



## **SECRETARIAL PROFESSION IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper considered issues, challenges and the future of the secretarial profession in Nigeria. The concepts of secretary and profession were addressed, and the historical perspective of the secretarial profession in general, and in Nigeria in particular, was reviewed. It was observed that the profession has evolved over the years as a result of changes in commerce and industry, and technological advances in the society at large; such that the title 'secretary' has now changed to administrative professional. Six issues/challenges: performance/professional growth, rewards, hazards, training, the B.Sc.-HND dichotomy, and attitude of autocratic leaders were identified and analysed. Further, the future of the secretarial profession in Nigeria was examined and noted as bright since the profession is developing and expanding, thereby creating more employment opportunities in the world of work. Recommendations were that more occupational growth opportunities should be created; appropriate reward system should be imbibed; adequate security measures should be made for secretaries considering their exposure to hazards; training and retraining of secretaries should be enhanced to provide for adequate skills acquisition for the demands of secretarial work; and that the B.Sc.-HND dichotomy be removed.*

**Keywords:** *Secretary, Secretarial Profession, Issues and challenges, Future, Nigeria*

### **Introduction**

The secretarial profession is one of the areas of human endeavour that has contributed largely to the growth and development of commerce and industry in particular, and the society at large. Organizations all over the world, large or small, have depended on secretaries for their survival, growth and proper functioning due to the indispensable roles of secretaries. Secretaries organize and coordinate office tasks, maintain records and provide other services that assist in providing directions for decision-making and organizational performance. The term 'secretary', according to Zuin and Findlay (2014), is derived from a Latin word 'secretum', meaning keeper of secrets. A secretary is, therefore, a person entrusted with secret and private matters. Different people have considered a secretary in different ways. For example, Ubon and Abidoye (2015, p. 1) present that "a secretary is a mere servant; his position is that he has to do what he is told, and no person can assume that he has any authority to represent anything at all, nor can anyone assume that statements made by him are necessary to be accepted as trustworthy without



further enquiry". However, according to Professional Secretaries International, PSI, (cited in Adebayo & Akinyele, 2012), a secretary is an executive who possess a mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative and judgment and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority. A professional secretary performs tasks similar to an executive or administrative assistant, and the functions of a professional secretary are central to the success of every organization, since no office can easily function without a secretary (Adam 2015). Because of this, secretaries have been given different titles such as 'next in command to the boss', 'memory aid', 'protector of the boss', 'eyes and ears of an organisation', and 'company's image maker'. The importance of secretaries in organizations, business or social, can therefore, not be overemphasized.

A profession may be regarded as a body of knowledge clearly defined and well-organized, and acquired intellectually. This implies that for one to be a professional, one has to undergo the relevant course of study and acquire the requisite knowledge, skills and aptitudes to function in the area. The practitioners must also be guided by the ethical codes of conduct for members of the profession. In this regard, the secretarial profession is founded on well-grounded principles, an organized and well-articulated course of study, and a code of ethics which practitioners are expected to imbibe and observe. For this reason, Musa (2016) reasoned that various office workers perform some aspects of secretarial work, but not all the workers are secretaries; as secretaries have more responsibility for their work. Lobato, da Silva-Aleluia and da Costa (2013) assert that the scope of secretary's work nowadays has expanded and secretaries have to be increasingly well-trained and prepared. Relatedly, Adebayo and Akinyele (2012) posit that the professional secretary, in addition to coordinating the daily routines of an office and organising of office schedules, analyses prevailing situations, exercises judgment, technical knowledge and creativity. Modern professional secretaries are therefore now referred to as office managers by some people because of the work they do, their education and training, knowledge and skills acquired; and even expectations from their bosses and the general public. A professional secretary is no longer merely the assistant who sits behind the typewriter, takes dictations in shorthand, and attend to visitors.

### **Historical Perspective**

There is no known evidence of the origins of the secretarial profession. However, Shulz (2013) avers that the Romans were the first to employ educated and prominent men as 'scribes' who took down dictation and also sometimes acted as trusted advisers to their principals. Oliveira et al (2021) indicate that the secretarial profession was documented around 3,300 years B.C., and the denomination was of scribes because they had some functions similar to the secretarial professionals. The scribes also had multiple knowledge at the time, such as languages, numerical reasoning, writing, operating tachygraphs, organizing archives, and constant contact with several areas. There was also the natural need for a superior to have an assistant. Mambo (2014) submits that during the Middle Ages, secretarial work was mostly carried out by clergymen hence the word 'clerk' is derived from the word 'cleric' which means of, or pertaining to, clergy. Clerical tasks later expanded into records keeping and bookkeeping as the merchant class began to rise, and clerical roles moved away from the church to trade and commerce (Evans, 2014). This is the source of the present-day title of clerical secretary.

The secretarial profession has evolved over the years with many changes occasioned by changes in the society, commerce and industry, and advances in technology. Historically, people drifted into secretarial work after studying basic shorthand and typing, often beginning in the



typing pool and progressing from junior to senior secretary, then personal assistant. There were certainly no opportunities for advancement beyond the limited secretarial world (Zuin & Findlay, 2014). According to Mambo (2014), men dominated secretarial jobs until the late 1880s, and in the 1930s, women started to dominate the profession, as some were promoted from steno pools while others were employed as graduates of business colleges and secretarial training schools. The dominance of women during this period resulted from increase in employment opportunities as a result of industrial revolution, and the manufacture of typewriters which were easier to operate compared to the chisels used upon stone and styluses used on clay, wood or wax tablets that men used. There was also the thought that women had an aptitude for work requiring finger dexterity. More schools training typists were also opened and their students were mostly females; in addition to the fact that more females had completed high schools and were ready to find jobs that required literacy skills. Moreover, the office had become very routinized and women's passivity suited them for jobs that required them carrying endless routine tasks. Women were also said to be more conscientious than men and better able to keep business matters confidential. Also, when the World War II erupted in 1940, a vast number of men enlisted in the army and more openings were created for women to enter the labour force. Also, women were considered cheaper labour compared to men.

As commerce and trade expanded, wealthy and powerful people needed secretaries, confidants and trusted agents to handle correspondence on private or confidential matters, most particularly on matters of state (Emeti, n.d.). The increase in the number of secretaries prompted a search for a professional status. Shulz (2013) adds that the female secretaries also wanted to enjoy the pay previously enjoyed by their male counterparts. As secretaries began to assume various levels of responsibilities, researchers in 1934 determined a need to distinguish between different clerical roles, namely secretary, clerk, typist, stenographer, and personal assistant (Evans, 2014). A group of secretaries in America then formed an organization that would help to professionalize the occupation and in 1942, the National Secretaries Association (NSA), (now known as the International Association of Administrative Professionals, (IAAP), was formed. This body coordinates and standardizes practice in the secretarial profession. Secretaries are also known by various titles including administrative assistants, executive assistants, office managers, executive secretary, legal secretary, medical secretary, private secretary, etc. The NSA first administered the certified professional secretaries' examination, a standard of excellence for the profession, in 1951 (Usman, 2021).

In Nigeria, the secretarial profession has its roots from the introduction of formal business education programme in schools in the 1930s. The need for clerical and stenographic personnel by the British companies in Nigeria propelled the establishment of commercial schools or institutes, mostly by private individuals (Ikpe & Undie, 2014). These institutes offered secretarial training and prepared students for the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and Pitman's Examinations, all of Great Britain. The increase and demand for high quality secretarial personnel coupled with developments in education attracted and activated government interest in business education (secretarial education inclusive) which further led to the establishment of formal secretarial training programmes in higher educational institutions including universities. The Rivers State University of Science and Technology is credited as the first university to mount a degree programme in secretarial administration. However, other universities also offer specialized secretarial training programmes in Office Technology and Management (OTM) and other business education programmes. The Institute of Chattered Secretaries and Administrators of Nigeria was established in 1988, and in 2003, the Nigerian Institute of Professional Secretaries



(NIPS) was established under Act 1990. The objectives of these bodies include to promote secretarial administration and business education in Nigeria; and to promote and maintain standards of competence of secretaries. The bodies therefore set standards, regulate, and conduct professional examinations for the practitioners in the secretarial profession. Despite all these effort and the number of secretaries produced in the various tertiary institutions in the country, there are still some challenges in the operations of secretaries in organisations.

### **Issues and Challenges**

In principle, the secretarial profession is accorded due recognition and its importance is stressed in Nigeria. Section 3 of The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) recognises the importance of technical and vocational and education and training, TVET, (secretarial education inclusive) as a means of preparing for occupational fields and for effective participation in the world of work. The policy also adds that the goals of TVET shall be to:

- a) provide trained manpower in the applied sciences, technology and business particularly at craft, advance craft and technical levels;
  - b) provide technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, commercial and economic development; and
  - c) give training and impart the necessary skills to individuals for self-reliance economically.
- (p. 16.)

Such submissions are not without implications. For instance, how can highly motivated, conscientious and efficient secretaries be produced in Nigeria? Do our educational/training institutions possess the capabilities to produce such secretaries? Are the secretaries through their training being provided with the necessary skills and competencies required for their assignments as well as making them adaptable to the changing technologies? Generally, are the secretaries properly prepared to offer the desired assistance to their superiors? These questions are the issues considered in relation to the secretarial profession in Nigeria.

Despite the importance of the secretarial profession in the society and its development in Nigeria, it is faced with certain challenges. These include the following, most of which are closely linked and interwoven;

- i. Performance/Professional Growth: Many analysts observe that the world of work today demands more performance skills by employees (Okoye & Arimonu, 2016; Ekpoh, 2015). According to Zuin and Findlay (2014), new technology has changed the shape of many occupations in recent years and the secretarial occupation is one of them. Odia and Iyamu (2021) assert that technology appears to be the driving force behind the continuous rise in demand for performance skills in the way of doing office work. There is therefore a need for secretaries to acquire skills in order to be able to perform in today's office. In Nigeria, there seem to be too much emphasis on educational certificates possessed than skills acquired and actual work performance. Clark (2013) submits that there is concern that a large segment of today's workforce does not have the required skills as desired by employers. It should also be noted that most of our educational institutions place more emphasis on theoretical training against practical. Okoye and Arimonu (2016) aver that the curriculum of subjects with practical content are generally organized into an average of 67% for theoretical classes and 33% for practical. The practical courses that are supposed to expose students to real practical training for skill acquisition and performance have become a myriad (Obunadike, 2015). The graduates of these institutions and secretarial training programmes therefore, sometimes, acquire 'good' certificates but cannot perform practically on the job. The



secretarial profession is that which requires practical skills for adequate performance. On the other hand, those with practical skills and can perform, in most cases, do not have the opportunities for professional growth as they may be required to possess certain minimum educational qualifications before being elevated to certain positions. This hampers professional growth, and many with only practical skills retire as mere clerks and typists. Precisely, there seem to be no clearly articulated career structure in the secretarial profession. This could discourage some people taking career paths in the secretarial profession.

- ii. Rewards: Reward is another issue of concern in the secretarial profession. This includes both placement and financial rewards usually attached to the secretarial cadre in organizations. Even though secretarial roles and responsibilities have changed, the secretary is still being considered as 'an assistant' to an executive. As an assistant, the rewards the secretary gets are usually not comparable to the executive and also commensurate with work done. Kobernovicz et al (2017) postulate that there is still a lack of knowledge about the evolution of activities that are currently performed by secretaries and this directly affects the identities and value of secretarial professionals and conclusively causes the remuneration of secretarial professionals to be lower while having more and more responsibility. This could discourage some people venturing into the secretarial profession.
- iii. Hazards: Though there are hazards in every human endeavour, the hazards in the secretarial profession in an office organization appear to be very pronounced and to overweigh other office jobs. From history, secretaries were also performing the role of defending their superiors, hence the title 'protector of the boss'. This implies that the secretary is first exposed to some danger, before the boss. To add further, the secretary is the conserver of the organisation's secrets, as he/she handles and keeps all the organisation's records. Even in today's office organizations, the secretary usually occupies the front office, implying that the secretary is met first before the executive. It is also the secretary that usually conveys management decisions to third parties, some of which could be 'painful'. These are risky duties. Apart from exposure to physical danger, the modern technological equipment like the computer and telephone have their own hazards on continuous exposure to and use. These hazards have a negative effect on the secretarial profession.
- iv. Training: Training and retraining of secretaries should be a continuous exercise in order to ensure currency with happenings in the secretarial profession and the quality of secretarial services desired. Also, the curriculum content of the secretarial training programme and the facilities/materials should be adequate in terms of quality and quantity; and in line with the current technological demands. It is also expected that training of secretarial students in educational institutions should reflect what is currently required in the world of work in terms of skills, attitudes, and equipment. This will place the recipients better to function in the world of work on graduation. However, secretarial education, just like education generally in Nigeria, is fraught with many challenges including inadequate funding, inadequate manpower, curriculum, modern infrastructure and facilities, and information technology (IT) services. It should be noted, also, that in some cases, the curriculum content does not include some essential courses/and or topics that should be offered. Ezeh, Ezeahurukwe and Ameh (2021), and Ali, Lang, Zainol and Manser (2012) lament that the knowledge and skills learnt by Office Technology and Management (OTM) graduates in formal schools are not adequate to meet every demand of their daily activities in the world of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century modern office. Okoli and Azhi (2015) observe that unemployment among graduates



from Nigerian universities in Nigeria is a critical issue of the widening gap between university curriculum and the challenges of the work as the educational curriculum does not balance theoretical training with skill acquisition. This trend poses a lot of challenges to secretarial graduates in the labour market due to lack of skills.

- v. The B.Sc.-HND dichotomy in Nigeria is also an issue in secretarial training. It should be noted that only a few universities in Nigeria offer specialized secretarial training. Majority of secretaries obtain training in polytechnics which award Higher National Diploma as the highest qualification. On graduation and employment, the HND holders in secretarial studies are usually placed below their degree holder counterparts. This could have a negative effect on choice and growth in a career in the secretarial profession.
- vi. Another big challenge is the issue of autocratic leaders in organisations. The attitude and actions of these autocratic leaders, often times, scare potential secretaries from venturing into the secretarial profession. Secretaries by their calling, work closely with leaders in organisations. Often, these leaders are so autocratic in handling the operations of the organisations that their secretaries are at loss as to how to perform their legitimate duties to the satisfaction of their boss and progress of the organisation.

These issues and challenges are an indication that secretarial education is not adequately organised and delivered, and as such not capable of equipping recipients and practitioners with the requisite attributes for gainful employment, adequate performance and further education. Also, the operational environment is always not quite conducive for effective secretarial practice.

### **The Future of the Secretarial Profession in Nigeria**

Changes in the society have caused the evolving roles of secretaries in organizations. It could be noted that the secretary of the past could always be seen with a notepad and pen to take dictations in shorthand, transcribe, then produce documents that were required. With the evolution of the organisations and technological advances, the secretarial professionals had to increase their knowledge to be able to perform multiple functions (Oliveira et al, 2021, Zuin & Findlay, 2014). The modern secretary in an organization has assumed the position and role of managers as a result of restructuring in organizations, eliminating some levels and adopting flatter structures. Secretaries can now demonstrate their abilities to perform tasks more demanding than traditional clerical duties.

The evolving roles of the secretaries have caused secretaries to perform various tasks in organizations, ranging from clerical tasks to executive functions. As a result, several types of secretaries have emerged, such as private secretary, personal secretary, administrative secretary, legal secretary, medical secretary and executive secretary. IAAP Editor (2014) submit that the 21<sup>st</sup> century office secretaries have transformed their titles, roles and responsibilities into what is called administrative professionals, encompassing administrative assistants, office coordinators, executive assistants, office managers, and various other titles. These roles and responsibilities require skills in management functions and technology such as project management, integrated computer software applications, organization and scheduling, internet/intranet communications and research, document preparation, storage and retrieval, with emphasis on electronic record keeping, customer service, and public relations.

The implication of this is that the scope of work of the administrative professionals have expanded beyond strictly clerical roles. Bogenschneider and Slack (2011) posit that the roles include purchasing office equipment and supplies, organizing special events, liaising with



vendors and suppliers, interviewing, orienting and supervising other staff, writing and editing documents, handling correspondence, and maintaining computer files, directories, and databases. Amoor and Magaji (2015) emphasise that these have transformed the work place and placed high premium on technical abilities and interpersonal skills of professional secretaries. Zuin and Findlay (2014) cite France (2009) as positing that although advance in technology is changing the role of assistants in organisations, there will always be need for assistants as their role remains important. Zuin and Findlay then predict that the secretarial occupation will be kept as part of the labour market and will develop. Although more career paths have been opened for administrative professionals with different levels and different job requirements, job descriptions, as well as duties and responsibilities, it is required of professional secretaries to possess the technical abilities and skills in order to perform and remain relevant. Secretaries also have to develop attitudes that can enable them cope with the different behavioural styles of their bosses in organisations.

In Nigeria, Office Technology and Management (OTM) is the new nomenclature for secretarial studies. According to Taiye and Modupe (2020), the change in name of the programme was as a result of the review of the curriculum by the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) in 2004 in order to make the secretarial studies programme to be more Information and Communication Technology (ICT) compliant. The curriculum was therefore expanded to include courses that could prepare students with appropriate office skills and competences to manage office technologies in line with the present-day ICT, and also prepare students for gainful employment in office occupations. This new design paves way for more employment opportunities in the still expanding secretarial profession.

## **Conclusion**

The secretarial profession has evolved and expanded resulting to transformation of secretarial jobs into administrative professional jobs and responsibilities. The demand for highly skilled labour therefore continues to grow. The advances in technology with the development of complicated ICT machines and gadgets also require competent personnel with the required skills and technical knowledge to operate and maintain them. Lack of skills and talent mismatch is therefore a challenge in the secretarial profession. The need therefore arises for adequate training and encouragement for those involved and interested in careers in the secretarial profession. The continuous expansion of roles and responsibilities required of secretaries (or administrative professionals) portends that the profession is ready to engage more people with the required skills to work in organizations. This implies creating more employment opportunities in the world of work and career paths in the secretarial profession. It may, therefore, be said that the secretarial profession has a very bright future in Nigeria.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the above analysis and presentation, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. More opportunities should be created by employers for occupational growth. Performance based on skill should be accorded adequate recognition and opportunities provided for those without theoretical knowledge but possess practical skills to also grow beyond certain levels. Employers should develop a career structure for the secretarial profession.



2. Rewards in the secretarial profession should be improved. Secretarial personnel with functional and relevant skills should always be rewarded and placed appropriately in organizations, instead of continuously working as assistants.
3. Provisions should be made for adequate security (physical, job, and emotional) of secretaries by employers to reduce their exposure to security challenges and other occupational hazards.
4. Continuous training and retraining of secretarial staff should be enhanced. The curriculum of the training programmes should always be reviewed and up-dated to accommodate emerging technologies and requirement in the secretarial profession, while practical training should also be improved. Training should also connect what is learned in schools to real life career scenarios, in conformity to Prosser's environmental theory of vocational education.
5. The dichotomy between the B. Sc. and HND holders should be practically removed and holders should be rated and placed strictly based on performance.

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