

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING PROFESSIONALISM IN SECRETARIAL PRACTICE FOR EFFECTIVE JOB PERFORMANCE AND IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract

More than ever before, secretarial practitioners face challenging role as modern office managers. This, and in the spirit of concept of international best practices, make it imperative for secretarial practitioners to perform secretarial functions in a professional manner. It is on the basis of the above background that the writer intends to assess the strategies for promoting professionalism in secretarial practice for effective job performance and improved productivity. The paper therefore attempts to examine the meaning of professionalism and its benefits, meaning of a professional secretary and his attributes. It also looks at anti-professional activities and strategies to curb professional misconduct. It concludes, making appropriate recommendations, amongst others, collaborative efforts to fight unprofessional behaviours.

Keywords: Professionalism, Professional Secretary, Secretarial Practice

Introduction

In view of the challenging role of the modern secretarial practitioners towards maximizing and enhancing the organizational performance, it becomes imperative for practitioners to conduct secretarial functions in a professional manner. Also in the spirit of the new concept in service delivery otherwise known as international best practices which provides a platform for delivering best services that meet international standards, secretarial profession cannot be in isolation of the rest of the world. Both secretarial practitioners and indeed its professional bodies such as National Association of Professional Secretarial Staff of Nigeria must be committed to promoting excellence and raise standards in the delivery of secretarial services. The best way to achieving international best practices is promoting professionalism in secretarial practices. It is on the basis of the above background, and the need for secretarial practitioners to perform their job efficiently, and contribute maximally towards realization of organizational goal and objectives that this paper intends to assess the strategies that promote professionalism in secretarial practice.

What is Professionalism?

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2014) defined professionalism as “the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterized or mark a profession or a professional person”. This implies that professionalism is about practitioners' characters, attitudes and behaviours that support the wellbeing of the organization in which the practitioner belongs, the society and indeed other members of the profession. It is a result-oriented way in which the business of a profession is carried out. Professionalism is the possession of adequate skills and knowledge required to function well and actually using those skills in the right direction resulting in attainment of set goal and objectives. Stratton and Mitstifer (2013) defined professionalism as a **passion** for personal responsibility, devotion to a life of service, commitment to a mission, and openness to new ideas and alternatives. This definition is all embracing as it sees

professionalism, as demonstration of love and affection, belief and commitment to service delivery, unflinching support for realization of organizational and professional objectives, and willingness to learn and accept efficient ways of doing things. Professionalism is having a high sense of responsibility to one's chosen career, quality service delivery, meeting professional and organizational expectations and willingness to learn new things. It is being a role model and active participant in the affairs of a profession and the organization to which one belongs. As professionals, secretaries are expected to take personal responsibility for self development, including the growth and development of their profession and the organizations where they are engaged. A professional secretary should not blame non performance on lack of resources; rather the secretary should provide alternative ways of getting things done. Newkirk (1982), quoted by Stratton and Mitsifer, also defined professionalism as the quality of an individual to overtly display characteristics that positively represent the standards of one's profession and a commitment to advancing the program or activity of the profession. Professionalism is considered here as a projection of positive and standard behaviours and attitudes relating to a particular profession and determination to sustaining such behaviours. Stratton and Mitsifer however believed there are certain fundamental elements of a profession, namely; **value orientation to service**, **abstract knowledge used adaptably and skillfully**; and **autonomy in decision-making and action** relative to the service.

These elements further corroborate the definitions given above as they emphasize practitioners' commitment to culture of service, knowledge acquisition and application, and ability to initiate actions and take right decisions. The characteristics, expected to be overtly displayed by professionals, must be translated by individuals into **patterns of action** that convey the image of a professional person.

Who is a Professional Secretary?

Gambari (2013) and Onifade (2012) adopted the definition by International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) which sees secretary as an executive assistant who has mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative and judgement and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority. A professional secretary is an office manager who is responsible for the day to day running of office in an efficient and effective manner, exhibiting adequate skills and knowledge, taking appropriate actions to achieving organizational objectives, using own initiatives. A secretary is a confidential assistant to an executive who painstakingly carries out his responsibility, stands as a shield between him and those who would rob the executive of his time and opportunity for constructive thinking; and generally assist him with the handling of important matters under consideration. The secretary coordinates all the office activities – managing both materials and human resources.

Benefits Of Professionalism

The need and emphasis on practitioners to conduct secretarial functions in a professional manner is without certain benefits to the practitioners, the profession and the society at large; and these include:

- (a) Professionalism enhances secretary job satisfaction and retention. Professional secretaries make work environment conducive for other employees and customers. As Hickson, Pichert, Webb & Gabbe (2007) put it, besides being the right thing to do, addressing unprofessional behaviour can yield improved staff satisfaction and retention, enhanced reputation.
- (b) It promotes secretary's efficiency, effectiveness and productivity. Secretaries with a professional attitude are able to focus on their work and avoid unnecessary distractions, which allow them to contribute more to their establishment.
- (c) It fosters respect and trust among intending and practicing members of the secretarial profession. It also boosts the image of the professional body.
- (d) Secretaries who have high standards of professionalism are usually regarded as being more credible and reliable than their co-workers. They are also considered to be their company's leaders.
- (e) Creation of a culture of professionals who are important role models for students, colleagues

- and other employees.
- (f) It enhances promotion.
- (g) It reduces waste and saves time. As a professional, the secretary is no longer expected to engage in trial and error method of doing things; as such time, money and materials will be judiciously utilized.

Attributes Of A Professional Secretary

For a secretary to achieve high level of professionalism resulting in efficient and effective job performance and increased productivity, he must possess certain attributes. Adebayo and Akinyele (2012), Onifade (2010), Igbiniedion (2010) and the Cambridge International College (2007) identified some personal and business attributes which could be described as ethical demands of a professional secretary. The attributes, apart from basic and traditional skills such as keyboarding, word-processing, computer operation and shorthand, are therefore necessary by a professional secretary to render exemplary services and meet the challenges of modern day office. They are:

- (a) **Appearance:** A professional secretary is expected to present attractive appearance. By being “attractive” does not mean “beauty” or “flamboyant”, but neatly dressed. Good appearance includes secretary's finger nails and the hair which must be clean, well-groomed. France (2009) asserted that good appearance creates confidence and air of authority.
- (b) **Personality:** Personality is made up of individual characteristics, personal traits and mannerisms. A professional secretary needs a pleasing personality to maintain amicable relations with people such as colleagues, other staff, potential customers, clients and suppliers. Common personality traits required, however, include amiability, a sense of humour, willingness to be helpful to others, patience, tact and politeness; which together ensure a pleasant conduct (especially necessary during particularly busy or rush periods). Aja (2010) believes a professional secretary is an epitome of politeness, respect and kindness to all persons they come across in the course of duty.
- (c) **Adaptability:** A professional secretary must be able to adapt quickly and smoothly to the changed circumstances, such as the need to work with different executives, the need to perform different tasks, as a result of holding a number of different posts with unimpaired efficiency. A secretary must learn to adapt to bosses of varying characters, temperament and secretarial needs. Some bosses are extremely difficult, who carry the problems of the home to the office. Some are loving; some are hating; some outward; some shy; some flexible; some rigid, etc. A secretary must not be a change 'resistor' but 'adaptor', bearing in mind that the only thing that is permanent is change.
- (d) **Mental Agility:** Mental alertness and attentiveness allowing the professional secretary to think clearly and be receptive to new ideas, grasp quickly and react positively to new instructions and changed circumstances. Mental alertness is particularly needed to hold fort for the executive for initiatives and decisions making. To be able to do this, the secretary needs confidence, knowledge and skills. It is important, however, that such confidence does not lead to arrogance which can easily offend others, or to “overconfidence” which can easily result in mistakes and accidents.
- (e) **Physical Attributes:** Physical fitness contributes to mental fitness or alertness which can sustain effective job performance and increased productivity. An executive needs a secretary who works consistently well; one who will not be “away” often because of ill health as the work of the executive will suffer if he does not have the continuous support and backing of his secretary. Physical attributes include ability to see very well in order to read figures, documents, computer VDUs, etc; and good hearing especially for telephone work and for taking dictation.
- (f) **Communication skills:** A secretary needs good diction - to speak clearly, in a pleasant, well modulated and efficient-sounding voice. She needs a wide vocabulary, knowledge of and the ability to spell and use correctly a wide variety of words. Good and clear speech is important when using the telephone and when receiving and dealing with visitors, so that callers gain a

good impression of the speaker and of the employing enterprise. A professional secretary should write correctly conveying messages clearly without any flaw, punctuating very well. Ability to speak and write well in another language - to be "bilingual" secretary adds value to written skills and oral communication skills of the secretary. Language is required for effective communication hence IAAP (2013) in its survey agrees that being effective communicators is the most important quality for secretaries who are regarded as office team leaders.

- (g) **Accuracy:** Most tasks performed by secretaries require attention to "detail" and accuracy. Carelessness, lack of concentration, inaccuracies, etc, by a secretary lead to costly mistakes, delays, misunderstandings, complaints and even to losses of sales/production, money, customers, profits and indeed goodwill. These cause problems for her boss, the organization, and to the secretary and the profession. The secretary could lose the confidence of her colleagues, her boss and her employers - and even her job. Misfiling of a document can cause problems, waste of time and effort in locating and putting things right. The secretary needs competency and accuracy in making calculations, completion of forms and other business documents, provision of information, filing and indexing, making appointments, travel arrangements, etc to avoid unnecessary embarrassment for self, boss and the entire business. Aja (2010) warned that professional secretary should abhor careless and irresponsible work as every job submitted must portray a hallmark of efficiency.
- (h) **Sense of Responsibility:** An executive needs to be able to rely on his secretary; to depend upon her to provide the support and backup he needs in the efficient performance of executive's work. He must be able to trust her to work well and thoroughly, without constant supervision. He must also be able to rely upon her to "deputize" for him, and to use her initiative when the necessity arises. In other words, an executive wants secretary who is reliable, dependable and trustworthy. She must be honest to the safekeeping of all valuable office resources, maintaining confidentiality of information and resist any attempt by others – (seniors, associates, subordinates) - to obtain from her confidential information which she has been entrusted with.

The various attributes mentioned above combined to form what is called a 'sense of responsibility'. The possession of sense of responsibility is essential for job satisfaction, effectiveness and attainment of highest standard of secretarial performance and results in progress and promotion in secretaryship.

Anti-Professionalism In Secretarial Practice

Anti professional activities are the attitudes, behaviours that negate the practice or attainment of professionalism. According to Hickson and others, anti professional activities are the unprofessional behaviours that are associated with poor adherence to laid down rule governing a profession or practice guidelines. They are negative tendencies that inhibit the achievement of organizational goal and objectives and retard the growth and development of a profession. Anti-professional activities are therefore certain misdemeanors that tarnish the image of a professional secretary and bring disrepute to the profession of secretarship.

For purpose of this paper, let us consider those negative activities on the part of the secretarial practitioners alone. Such negative tendencies on the part of employee secretary include the following:

- (a) **Gossip:** Gossip is any conversation between two or more people about another who is not present with the intention of showing disrespect or destroying his personality. It is a discussion about people that are not based on facts but assumptions. France (2009) believed gossip is difficult to avoid but cautioned secretarial practitioners to be aware of it at all times as they could be dragged into gossiping innocently. A professional Secretary should avoid spreading negative information about colleagues, employers, as this can create troubles that are likely to cause him job loss and dubbed him as unprofessional.
- (b) **Flirting:** This is one issue that could bring disrepute and disrespect to the people involved. It is an immorality that destroys human dignity. The secretary should remain professional at all

time to guide against behaviours that will tarnish the image of secretarial profession which has its origin from nobility. When advances are made, it should be managed without necessarily affecting relationship by courteously rejecting it.

- (c) **Assumption:** Having worked for someone for a long time, one can make right assumptions. The professional secretary should avoid making wrong assumptions that can cause serious trouble to the organization and the secretary. Actions and decisions should therefore be based on facts and figures, and where necessary clarifications be made to avoid serious mistakes that would make secretary to look stupid and be tagged unprofessional.
- (d) **Lack of appropriate follow-up and feedback:** When a directive or assignment is allocated by the executive, he expects results. A professional secretary should follow up matters and give appropriate feedback especially when he encounters difficulty that could affect service delivery. Keeping the information, thinking that the executive will not remember it only for the issue to be raised again is a dishonest and unprofessional attitude.
- (e) **Carrying out illegal sale in office:** It is not uncommon to see secretary's office being turned into an illegal market place where wares are overtly displayed. Apart from being an eye-sore, it attracts all manners of people to that office to the extent that one hardly distinguishes that office from any '*jankara*' market in the neighbourhood. It is therefore unprofessional for secretaries to turn their offices into market places as it affect smooth conduct of official business, bringing disrepute and affect the efficiency and productivity of the secretarial practitioners. Apart from abhorring buying and selling activities in offices, the professional secretary should stand clear of other personal activities during official hours as this may distract attention.
- (f) **Bringing children to office:** It is unethical practice for a professional secretary to bring children to office. Children by their nature will constitute nuisance to the smooth operation of an ideal office. It should be noted that if every member of staff allowing his children to office, it will destroy the very essence of a conducive working environment that guarantees effectiveness, efficiency and higher productivity. The visitors themselves are likely to impress and thereby seeking unwarranted favour from the secretary by presenting unsolicited gift to secretary's children. Indirectly, such unsolicited gifts may turn out to be an inducement, and, Onifade (2010) warned, bribery - do not be tempted to accept gifts or favours from internal or external clients just in case there is an under-lying reason.
- (g) **Poor Appearance:** Good dressing builds confidence as it makes you feel good and increase your self-esteem. France (2009) cautioned secretarial practitioners that any sign of dirty or scuffed shoes, untidy, greasy or disheveled hair, creased clothes, stains, dirty nails or mismatched clothes could make a long-lasting negative impression and this is unprofessional.
- (h) **Delayed or poor service delivery:** The concept of service delivery is already in-built into secretarial profession through our professional traits and ethical conduct. The professional secretary arrives early in the office and always the last person to leave. He is not expected to be a time watcher. It is therefore unprofessional for the secretary to deliberately or unconsciously delay or render poor service to his clients – the executive inclusive. It is very disturbing seeing secretarial staff postponing or piling jobs over the table due to lackadaisical attitude, as such; prompt and timely service delivery is part of consideration for high standard jobs. The professional secretary should know the meaning of service, as Obasanjo (2007) once said, service is what we offer ourselves for; and service is what people are entitled to expect from us. Prompt service delivery promotes effectiveness and efficiency as well as good image of secretarial profession.
- (i) **Non-compliance with ethical values of secretarial profession:** Inability to uphold certain secretarial code such as honesty, trust, empathy, good telephone manner, punctuality, confidentiality, cooperativeness and timely delivery of job could destroy the essence of secretarial profession. Negligence or deliberate refusal to adopt these core values of secretarial practice as a way of life is unprofessional.

Strategies For Promoting Professionalism In Secretarial Practice

To promote professionalism in secretarial practice is to behave and conduct secretarial business in a manner that set the practitioners apart from other employees. It is an attempt to sustain the good reputation of a profession by upholding its ethical considerations to meet the need of the practitioners and enhancing their performance and thus increase productivity. The strategies include:

- (a) **Secretarial practitioners must uphold the ethical core values of secretarial profession:** Gambari (2013) and Onifade (2010) identified ethical demands on the professional secretary as flexibility and adaptability, poise, intuitiveness, tact, punctuality, courtesy, due diligence, being proactive, self-confidence, good telephone personality, appearance, organizational skills, confidentiality, leadership competence, loyalty, reliability and responsibility. Onifade then described the ethics of secretary as moral principles relating to the job that he is bounded by. The secretary must keep faith with these ethics as a way of engendering professionalism in secretarial practice.
- (b) **Exhibit characteristics of a profession/professional:** Stratton & Mitstifer (2013) described those characteristics to include:
 - **A value orientation to service** for the welfare of society - service orientation. A professional secretary must believe that it is only through service orientation, that is commitment to service delivery, that the welfare of others is guaranteed and assumed to be uppermost in mind.
 - **Abstract knowledge used adaptably and skillfully** in the area of service - expert knowledge for the service - a theoretical framework.
 - **Autonomy in decision-making and action** relative to the service - decisions are made and actions taken based on expertise, knowledge and reason.
- (c) **Participate in a unified professional membership:** Active participation of secretarial practitioners in their professional associations is a *sine-qua-non* to promotion of the profession. Being an active participant includes:
 - Attending local meetings of the profession regularly.
 - A professional is expected to pay dues out of his own pocket to organizations for the privilege of being a practicing professional.
 - Since professionals require autonomy in decision-making, the professional organization, rather than the employer, is the cooperative agency through which the profession is advanced.
- (d) **Identify and eliminate anti-professional developments:**
Anti-professional developments might include:
uncredentialed workers, anti-professional thinking, legislation adversely affecting families or the profession.
- (e) **Professional Secretary must embrace continuing education:** Continuing education and training remain essential tools for capacity building for secretaries, bearing in mind that innovations in office automation persist and unending. Continuing education can be in form of attending conferences and seminars such as the annual conference/workshop of the National Association of Professional Secretarial Staff of Nigeria (NAPSSON). Continuing education is the rallying point for skills acquisition and development that will keep secretary abreast with the ever-evolving office technologies.
- (f) **Welcome new secretarial staff and emphasize their role in modeling professionalism.** Local chapter of a professional body such as NAPSSON could arrange orientation programme for new members of the profession where the employer failed to do so emphasizing behaviours expected of a secretarial practitioner and obtain a commitment to know and exhibit these behaviours. Adequate awareness should be created at such orientation programme on the dangerous trend of subscribing to unprofessional behaviour in secretarial practice.
- (g) **Be accountable and take pride in high standard work:** Since professionalism is concerned

with quality service, secretaries should maintain a high level of professional service at all time. Sense of accountability will engender quality work. When an error is made, secretaries should avoid passing buck, rather he should own up to it and try to avoid its future occurrence.

- (h) **Developing appropriate skills needed for day-to-day secretarial function:** Such skills include managerial/administrative, inter-personal, communication and computer skills. Such skills are described as competencies which are necessary for managing day to day activities of a modern office. These include personal competencies, communication competencies, organizational competencies, international/intercultural competencies and domain competencies. Gambari (2013) and Adebayo & Akinyele (2012).

Conclusion

Every secretarial practitioner must evaluate and adjust his/her professional conducts, attitudes and behaviours to be in agreement with the criteria, characteristics and attributes of an ideal professional secretary. The standard of performance, efficiency and effectiveness of secretarial practitioners must be measured and assessed vis-à-vis their contributions towards the realization of organizational goal and objectives. Secretarial practitioners should uphold the ethical values and principles of secretarial profession which are based on confidentiality and service to humanity. Onifade (2010) gave details of the ethics to include confidentiality, honesty, loyalty, reliability, responsibility, work unsupervised (meet deadlines, set priorities), cooperativeness, flexibility, multi-skilling (learn as much as possible about computer program and other positions in the firm), and bribery (do not be tempted to accept gifts or favours from internal or external clients just in case there is an under-lying reason).

However, if self and collective assessment of secretarial practitioners is short of society expectation, that is, failed to meet standards or international best practices aiming at attaining efficiency and effectiveness, then it becomes imperative for every secretarial practitioner to reposition, rededicate, re-strategize, redouble their efforts and show more commitment towards the ideal of secretarial profession. Secretarial professional bodies such as NAPSSON and individual practitioners must collaborate to fight unprofessional conducts through regular training and retraining and sanction the recalcitrant ones as deliberate resolve to overlook those unwholesome attitudes could bring disrepute to the profession and the practitioners. Unprofessional behaviour stresses any system and begets more unprofessional behaviour; failing to address unprofessional behaviour simply promotes more of it. Professionalism on a sustainable basis guarantees efficiency and effectiveness of a secretarial practitioner. An efficient and effective secretary no doubt enjoys respects, promotion, honour and job satisfaction that translates to improved productivity.

Recommendations

- (a) NAPSSON as a professional body should vigorously pursue its desire to be an act of national assembly to be able to regulate the practice of secretarial profession and to legally enforce all forms of professional misconduct associated with the secretarial practice.
- (b) Management of public and private establishments should see training as an investment rather than a cost. As such, members of secretarial profession should continue to enjoy sponsorship to annual conference/workshop of professional bodies such as NAPSSON bearing in mind that it is a forum for exchange of information and ideas and exposure to latest technology in office management.
- (c) Secretarial practitioners should sustain and regularly updating their membership of professional bodies such as NAPSSON, ensuring their full participation in all its activities considering the fact that active membership of a professional body is *sine qua non* for promoting professionalism and engenders continuous development of secretarial practitioners and the profession. Members should therefore owe it a responsibility to sponsor themselves to conferences of their professional bodies where managements fail to do so.
- (d) Awareness should continue to be created at the branch and national levels of the NAPSSON as a professional body on the danger of deliberately neglecting or erroneously abandoning ethical values of secretarial profession. Induction programme should also be organized for

the new entrants into the profession emphasizing the importance of observing ethics of secretarial profession.

- (e) NAPSSON at national and branch levels should collaborate and join forces to fight all forms unprofessional attitudes and behaviours that could bring disrepute to the profession and disrespect to the practitioners.

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