

INADEQUACIES OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT SKILLS OF SECRETARIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR OTM CURRICULUM REORGANIZATION

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Abstract

The need to reorganize OTM curriculum to ensure secretaries acquire relevant skills for effective performance in modern offices has necessitated this paper. The paper focuses on the inadequacies of project management skills of secretaries and its implications for curriculum reorganization for thriving of OTM profession in Nigeria. Relevant literature is reviewed on project management skills, and their importance to the productivity of organizations in Nigeria. Also, project management skills such as organization, communication, planning, time management, ICT, and risk management are expected to be possessed by secretaries. However, it is discovered that most of these skills are lacking among professional secretaries in Nigeria affecting their performance in modern offices. Based on the discussion, the authors conclude that OTM curriculum is not adequate in equipping secretarial studies students (OTM students) with project management skills to enable them to complete office tasks effectively when employed in organizations in Nigeria. It is recommended among others that; OTM curriculum in tertiary institutions in Nigeria should be reviewed in order to incorporate relevant project management skills into it. This will enable secretarial studies (OTM) students to acquire these skills for job performance in office of organization upon graduation.

Keywords: Project Management Skills, Secretaries, OTM curriculum, Reorganization

Introduction

The success or failure of any organization whether public or private, depends mainly on the contributions of secretaries. Secretaries are the face of every organization, including educational organizations, and their works are quite important, as no organization can function properly without secretaries' assistance. The secretary is an individual who has a solid general education and has completed a predetermined programme of instruction in the fields of secretarial training, and who possesses the necessary abilities, attitudes, and competences to assume the roles/duties in an office (Akintola and Adepoju, 2016). He/she is an executive assistant who has mastered office skills, can assume responsibility with or without supervision, uses initiative and judgment, and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority (Ile and Oguejiofor, 2015).

Secretaries perform different administrative function, according to Akintola and Adepoju (2016). Traditionally, these functions have been largely tied to correspondence, such as composing and typing routine office letters, memoranda, reports, minutes of meetings, and scientific or technical materials. Similarly, as important individuals in the office, secretaries are in charge of keeping the office organized, keeping track of the many appointments and meetings on the calendar, and managing the flow of visitors and employees who need to see the management staff. In addition, according to Oyesode (2014), secretaries perform more advanced executive roles or specialize in areas such as health care or legal support in addition to standard secretarial tasks such as managing electronic filing systems, handling and routing mail, and operating various office machines such as computers, phones, fax machines, and videoconferencing equipment. Furthermore, for execute office work, secretaries rely on computer software and programmes such as databases, spreadsheets, and graphics to complete tasks. Based on the professional training programmes completed in schools, Ogundionye (2021) states that secretaries must demonstrate initiative, exercise good judgment, and make sound decisions within the scope of authority delegated to them.

A qualified secretary should possess both knowledge and expertise to carry out office duties successfully. According to the Michigan Civil Service Commission Job Description (2016), qualified secretaries must possess the following skills: knowledge of office procedures, practices, and computer software programmes; knowledge of proper English usage and grammar; knowledge of the organization and composition of letters, minutes, reports, charts, and spreadsheets; knowledge of scheduling and coordinating travel arrangements; and ability to type at a rate of 40 net words per minute from clear copy. electronic office equipment. Similar to this, Ogundionye (2021) states that office secretaries should have skills in ICT, leadership, electronic records management, and project management.

Project management refers to the act of planning, organizing, overseeing, and controlling every aspect of a project, as well as motivating everyone involved

to complete it safely, within budget, and according to schedule (Raooof, 1999). It involves planning, organizing, coordinating, leading, and controlling resources to achieve the project's goal (Gido and Clements, 2012). In addition, project management entails planning the work, developing a plan, and then carrying it out (executing that plan). The functions of project management include; defining the requirement of work, establishing the extent of work, allocating the resources required, planning the execution of the work, monitoring the progress of the work and adjusting deviations from the plan. One of the main tasks of secretaries working for the company is to plan, organize, and coordinate office procedures to achieve organizational goals. To ensure that office tasks are completed efficiently and on time, secretaries must have the necessary skills in project management. For the secretaries to be truly great project managers, they require more than just training and qualifications, they need to possess relevant skills to get tasks over the line.

Skill is an ability to do something well, gained through training and expectance. Skills involve a practical knowledge and ability to perform a function which could be acquired or learnt in the school or training centers through learning experience (Ezeabii et al., 2021). Project management skills are the necessary traits and competencies an employee (secretaries) need to be a successful project manager. Project management skills enable employees to complete office tasks in a quality manner, on schedule, and within the budget set by the organization, according to Gido and Clements (2012). Therefore, professional secretaries should have the project management skills such as planning, organizing, coordinating, controlling, and leading. Similarly, Inuwa, Joseph and Musa (2019) listed project management skills as, job comprehension skills, office communication skills, job execution skills, job monitoring skills, job management skills, and resource organizing skills, among others. Additionally, project management skills required of professional secretaries according to the Project Management Institute (2018) include soft skills such as communication skills, organization, adaptability, empathy, unflappability, leadership, problem-solving, time management, collaboration, risk management, and critical thinking, negotiation, and tracking and monitoring skills.

In many organizations in Nigeria, the issues of poor job performance of secretaries have been a source of concern to employers as they lamented that these secretaries do not possess adequate skills for effective performance (Gbinigie, 2016). Similarly, Ezeabii, Ekoh-Nweke and Okonkwo (2021) reported that some secretaries cannot effectively perform their functions or complete their projects expected of them in the office due to lack of skills such as communication, ICT, time management, and project management skills among others. If a secretary is not excellent in spellings and grammar or cannot type quickly and accurately, or relate with customers or visitors well or have the knowledge of computer software programmes, such secretary cannot carry out tasks effectively in any organization.

According to Okoli (2015), qualified secretaries should have a wide knowledge of business skills such as planning, organizing, coordinating, controlling, and monitoring, versatile knowledge in personnel matters, office practice, communication and inside knowledge of the operation of all departments within the organization, Okoli however, regretted that most secretaries are half-baked who possess only knowledge of shorthand, typewriting and basic office practices without soft skills required to effectively and timely complete office tasks. Moreover, for a secretary to perform well in his job and achieve stated objectives the secretary needs to be well trained in various skills which include; managerial, communication, technical, leadership, and project management skills (Ezeabii et al., 2021). In most cases, the employers have to incur huge cost training and re-training these secretaries when employed in their organizations.

The Office Technology and Management (OTM) remain the main agent of change in Nigeria (Adeoye & Adeoye, 2017), and helps in producing graduates (secretaries) with requisite skills required fit into modern organizations. In view of this, Endouware and Yusuf (2021) state that it is imperative for secretarial graduates from tertiary institutions in Nigeria to acquire skills (project management skills inclusive) for effective performance in modern offices. As new technologies emerge, narrow technical skills are becoming insufficient for many office jobs and businesses while the demand for higher project management skills are increasing. It is more important than ever for OTM programme from time to time to re-organize and diversify their programme to make it more responsive to current as well as future project management skill needs. Now is the ideal time, therefore, for planners of OTM curriculum to re-organize to remain relevant.

Re-organization refers to the process of overhauling existing programme strategy, setup, and operations to improve productivity (Blakely-Gray, 2019). It can take place when there are financial challenges; emergence of new skills, or standard/quality of service delivery fall below expectations. In the context of this paper, re-organization simply means making necessary changes to OTM curriculum to reflect current project management skill needs. O’jules 2020) defines re-organization of OTM programme as the act of going back to the drawing board to re-plan, considering modern changes in the planning process to ensure emerging project management skills and innovative teaching strategies among others are embedded in the teaching and learning of the programme. Re-organization of OTM curriculum involves incorporating project management skills into the curriculum to ensure that graduating secretaries acquire them for effective performance in modern organizations. Therefore, this paper focuses on the inadequacies of project management skills of secretaries: implications for OTM curriculum reorganization for thriving OTM profession in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The Secretary

A secretary is called names such as the “mirror of the office”, “the gate keeper of the office”, “an administrative assistant” and the “live wire of an organization”, just to mention a few. A secretary is an office-staff who combines the mastery of secretarial skills of typewriting and shorthand with office routine functions. Ile and Oguejiofor (2015) define 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. Citraresmana (2020), views a secretary as someone who works in an office, writing letters, making phone calls, and arranging meetings for a person or for an organization. Similarly, Ezeabii et al. (2021) conceptualize a secretary is a personal assistant or administrative assistant in a society or organization who deals with a lot of duties which includes; handling of correspondences, managing budgets, book-keeping, attending telephone calls, handling visitors, maintaining websites, among others. It means that a qualified secretary should have a wide knowledge of business acumen, versatile knowledge in accounting, personnel management, office practice, communication and inside knowledge of the operations of all departments within the organization where the secretary works. Based on the above definitions, the researcher believed that a secretary is an officer of a society or any organization whether big or small, public or private who deals with events or office activities usually under an employer or supervisor.

Duties and Functions of a Secretary

A secretary performs various duties in the office of an organization. According to Agomuo (2014) the duties of a secretary are as follows: helping new employees and visitors to find their way around the organizations, managing customer files and other records in an office, handling incoming and outgoing phone calls and mail correspondence, copying documents for mailing or internal distribution, performing clerical tasks and errands to assist others by cancelling or rescheduling appointments, ordering office supplies, taking notes during meeting and getting drink for guests, and supporting the manager or managers in an organization. Similarly, the Michigan Civil Service Commission Job Description (2016) lists the duties of a secretary as follows: composing and typing routine letters, memoranda, reports, minutes of meetings, scientific or technical material, numerical data, charts and forms, receiving and screening visitors and telephone calls, taking messages, scheduling appointments for professional(s) and/or management staff and providing information to callers requiring knowledge of organizations operations, supervisor's point of view, and the interpretation and application of policies and procedures, establishing and maintaining office files, logs, indexes, control records, or other information concerning the work under the supervisor's control,

Skills Expected of a Qualified Secretary

Developing knowledge and skills of secretaries require effective delivering of Office Technology and Management (OTM) Programme. In order to succeed in the profession as well as perform office functions the secretary needs to possess the following skills according to Michigan Civil Service Commission Job Description (2016); knowledge of office practices, procedures, and computer software programmes, knowledge of correct English usage and grammar, knowledge of the organization and composition of letters, minutes, reports, charts, and spreadsheets, skill in typing from clear copy at a rate of 40 net words per minute, ability to follow, apply, interpret, and explain instructions and guidelines, ability to determine work priorities, ability to make decisions and take appropriate actions, ability to meet schedules and deadlines of the work area, ability to communicate effectively, ability to compose routine correspondence and reports, ability to operate standard ICT office equipment, and ability to analyze and assess office services and operations for quality, efficiency, and effectiveness and to make recommendations for improvements.

Concept of Project Management

Project management refers to a combination of management and planning and the management of change. Project management has evolved in order to plan, co-ordinate and control the complex and diverse activities of modern industrial and commercial projects ((Raof, 1999). It is a specialized management technique, to plan and control projects under a strong single point of responsibility. Maserang (2012) viewed project management as the application of a collection of tools and techniques to direct the use of diverse resources toward the accomplishment of a unique, complex, one-time task within time, cost and quality constraints. Generally from different schools of thought, it is believed that project management is the discipline of planning, organizing and managing resources to bring about the successful completion of specific project goals and objectives.

Project Management Skills

Many different project management skills abound, and no research can completely cover all of them. Taking this into consideration, this paper has enumerated key skills secretaries need to effectively and timely perform their office tasks. According to Gido and Clements (2012), project management skills include abilities to establish task objective, and get agreement from supervisors, define major office tasks, create an office work breakdown to be executed, assign responsibilities, that is, identify the person responsible for each office task, define specific work activities (develop a list of detailed work activities needed to perform each work package and produce any required documents), and sequence work activities (create a network diagram that shows the necessary sequence and dependent relationships). According to the Project Management Institute (2018), project management skills include soft skills such as communication skills, organization, adaptability, empathy, unflappability, and leadership skills.

Communication Skills

These skills include the ability to effectively work with colleagues, team members, other departments, and supervisors, ability to ensure that the team is on the same page, working towards the same, ability to communicate face to face, with e-mail, instant messaging, through video conferencing, ability to listening attentively to other employees' ideas, ability to ask the right questions, and ability to give prompt, specific and action-based feedback. Similarly, communication skills are the abilities to; clearly communicate feedback, make points, and ask questions of coworkers to collaborate well, keep a good posture, eye contact, and body language, as well as the capacity for listening, active listening skills, and ask open-ended clarifying questions.

Organizational Skills

Organization is one of the most important skills needed to be a project manager (Project Management Institute, 2018). Organization is a broad term that covers a lot of associated sub-skills such as ability to plan a project in detail, and skills in personal time management. Organization skills include abilities to: keep up-to-date work/office calendar, focus on one task at a time, keep deadlines, effectively judiciously use available resources to complete office task. Others are abilities to; maintain a clean, clutter-free office workspace, sort office documents into easily-findable folders with labels, put things back where they belong after use, and keep any other physical resources organized that might be needed for office work.

Planning Skills

Planning necessitates thinking both long and short term in order to organize tasks and assignments in a way that facilitates productivity and performance (Estrada, 2022). Secretaries can use planning skills at work to organize large projects, divide them into smaller tasks, and then choose when and how to complete each task while taking into account the available resources. In order to determine who will be in charge of which project components and how elements completed by various employees or teams will come together, planning skills will also be useful for project management when others are involved. Planning is essentially drawing up a road map with specific instructions for everyone involved to follow in order to achieve the desired result as quickly and effectively as possible (Estrada, 2022). Planning skills include abilities to; outline task them front, set timelines and deadlines for each step, arrange various steps in a logical order, plan check-ins with team members to ensure that short- and long-term expectations are always understood, to trust ones instinct to get started instead of wasting time second-guessing oneself.

Leadership Skills

Leadership skills involve the abilities to: present a make task commitment to ensure that jobs are completed; accept risk when faced with opportunities that cause efficient use of available resources, be proactive, innovative and take risk to

complete office tasks, and accept responsibility of failure to complete task on time (Ukatu, 2021).

ICT Skills

Information and communications technology (ICT) skills are necessities to secretaries to carry out office tasks and complete them on time. ICT skills cover knowledge and ability to send and receive e-mail, use e-business, e-commerce with word processors, send and receive fax messages, use scanners, printers, and computersto produce a document, among others. ICT skills are paramount to enable secretaries effective management office data electronically.

Time Management Skills

Planning involves outlining tasks, whereas time management involves scheduling time on a daily basis. This difference has an impact on how well a secretary can stick to the plans made. According to Pearson in Estrada (2022), good time management enables a secretary to prioritize projects that will deliver the most impact. Time management skills include abilities to; avoid procrastination, prioritize and schedule tasks to improve time management, make a list of tasks to carry out first, and order the jobs on the to-do list according to expectations and deadlines. Others are abilities to; make a schedule for the day that details when to work on each item, from the highest priority down to the lowest, plan ahead and leave some wiggle room in your schedule for unforeseen requests or demands, and use a time-tracking app to accurately estimate how long a task will take,

Problem Solving Skills

Despite how much the secretary may like to believe that every task will go according to plan, unforeseen problems will inevitably arise. Problems cannot demotivate the secretaries. Instead, they must come up with ways to continue the project even when the best-laid plans fail. Other skills are abilities to; remain objective, analyze the facts, and evaluate options without bias (Joubert, 2019).

Technical Skills

In addition to the project management skills, effective secretaries must also have the technical know-how to carryout office tasks to completion(Joubert, 2019). Technical skills include abilities to; interact with teams more effectively and have a better understanding of the inherent risks and potential stumbling blocks in a project, have a practical understanding of popular project management software that can be frequently employed for resource, budget, and schedule management as well as for planning, organizing, and coordinating teamwork. In order to successfully carry out an office tasks to completion in the modern world, secretaries must also continuously advance, learning how to use the newest office technologies available.

Problem of Inadequacies of Project management Skills among Secretaries

The issue of lack or inadequacies of skills among the secretaries in Nigeria has remained a source for worry among stake holders. According to Ezeabi et al.

(2021), some of the secretaries in Nigeria cannot complete simple office task in organization. Igwe (2015) regrets that secretaries in organizations cannot perform their office task effectively due to lack of, or inadequate office skills, Igwe posits that the Nigerian secretaries lack good customer relationship, time management skills, and do not possess the ability to use varieties of computer software programmes in performing office duties. Additionally, Ezeabii et al. admit that all these deficiencies lead to non-achievement of the objectives of organizations. Furthermore, lack of skills in the use of ICT facilities by secretaries creates difficulty in completion of office tasks.

Because of changes in office procedures and operations, Ohiwerei, Okosun and Ohiwerei(2019) states that the secretaries need to proceed to acquire more training and retraining to enable him/her fit into the new offices. Ohiwerei et al. observe with regret that some secretarial staff have phobia for ICT skills training, therefore would prefer to continue with the old fashion or put in for voluntary retirement. A resultant effect, which put more pressure and work overload on the few secretaries that are left in the system as management has since placed embargo on recruitment of fresh secretarial staff.

Similarly, some of the secretaries found in offices of many organizations today lack self confidence in their ability to complete office projects, are not fluent in communication, do not exhibit enough transparency, honesty, politeness, smartness and ability to carrying out their office duties. Changes are the only thing that is permanent in life hence the secretaries are faced with changes in personal life as well as attitude towards the secretarial profession. Nwaokwa and Okoli (2012) states that many secretaries lack the communication skills required to carry out, and complete tasks in the various offices and this has greatly affected their performance. Additionally, Ohiwerei (2019) opines that there is a serious deflection in the present business education curriculum, including OTM curriculum which calls for urgent re-organization of the curriculum in Nigeria. Ohiwerei states that it is unfortunate that non-OTM professionals seem to be involved in the curriculum design for secretaries.

Recently, there has been some resentment shown by some organizations as a result of the disappointment that they encountered with secretaries' performance of office duties. The employers have traced this situation to the lack of adequate secretarial training programmes they receive while in schools. It is not a hidden truth that most of the OTM programmes in higher institutions are not what they ought to be in the sense that they lack qualified human resources as well as facilities and equipment they need to training secretaries. The problems are quiet enormous. The secretary produced will be half backed, in competent, inefficient and ineffective in carrying out office tasks and completing them effectively and timely. With the increasing miniaturization in information technologies which is increasingly being employed by most organizations in carrying out office projects,

secretaries that possess inadequate project management skills will be both stranded and frustrated finding themselves in a completely digital office.

Implications for OTM curriculum re-organization for thriving of OTM profession in Nigeria

This paper that has shown that secretaries in Nigeria have inadequate project management skills such as communication, problem-solving, ICT, organization, planning and risk management skills has profound implications for the review of OTM curriculum. The OTM curricula of tertiary institutions are not adequate in preparing secretarial students effective job performance in modern organizations. Additionally, It implies that OTM lecturers are not laying more emphasis in equipping secretarial students with project management skills required by employers for effective job performance when employed in modern organizations upon graduation. Similarly, it implies that the instructional resources for adequate training of secretarial students in project management skills are not available and adequate. It does appear that OTM courses taught in tertiary institutions are not providing the required project management skills exposure secretarial studies students need to complete office tasks (projects) in organizations when employed upon graduation.

Conclusion

Project management skills are no longer optional for secretaries working in organizations in Nigeria, they have become the new normal, and employers are paying increasing attention to hiring secretaries that possess them. The literature reviewed shows that many of secretarial professionals in Nigeria possess inadequate project management skills required to carry out office tasks and complete them effectively and timely. Therefore, the authors conclude that OTM curriculum is not adequate in equipping secretarial studies students (OTM students) with project management skills to enable them complete office tasks effectively when employed in organizations in Nigeria.

Recommendations

For better acquisition of secretarial project management skill, the authors advance the following recommendations:

1. The OTM curriculum in tertiary institutions should be reviewed in order to incorporate project management skills into it. This will enable secretarial studies (OTM) students to acquire these skills for job performance in office of organization upon graduation.
2. Management of organizations should organize regular training and re-training programmes to enable secretaries to acquire, or up-date their project management skills for effective job performance.

3. OTM lecturers should emphasize more on equipping secretarial studies students with project management skills, which will enable them to carry out office tasks and complete them timely when employed in modern offices when upon graduation.
4. Government and other stakeholders should adequately provide instructional resources especially ICT facilities to all OTM departments in tertiary institutions to enable lecturers to utilize them widely in equipping students with needed project management skills for effective job performance in modern offices.

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