation products are Altavista (http://babelfish.altavista.com) and Google (www.google.com/language_tools) as well as products and services available at Trados (www.trados.com).

Portals: A portal is a Web-based, personalized gateway to information and knowledge that provides relevant information from different IT systems and the Internet using advanced search and indexing techniques. We distinguish among four types of portals: commercial, affinity, corporate, and industry-wide.

Commercial (public) portals are the most popular portals on the Internet. They are intended for broad and diverse audiences, and they offer fairly routine content, some in real time. Examples are Lycos (www.lycos.com) and Microsoft Network (www.msn.com).

In contrast, affinity portals offer a single point of entry to an entire community of affiliated interests, such as a hobby group or a political party. Examples is Fedpolyportal.edu.ng. Corporate portals offer a personalized single point of access through a Web browser to critical business information located inside and outside an organization. These portals are also known as enterprise portals, information portals, or enterprise information portals. In addition to making it easier to find needed information, corporate portals offer customers and employees self-service opportunities. Whereas corporate portals are associated with a single company, industrywide portals serve entire industries. An example is Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) (www.nut.edu.ng)

Electronic Mail: Electronic mail (e-mail) is the largest-volume application running over the Internet. Secretaries can send letter, memos, reminder etc using email. They are less expensive, faster and safer compared to conventional mails.

Web-Based Call Centers: Effective personalized customer contact is becoming an important aspect of Web-based customer support. Such service is provided through Web-based call centers, also known as customer care centers. A secretary can use this facilities to reach their entire customers for problems/solution. For example, all Telecommunication operators in Nigeria uses this service to help solve customers' related problem.
**Electronic Chat Rooms**: Electronic chat refers to an arrangement in which participants exchange conversational messages in real time. A chat room is a virtual meeting place where aries can exchange ideas and even arrange meetings for participants.

**Unified Communications**: In the past, organizational networks for wired and wireless data, voice communications, and videoconferencing operated independently, and the IT department managed each separately. This situation led to higher costs and lower productivity.

Unified communications (UC) simplifies and integrates all forms of communications—voice, voice mail, fax, chat, e-mail, instant messaging, short message service, presence (location) services, and videoconferencing—on a common hardware and software platform. Presence services enable users to know where their intended recipients are and if they are available in real time.

UC unifies all forms of human and computer communications into a common user experience. For example, UC allows an individual to receive a voice-mail message and then read it in his e-mail inbox. In another example, UC enables users to seamlessly collaborate with another person on a project, regardless of where the users are located. One user could quickly locate the other user by accessing an interactive directory, determine if that user were available, engage in a text messaging session, and then escalate the session to a voice call or even a video call, all in real time.

**Collaboration**

The third major category of network applications is collaboration. An important feature of modern organizations is that people collaborate to perform work. Collaboration refers to efforts by two or more entities (that is, individuals, teams, groups, or organizations) who work together to accomplish certain tasks. The term work group refers specifically to two or more individuals who act together to perform some task asynchronously.

A variety of software products are available to support all types of collaboration. These products include Microsoft Groove, Microsoft SharePoint, Google Docs, IBM Lotus Quickr, and Jive. In general, these products provide online collaboration capabilities, work-group e-mail, distributed databases, bulletin whiteboards, electronic text editing, document management, workflow capabilities, instant virtual meetings, application sharing, instant messaging, consensus building, voting, ranking, and various application development tools.

**Electronic Teleconferencing**: Teleconferencing is the use of electronic communication that allows two or more people at different locations to hold a simultaneous conference. There are several types of teleconferencing. The oldest
and simplest is a telephone conference call in which several people talk to one another from multiple locations. The biggest disadvantage of conference calls is that they do not allow the participants to communicate face to face. In addition, participants in one location cannot see graphs, charts, and pictures at other locations.

To overcome these shortcomings, organizations are increasingly turning to video teleconferencing, or videoconferencing. In a videoconference, participants in one location can see participants, documents, and presentations at other locations. The latest version of videoconferencing, called telepresence, enables participants to seamlessly share data, voice, pictures, graphics, and animation by electronic means. Conferees can also transmit data along with voice and video, which allows them to work on documents together and to exchange computer files. Several companies are offering high-end telepresence systems. For example, Hewlett-Packard's Halo system (www.hp.com), Cisco's TelePresence 3000 (www.cisco.com), and Polycom's HDX (www.polycom.com) use massive high-definition screens up to eight feet wide to show people sitting around conference tables. Telepresence systems also have advanced audio capabilities that let everyone talk at once without cancelling out any voices.

Google

We mention Google in its own section because the company is developing and deploying applications that span discovery, communications, and collaboration. The company's applications fall into five categories: (1) search applications; (2) "communicate, show, and share" applications; (3) mobile applications; (4) applications to "make your computer work better"; and (5) applications to "make your web site work better." The following link provides a look at the number and variety of Google applications: http://www.google.com/intl/en/options.

Recommendations

From the above discussions, we do make the following recommendations

1. Secretaries should be meant to undergo regular compulsory training and IT certification examinations to improve their skills.
2. Management should regularly train the secretaries on these technologies particularly the ones applicable to their organization.
3. Government at Federal, state and local government levels must strive to provide the needed infrastructures needed by these organizations to adopted and use these technologies. It is the responsibility of a responsible government to provide the basis and platform for technology takeoff and growth.
4. The National association of Secretarial professional should ensure that regular courses are organized for its members. They should be very strict in
the monitoring of organizations and the facilities they provide for the use of secretaries. Enlightenment campaigns and propaganda should be adopted to disseminate technological based information to all members.

5. The association website should make available to all members materials and tutorials that can assist them in performance of their jobs

Conclusion

We have been able to discuss who a secretary is and established the environment in which he/she operate in this 21st century that is characterized by technological tools/techniques. We have also been able to analyze the various forms of globalization giving historical perceptive. We have shown and discussed the various tools that are available for the secretary to perform his/her work and provided various websites were these technologies can be assessed and use. It is our strong believe that justice has been done satisfactorily to this work. It is our believe that the business environment under which the secretary operate has been transformed by technology from the traditional methods to the digital methods and we do believe that secretaries must avail themselves of every opportunity to learn these new technology in order to make them efficient on the job.

References


