

## SCHOLASTIC ADVANCEMENT OF EFFECTIVE SECRETARIAL SUPPORT TO STRATEGIC BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

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### **Abstract**

Two decades ago, secretarial practitioners were very familiar with set skill, administrative languages and traditional office equipment and items that made the work culture to be a largely mechanical routine and rigidly predictable. The famous language of communication was: “I am directed...”. Among those traditional office equipment were typewriters (olympia, imperial, Olivetti, etc) roneo machine, ribbon, stencil, white and red correcting fluid, etc. Such was the plight of secretaries and where the stencil got torn there had to be a retyping of the stencil so as to produce adequate copies. The secretary advanced from the traditional typewriting work to computerized operations. The advancement from mere attendant/receptionist to stenographer and to secretary is worthy of being researched into. The advancement from mere skill acquisition to university degree and ICT proficiencies has positioned the secretary as not just a record/secret keeper but also an administrator of the office. This paper considers the transition and x-rays the secretarial role as a strategic business partner.

Keywords: Strategic Partner, Secretary, Advancement.

### **Introduction**

For decades, now, fast changes have been taking place in all facets of human life including the office environment. The secretary is known as an office-staff, just like clerical officer, administrative officer, etc but combines the mastery of secretary skills of typewriting and shorthand with office routine functions. Mayer(1977) defined a secretarial as an executive assistant who possess a mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility with or without supervision, exercises initiatives and judgement and makes decision within the scope of assigned authority. This means that a secretary should have a wide knowledge in accounting, personnel, office practice, communication and inside knowledge of the operation of all departments within the organization where he works.

Technology is providing the tools that are revolutionalizing the role of secretarial professionals from that of *information recorders* to *business strategists* making them much more critical to the success of an enterprise (Jaiyeola, 2007).

### **Secretarial Profession – Historical Perspective**

Various sources on the history of the secretarial profession shows that nobody knows when secretaries originated, but that the Romans were first to employ men as scribes who took down dictations. Secretaries were then 'scribes.' In 1837, Sir Isaac Pitman published Shorthand. Events started to unfold in the 1880s with considerable development in the business world when the scribes complained bitterly of the tedium of long hours scratching a living with a Quill pen. Ahukannah (2000) in Irene (2011) states that the QUILL Pen was the crude beginning of office technology. However, in the 1930s, with the invention of writing machine, women started to dominate the profession. In Nigeria, there were few secretaries in the early 1900s because there were no government established training institutions. Stenographers marked the beginning of secretarial cadre(rank/post). They possessed the skills of shorthand and typewriting but lacked office skills. Organizations employed typists and stenographers as secretaries. These "secretaries" were trained by road-side secretarial institutes, which were established by experienced individuals. These institutes did not have qualified instructors and adequate machines. Therefore, those who employed them were skeptical about their administrative competence, thus limiting their activities to routine or chore office jobs.

In 1960 the Ashby Commission presented a report and stressed specifically the need for the inclusion of Business Education in the secondary school level. This marked the beginning of learning commercial subjects and business education right from secondary school level. In the late 1900s, the state and federal governments started recognizing the need to employ efficient secretaries and established Federal Training Centres in Lagos and Kaduna. The state governments later established Staff Development Centres. Admission requirements into these centres were low. After so many years of buzzing around and struggle by practitioners to secure higher education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka introduced *Business Education* among courses being offered. Following this suite, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria started offering Business Education in 1976/77. Consequently, other Universities followed suit and as at today, universities are not only offering Business Education but Secretarial Education as an option in the Faculty of Education. Later, polytechnics were established by both state and federal governments in order to have better trained secretaries. It is a general belief that Polytechnics offer secretarial training and its being closely supervised by the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE).

**Present Situation:** We have a few universities with a Secretarial Administration department where secretaries are trained. The polytechnics are still regarded as the best place to train secretaries. Secretaries command high respect and they easily get jobs. They are versatile because all organizations need them. In the early days of producing secretaries in Nigeria, people regarded those who went to commercial secondary modern or commercial secondary schools as dullards. The public regarded those who went to secondary grammar schools as highly intelligent - those who would become doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. Things have interestingly reversed as

commercial or business courses are becoming more versatile than the science courses. We now find doctors and other professionals who write accounting examinations.

### **Definition of Secretarial Services**

Gone are the days when secretaries only play the roles of: typewriting, taking and transcribing shorthand passages, answering of telephone calls and processing of mails in all forms. Margaret (2009) succinctly clarified that: the secretarial function, though a supportive function, requires a large amount of initiative, tact and resourcefulness to succeed. Ugiagbe (2002) defined a secretary as 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. Boladele (2002) 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. According to Onifade (2009), a secretary is an assistant to a manager. Apart from the traditional responsibilities, such as typing, taking dictation and transcribing, managing records, receiving, storing and retrieving information or operating the computer, attending meetings, answering telephone calls, he now carries out research, prepares the manager's itinerary, makes travel bookings and hotel reservations, supervises the junior workers, and makes some decisions using his initiatives. He should be able to answer some questions on behalf of the boss. For example, a client who wants the price of a product should not wait to see the boss. A secretary who is familiar with the company's policies, price list and handbooks should relieve the boss of such burden by providing accurate information. He should be able to coordinate the administrative activities and organize the office for efficient performance. He should be able to use the internet and train new staff on the computer. The secretary is a member of a team in the workplace and therefore should always be cooperative and supportive. He should be able to write and present reports and disseminate information using websites and e-mail. He now shares with the manager the responsibilities that were hitherto reserved for the manager. Igbiniedion (2010) identified the secretary's responsibilities to include; taking dictation and transcribing it into correspondence which is at once dispatched to its business destination. He highlights of some forms of these correspondence to include: letters, memos, circulars, orders, quotations, acceptances, contractual terms, and conditions, invitations, etc. Each of these items he claimed will invoke a response from the addressees, who will perhaps order materials, proceed to manufacture, insure cargoes, book hotels or engage in some other expensive activity which forms part of the intricate network of business life. Therefore the secretary must be regarded with some respect with reference to these onerous functions that impinge on the success of the organization.

## **Advancement**

**By ICT:** The information and communication technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have revolutionized all profession worldwide including the secretarial practice. The existence of personal computers, notebooks, filing equipment, fax machines, cellular phones and others increasingly sophisticated office machines has greatly evolved the role of secretary. The most astonishing part of it is that office automation and organizational restructuring have led secretaries to assume a wider range of new responsibilities once reserved for managerial and core administrative staff. A study conducted by the IAAP in 2005 revealed that 89% of respondents confirmed their changing roles, job titles and duties. Only 9% sees themselves as secretaries.

Ordinarily, ICT is used to improve delivery of and access to effective and efficient management of office and the organization as a whole. ICT as focus on secretaries, it tends to improve the understanding of the secretarial practice and functions, increase quality of secretaries work attitude thereby increase the impact of secretaries on the management of the office.

**By Training:** The higher education which had advanced to Masters Degree level and at various postgraduate diploma levels had really expanded the secretarial role and responsibilities in any given organization. It is important to state here that higher education was enhanced by the processes of globalization. It is crystal that globalization is an advancement in communication technology. It affords people opportunity to understand, tolerate, cooperate and work together to promote mutual interest in existing relationship. As a result of this, secretarial job openings are getting hard to come by simply because most executives now need fewer but more qualified secretaries.

Aside basic training, higher education imparted in secretaries the underlisted:

- Proactive diary management
- Creating/amending documents and letters
- Digital dictation
- Organizing meetings, travel arrangements, lunches and conference calls
- Proactive interest in matter opening to include drafting, letters of engagement and related correspondence
- Collating billing guides, drafting narratives and covering letters to client.
- Time recording
- Updating/adding contacts to inter actions, including managing lists and reports
- Processing expense claims.

By effect, the following are now solidly expected to be the Secretary's responsibilities:

- Ability to turn around documents at proficiency in using Microsoft office suites of application (Microsoft word, power point, excel, Microsoft access, etc)
- Ability to prioritize and organize

- Effectively communicate using mastery of English
- Ability to devote strong attention to detail
- Ability to use own initiative and remain calm under pressure
- Sound team player
- Ability to use telephone confidently and professionally
- Being proactive and “can do” attitude
- Professional approach to work and clients
- Deliver work to deadlines and keeps relevant parties involved
- Ability to deal with issues with integrity and use own initiative
- Experienced at supporting multiple individuals
- Adopt a flexible approach to work additional hours when required
- Ability to perform internet research.

### **Effect of Challenges**

- The entire office world is now living in an era characterized by 'high tech', and 'high touch'. By so doing, one of the greatest challenges of today's secretary is acquisition of skills in information and communications technology. The advancement in the profession has rendered the secretary to act as communication link between people and machines.
- Insufficient teaching equipment by tertiary institutions offering secretarial programmes
- Unfavourable establishment and government policies which not only relegate secretarial practitioners but also limit them in career progression.
- Inferiorty complex on the part of practitioners. It has become evident that secretarial staff feel inferior to officers in order cadres of administration any ways and
- Proliferation of Training Institutes thereby rendering secretarial training as being unorganized and uncoordinated. This profession has suffered in so many ways and one of it is unorganized training centres,. It has become order of the day to see every tom dick and harry establishing a secretarial Institute. This has created negative impression about the profession to the world. The continuous existence of road-side and unlicensed secretarial training centres is one of the factors inhibiting deserved recognition of the profession.

### **Conclusion**

From the aforementioned, it has been established the role of secretaries has never been more pivotal to the effectiveness of the executive. The critical role of the secretary is to ensuring strict office management and control providing effective leadership and driving tangible business improvements. Increasingly, by advancement in training and Information communication technology the secretary is on more responsibilities that have a direct impact on the success of the organization. What could be more strategic a partnership than this. Obviously, the secretary has been transformed to

being a strategic business partner.

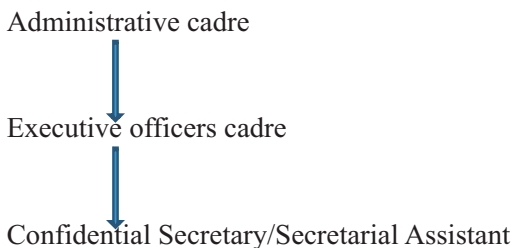
### Recommendations

**Collective Effort:** In ordinary sense, membership of professional organizations stand to gain the following:

- Avoidance of obsolescence through the development and maintenance of new knowledge and skills
- Friendships
- Job referrals
- Professional role models.

However, the challenges of today goes beyond the aforementioned points in the sense that secretarial practitioners are now faced with structural delineation and segregation. The scholastic advancement in the profession has attracted high jealousy for the practitioners. The administrative cadre in the public service see secretary as a threat and as a result seek for all means to sideline him. The issue became compounded by government regulations and establishment rules which considers the Administrative cadre as a superior cadre to the secretarial cadre. Consequently, the lowest rank of Administrative Officers sees him/herself as a future Registrar. The Secretary would have to convert to the so-called core administrative cadre to become a Registrar.

Frankly speaking, there is variation in mode of operation in public and private sectors of the economy. The public sector consider the various secretarial cadre as not only Registry staff but third-class Registry staff as represented below:



To perfect our journey towards strategic partnership relationship, the professional body as a matter of urgency need to take a drastic and radical step towards accomplishing a **Charter Status**. This height is the topmost of professional achievement because it provides an enablement for:

- ✓ **Deserved recognition.** The Professional body will be represented or earn a sit, where issues relating to the practitioners are involved.
- ✓ **Power of control and regulation** of practitioners of the profession in terms of entry and exit points, organizing mandatory tests for professional upgrading, and promotion, etc.
- ✓ The secretarial profession will also earn its **autonomy status** in the organizational hierarchy in that secretarial services will stand on its own.

The practitioner in the private sector receives varying treatment depending on the socio-economic set up and the philosophy of the founders of the organization.

The National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) should continue to supervise and regulate running of secretarial institutes in a more disciplined manner. The NABTEB Inspectorate should initiate and monitor closely the affairs (equipments, quality of study environment, Tutors, etc.) of the recognized ones among training institutes and also define limited standard of operations. If the ministry of Education could monitor establishment of private schools at all levels; then why won't NABTEB take up this giant strides.

**Developing Social Competence Among Secretarial Practitioners:** It is further recommended that secretaries develop a social competence skill. This is a natural endowment and it is believed that the formal training so acquired by secretaries would enhance applicability of this. The competence skill include:

- Being empathic, that is ability to perceive another's thought and point of view.
- Being aware of and sensing a group's dynamics and inter relationships
- Excellent interpersonal communication skills
- Change management skills
- Ability to resolve arguments and discords
- Ability to nourish and build good relationships
- Team player skills

**Developing Skills:** Every responsible officer is expected to demonstrate organizing skills for betterment of assigned tasks. The Secretary as the office affairs manager and the strategic business partner to the executive, should on a general note imbibe: good planning habit, proper scheduling of work, coordination of resources and meeting deadline target.

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