

TOWARDS ENHANCEMENT OF SECRETARIAL PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

This study aims at exploring the basics for the enhancement and development of secretarial profession in Nigeria. The problems as observed in the paper involve the need to examine the productivity and efficiency of secretaries especially with the advent of the dynamism of emerging economies changing the model of office administration and businesses in Nigeria. The need for this paper is justified by the fact that the modern approach of office administration and business environment has witnessed various changes especially in terms of technological advancement.

KEYWORDS: Enhancement, secretarial, development, profession.

Introduction:

The development of secretarial profession in Nigeria started during the days of colonial administration in Nigeria. This however, does not mean that there was no form of secretarial services before the coming of the Europeans.

The early man's record of events was not written down rather it was through oral transmission because people could neither read nor write. The advent of colonial administration in Nigeria brought a bid change in the situation. They came with western education and established so many schools that Nigerians attended. Typewriting was introduced together with Pitman's shorthand.

Following this rigorous innovation, a lot of improvements have been made in the training of secretaries and it is therefore necessary to distinguish between a typist, a shorthand typist and a secretary.

A typist is a junior worker or staff member, whose main duty is to type manuscript or handwritten drafts, while shorthand typist is a skilled worker who combines the skills of shorthand writing with that of typewriting.

A competent secretary combines shorthand and typewriting skills with ample knowledge of secretarial duties. He deals with correspondence, keep records, make arrangement and appointment for a particular member of the staff he is an indispensable, an alter ago, the company cannot do without, since secretarial profession carries a lot of responsibilities especially, now that more sophisticated

equipments are introduced to facilitate the work of the secretary. It is the duty of a secretary to attend official meetings. Secretaries from another perspective are those that are attached to the executives, to help the executives carry out certain responsibilities. The secretary efficiently and effectively renders proper services and gives notification to the commission required under the company's act.

Ezezue (2007) defines communication as the transfer of information, ideas, emotional feelings or views from one person to another in an understandable way through the use of meaningful words, signs, letters, and symbols for the purpose of entertainment or influencing the behaviour of another person. This definition is not far from the essence of business and office communication. Office and business communication span all kinds of communication – verbal; written; non-verbal; kinesics; and proxemics. The Secretary's ability to obtain information from the appropriate file and reference sources are extremely helpful to the emerging office and the executive and such information may be acquired manually, mechanically or electronically.

The Secretary in carrying out her complex official duties heightened by the introduction of ICT in modern offices handles important business communication and recording functions. Her shorthand phonetic language skills which include taking dictations at high speeds and transcribing same with much accuracy, information and word processing skills and records keeping -filing, storage, retrieval, referencing - competences could enhance secretarial practice and function.

Nte (2003) opines that computer technology has greatly affected the job of a secretary because of the shift from the traditional manual office to intense automation in all spheres of office practice even in the area of shorthand phonetic language skill and the social media. The rapid and continual technological developments, especially in office equipment have great effect on the changing role of secretaries. Rather than eliminating secretaries from the office, technological developments have freed them from many times consuming, routine tasks so that they may be better employed in the more specialized areas of office work. For example, a secretary may now retrieve information from a computerized file without having to leave the workstation. Computers now expedite the processing of written communications and accounting procedures and highly sophisticated telecommunications equipment and gadgets and the electronic-mail systems facilitate rapid transmission of both oral and written communications. The social media is a broad category of applications that promotes social interaction through web-based and mobile technologies. Its initial use focused primarily on sharing personal information, but presently these applications have become significant tools in offices and business organisations to market products, enhance communication with customers and attract new clients and callers.

NBEA (2012), states that social media is an important business communication tool as online communities provide a unique opportunity for companies and organisations to create brand awareness that evolves a social media audience creating content that is shared globally. The expanded market place that has resulted from this affects both large and small offices, companies and organisations and they abound in African and Nigeria. For Secretaries to be competitive in today's global economy, they need to improve their skills and competences using the social media tools effectively in and out of the workplace. Some of the most common social media are the Facebook, WhatsApp, Internal Relay Chat (IRC), and the computer mediated communications (CMC). In the age of digital recording devise and audio reproduction, secretaries using these devices to record speech is not only much more accurate, it also allows the listeners more time to take note of other important factors such as speakers mannerisms and body language. These are important devices that enhance shorthand skills and make communication very easy. Many forms of shorthand exist and typical shorthand system provides symbols or abbreviations for words and common phrases which can allow someone well-trained in the system to write as quickly as people speak. Abbreviation methods are alphabet-based and use different abbreviating approaches. In emerging offices in Nigeria, the computers, internet, web designs and products and electronic media has made great impact that even the use of cell phones for many official matters including SMS brevity, coding and storage/retrieval competence has enhanced secretarial practice.

Definition of Terms:

For better understanding of this paper, the following terms are defined.

Administration: The act of putting something into operation, the control or direction of affairs.

Effective: Having a noticeable or desired result.

Organisation: The arrangement of points to form an effective whole, a group of people with a specialised purpose.

Technology: The branch of knowledge, study, mastery and utilization of manufacturing and industrial methods, systemic application of knowledge to practice industry.

Penman: The first trained professional officer

Stenographer: someone who has the skill of writing shorthand outlines and transcribing on the typewriter.

Automation: Use of automatic equipment and machines in handling of secretarial matters.

Secretary: According to National Secretaries Association in Obodo (2001), a secretary is an executive assistant who possesses a mastery of skills; who demonstrates the ability to assume responsibilities without direct supervision, who

exercises initiative and judgement and who makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority.

Chattered Secretaries: A professional body that controls the activities of its members and regulates entry into the profession through a set of organised examination.

The Emerging Office Secretary in Nigeria:

The Professional Secretary International aptly defines the secretary as an executive assistant who possesses a mastery of office skills, who demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, who exercises initiative and judgment and who makes decisions within the scope assigned authority. Shorthand phonetic language skills promote saleable skills acquisition and employment generation possibilities that enhance secretarial practice.

Secretarial training at all levels provides exposure in the following areas:

1. Developing knowledge regarding the content of office, its roles and functions. Every individual both young and old should have proper knowledge and understanding of the concepts of office, its role and function.
2. Developing the ability to deal with office environment and responsibilities which helps in establishing and maintaining satisfying office knowledge and understudy relationships with colleagues, callers/visitors, community and relevant others in everyday routine office life.
3. Developing life skills to cope with maintenance and security of diverse office materials and equipment. It develops the knowledge, skills and values necessary for business and public life, participation in the social life of the community particularly in the maintenance of office communication, records and equipment.
4. Promoting understanding and coping with changes in office automation and changes in the society. It helps a secretary understand and cope with the challenges in the quality and functional life of office communication, records management, equipment care and improved productivity.
5. Developing physiological processes of one's own body by creates awareness regarding proper skills in effective communication, records keeping, security of information, reading of equipment/materials, leaflets, guidelines and routine maintenance, repairs, refurbishment and replacement and recycling possibilities.
6. Creating responsible and useful citizens who can contribute meaningfully to the effectiveness of the office thereby developing a meaningful society.
7. Developing consciousness of the role of office in promoting entrepreneurship, patriotism and responsibility towards oneself, the

community, nation and humanity which is very crucial for secretarial practice in emerging offices in Nigeria.

Previously many secretaries were engaged with duties and responsibilities and not much authority was attached. In the modern office environment today, the current impact of business and the resulting pressures affecting managers at all levels have caused them to rethink the secretarial function and to delegate more responsibilities and more authority to their secretaries.

Lindsell-Roberts (1993:2) present some of the additional responsibilities expected of administrative secretaries to include:

- A. Preparing rough drafts of executive communications
- B. Editing and signing executive correspondent
- C. Composing speeches, memoranda and reports for the executive
- D. Composing articles for publications
- E. Editing copy prepared by others
- F. Consulting references sources to obtain information needed by the executive
- G. Abstracting information from various sources for the executives use
- H. Setting up meeting and conferences and reminding executives of the task delegated to them at these meetings
- I. Chairing and participating actively in meetings
- J. Supervising and training employees
- K. Recommending or selecting office equipment systems and supplies for purchases

Functions of the Secretary:

The acquisition of professional secretarial skills is to enable the recipients to function effectively in the modern office environment. Accordingly, the secretary with professional skills performs some basic functions or roles that have now radically changed from what it used to be previously. The secretary of today or modern-day secretary performs the task of the receptionist, planning the employer's itinerary and appointments, supervising junior workers, reminding her boss of appointments and assignments, filtering all calls, callers and visitors to avoid undesirable encroachment on her boss' time and handling all incoming and outgoing mails.

Today's secretary composes and produces outgoing mail able correspondences, prepares reports using modern facilities such as computers and the internet, handles filing and indexing, orders supplies and all the attendant functions such as maintaining minimum and maximum re-order levels. Other functions include maintaining financial records together with impress accounts and the preparation of briefs for her boss concerning interviews and advice where necessary. The

professional secretary of today is also responsible for all activities relating to meetings, such as before meeting, during meeting and after meeting.

The role of the professional secretary of today in the business environment is also constantly changing and expanding with various forms of administrative and managerial responsibilities (Wikipedia Encyclopaedia, 2004). However, some of the greatest challenges the new roles pose include those of leveraging customer care skill and managing the human resource as well as a wide range of organizational and management techniques required to operate effectively. There is also the function arising from integrity, technique and approaches to provide a proactive support to her employers within the organization and the ability to develop the managerial aspects of her position. Adaptation to change provides the professional secretary an array of functions with the attendant challenges. No doubt, the secretary of today performs some very strategic functions in an office and these functions, for obvious reasons, are wide-ranging (Amiaya, 2006).

Critical Secretarial Skills Required for the Enhancement of Secretarial Practice in Nigeria

As Stated by Quintessential Careers

According to Quintessential Careers (2010), certain skills have been associated with the professional secretary. The list covers a wide spectrum. However, they include the following:

1. **Communication Skills** – These have to do with written, verbal and listening skills. By far, some of the communication skills most often mentioned by employers are the ability to listen, write and speak effectively and fluently. There is no gain-saying the fact that successful communication is critical in modern day business organizations.
2. **Analytical/Research Skills** – This is in the area of thinking with demonstrated talent for identifying, scrutinizing, improving and streamlining complex work processes.
3. **Computer-Technical Literacy** – With the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and by implication the use of the computer, almost all jobs in the office now require some basic understanding, application and use of the computer hardware and software, especially word processing, data processing, spreadsheets and e-mail.
4. **Flexibility/Adaptability/Managing Multiple Priorities** – Today's goal-driven leaders, including the professional secretaries who maintain a productive climate and confidently motivates, mobilizes, mentors and coaches subordinates to meet and sustain high performance standards require these skills.

5. **Multicultural Sensitivity/Awareness** – There is possibly no bigger issue in the work place today than the subject of diversity. Such diversities include language, religion, the concept of federal character as in the case of Nigeria, gender, individual characteristics and dispositions, among others. The job seekers, particularly the secretaries, require demonstrating a conscious and deliberate awareness and understanding of other people.
6. **Planning/Organizing** – In these areas, the skills and ability to design, plan, organize and implement projects and tasks within a stipulated time frame are very important. The subject of goal-setting is not isolated – the secretary should be able to set measurable and achieving goals, taking into consideration, all known and unforeseen constraints.
7. **Teamwork** – In modern-day organizations, teamwork requiring working in one or more work groups is inevitable. It thus becomes necessary for the individual to develop and sustain the ability to work with others in a professional manner in the course of attempting to achieve organizational and individual goals.
8. **Result-Driven** – The professional secretary should be result-driven and an achiever with exemplary planning and organizational skills, and possessing a high degree of detailed orientation.
9. **Problem-Solving/Reasoning/Creativity** – This involves the ability to find solutions to problems using the power of creative reasoning of past experiences along with the available information and resources.
10. **Interpersonal Skills** – The ability to relate with, and inspire co-workers to participate and prevent conflicts is very essential, given the amount of time spent at work each day.

Importance of the Enhancement of Secretarial Practice in Nigeria:

For the office duties or functions to progress appropriately, the professional secretary has to be abreast with current trends with reference to office machines, office technology, office terminologies such as teleconferencing, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as well as others, and be able to respond to them in the right manner, and in a proactive manner. Secretarial skills are a pre-requisite for national and individual development, especially on the part of practitioners notwithstanding the attendant or associated problems, such as funding. These, no doubt, help to expand the horizons of the human intellect and an overall personality of secretaries. The importance of the enhancement and development of secretarial practice can also be seen in the following:

1. **Productivity:** Secretarial skills help in increasing the productivity of employees which, in turn, contributes to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives.

2. **Esprit de corps or team spirit:** The work environment is made up of different functions and people with different backgrounds and expectations. The need for the concept of esprit de corps or team spirit, therefore, becomes very important because it helps in inculcating the sense of team work, team spirit and inter-team collaborations. It also helps to inculcate the zeal to learn among employees.
3. **Organizational culture:** Every organization has its own culture; a good knowledge of this culture helps the professional secretary in the development and improvement in the organisational health and culture together with effectiveness. Furthermore, this knowledge helps in creating a learning culture within the organisation.
4. **Organizational climate:** The climate of an organization goes a long way to determine its success or failure. The knowledge of this, therefore, helps the professional secretary to build a positive perception and feelings about and within the organization. It is pertinent to state that the secretary gets these feelings from the organizational leadership, colleagues and subordinates.
5. **Quality:** The concept of quality covers a wide spectrum; it helps in improving the quality of work and the quality of work life.
6. **Healthy work environment:** A developed professional secretary is able to understand that a healthy work environment is very important in building a positive employee-employee and employee-management relationship so that the goals of the employees and the organization can align.
7. **Health and safety:** A good knowledge of the importance of health and safety in the work place contributes to improving the health and safety of the employees and the organization.
8. **Morale:** Much has been said by industrial psychologists among other behavioural specialists. Morale increases productivity and self-satisfaction to mention but a few. To a large extent, too, it has a positive correlation with the creation of a better corporate image.
9. **Profitability:** The whole essence of the existence of any organization, particularly the profit-oriented concerns is to maximize sustainable profit. An acknowledgement of this on the part of the professional secretary makes it possible to develop a positive attitude towards profit orientation and maximization.

Conclusion:

Secretaries in Nigeria today are faced with the perplexing capabilities of the computer and its application to all spheres of office operations. Communication, recording and retrieving information remain a major secretarial practice influenced by the computer in any office.

Secretarial skills relate to the ability of an individual – the secretary – to perform optimally in the work environment that is characterised by globalization and ICT. The functions of the professional secretary of today, no doubt, cover a wide spectrum. The skills of the professional secretary do not come about without some effort and training or education that is the whole essence of the enhancement and development of the secretarial profession. The concept of secretarial practice is all-embracing. The enhancement and development of secretarial practice in Nigeria cannot take place without adequate funding as it is part of human capital development, and this is one of the major challenges militating against the achievement of human capital development with regard to the acquisition of secretarial skills needed for national development. Unfortunately, today's secretaries, no doubt, face some challenges which serve as threats to their ability to perform maximally.

Recommendations:

In order for the enhancement and development of secretarial practice in Nigeria to succeed, the following recommendations are appropriate.

1. Secretarial practice/ profession should be planned and adequately funded in line with the requirements of contemporary or modern office administration and modern business environment and international standards must be applied. There should be regular interaction among planners, employers and builders of human capital to facilitate the process of national development and the enhancement and development of secretarial practice.
2. Government at all levels should endeavour to provide quality education through proper and adequate funding as well as facilitate the quality of work life with respect to the enhancement and development of secretarial practice.
3. The secretarial profession was given appropriate attention in the past and even in the present national development plans of the nation. However, adequate actions to back this have been lacking. Therefore, proper planning and sustainable policies for the enhancement and development of secretarial practice should be an ultimate priority.
4. The professional skills of those in the secretarial profession should be updated regularly through training and retraining; exposure to modern trends in the area of office automation, ICT and improvement in the quality of work life.
5. It is imperative to step up human capital development as it relates to the production of skillful and professional secretaries that will contribute in no small measure to national development.
6. Computers and sophisticated telecommunications equipment and electronic-mail systems facilitate the rapid transmission of both oral and

written communication, recording and retrieval functions and should be provided to enhance secretarial practice.

7. Adequate enlightenment should be made of the positive impact of the secretarial professional body (Chartered Secretaries).

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