



THE SECRETARIAL PROFESSION: A THREATENED FUTURE

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Abstract

Once it was when the secretarial profession and its practitioners were highly revered. Regrettably, such is not the case today. This position paper posits that the future of this once respected profession is under threat. It examines five areas affecting the profession to include inconsistent government policies regarding its career progression, technological development, and attitude of practitioners, issues related to curriculum and training, and absence of a professional/standardization body. Solutions were equally proffered to include that government should give this profession its rightful recognition by making consistent policies regarding career progression and employment of practitioners. Again, NBTE and NUC together should come up with appropriate curriculum and incorporate the study of the profession in University system up to the PhD. It further canvassed for support for the APSSON's CIPSSON Bill, amongst other suggestions.

Keywords: Future of, Secretarial Profession, Threatened, Technology, APSSON, ABEN

Introduction

There is no doubt that the secretarial profession is a very pivotal one. It cuts across every sphere of human endeavour, no matter the nature of the organization. In fact, the secretarial role is so significant that even down to family units when family meetings are to be held, the need for secretarial services come into play, because a member of the family is appointed to act as the secretary. Also, no matter the nature of the organization, trained personnel is there to fit the role. No wonder such titles as Medical Secretary, Legal Secretary, etc exists. As a matter of fact, one of the most recognized International organizations is headed and administered by one who bears the nomenclature of Secretary or Under-Secretary, for example the United Nations Organisation and a number of its agencies; and the location of the hub of activity of many such organisations is referred to as the Secretariat. Despite these, it is regrettable to note that the profession seems to be passing through a hard time. A number of factors threaten its existence and future, including government factor, practitioners' roles, effect of advancing technology, curriculum and training related issues, etc. The paper attempts to proffer suggestions to the identified problems.

First it is necessary to highlight some key concepts in the topic, as well as pinpoint the importance and roles of the Secretarial Profession.



Concept Mapping

According to the Collins dictionary, the term future of (someone or something) refers to what will happen to them or what they will do after the present time. Synonyms for this expression include prospect, expectation, and outlook. Again, if it is said that someone or something has a future, it means that they are likely to be successful or survive. Going by these definitions therefore, within the context of this paper the term 'future' is looking at what will likely happen to the secretarial profession later, expectations, prospects and outlook in the days ahead. Also, its chance of survival or success is a matter of concern to this study.

Definitions from Oxford Languages gives one meaning of threaten as 'to cause (someone or something) to be vulnerable or at risk; endanger'. Thus, the secretarial profession seems vulnerable, at risk or endangered by certain factors which this work intends to discuss.

The importance of the Secretarial profession is seen in the roles or functions of its practitioners. They go hand in glove. As has been previously hinted the secretarial profession is indispensable, a pivotal one indeed, and hence the secretary is equally indispensable (Ohiwerei & Okosun, 2021). No wonder Amiaya (2012) observes that the place of secretarial skills in human capital development is no doubt invaluable. Adebayo and Akinyele sums it up in Ohiwerei and Okosun (2021) when they opine that the secretary coordinates the daily routines of an office and organizes office schedules and paper work which includes analysis of prevailing situation, judgement, technical knowledge and creativity. In short, the Secretarial profession is the heart and soul of the organization .

Issues threatening the secretarial profession

A number of issues bedevil the secretarial profession. These issues are trying hard to snuff or choke the life out of the profession. Some of these issues are discussed below:

Another area of problem is government's policies on career progression. Inconsistent Government policies and actions do not seem to be helping the profession and its practitioners. A situation where the government placed an embargo on the employment of secretaries left much to be desired. This has made the profession to be an endangered species. As the older generation retired, they were being replaced by data processors or whatever names they go by to carry out secretarial duties. This in every sense is an aberration because such individuals lack the finesse and expertise of professional secretaries. Round pegs should by all means be put in round holes. One advert slogan says that 'if it is not panadol, it is not the same thing as panadol.' This is besides other inconsistencies existing where it seems that each Ministry, parastatal and establishment treated secretaries as they pleased. Some establishments paid certain types of allowances, e.g. Responsibility allowances, while others did not. Most organisations have pegged the grade level secretaries could rise up to, and a myriad of other issues.

Another problem threatening the Secretarial profession is technological development. Santos (2021) acknowledges that technology has affected society and its surroundings in a number of ways. Technology is said to be the application of scientific knowledge to the practical aims of human life or, as it is sometimes phrased, to the change and manipulation of the human environment (Britannica.com). Technology has revolutionised the world and the various spheres of activities. The world of work has not been left out for it has experienced marked changes. Equipment used at work has drastically changed. This has resulted in work being done by a number of persons are now done by a single person. As it pertains to the secretarial field, for instance, the introduction of the computer has made it possible for most everybody to produce their own documents themselves. Thus, this gave room to what Lanre (2021) referred to as individuals who have become 'jobnappers' who now kidnap as it were, secretarial jobs to the detriment of the profession. Already, in Nigeria, some establishments, like banks no longer offer



positions for Secretaries, since computer literate staff mostly handles their own correspondence, as if the Secretary's job begins and ends with typing of documents. Despite that though, these 'jobnappers' can hardly offer secretarial jobs with the same finesse as professionally trained secretaries. The difference is always clear.

Hence, even though modern technology is regarded as important and of high value in ensuring quality work output in an office, as well as bringing about productivity. It is equally believed that these machines can cause job displacement. This is the fear that many employees suffer from when new machines are being purchased for use by their organization (Santos, 2021).

Feintzeig (2020) noted that Technology has replaced much of the administrative tedium—the memos to be typed, the boxes of files to be pulled from storage—that marked the “Mad Men” days when secretaries kept the workplace humming. Technology and automation have chipped away at duties like papers to be filed and landlines to be answered

Another area that critically affects the secretarial profession is paucity of university training opportunities for the profession. This is not talking of Business Education, which is aimed at training the trainer. This is referring to universities that train Secretaries from the first degree level up to the, third degree level, the PhD level. Thus, while training in the polytechnics stop at Higher National Diploma (HND) level, thereafter, vacuum largely exists. Hence, a lot of polytechnic graduates express concern by asking, after HND what next? Why must they switch careers after this level? Why can't they grow to be directors as well, since by their training they make superb administrators? The result becomes that, after the National Diploma (ND) level, many purchase direct entry forms into the universities and change course. In the long run, a dearth of secretarial practitioners would ensue. In fact, the secretaries and secretarial profession are gradually becoming an endangered species.

Absence of a standardisation body is another challenge of the secretarial profession. A regulatory body is different from a standardisation, professional body. While the National Board for Technical Education regulates Polytechnics, National Universities Commission regulates universities, etc, these are not professional bodies. The regulatory bodies are government parastatals concerned mainly with the curriculum and staff issues, the professional bodies protect the interests of the profession.

According to Science Council (n.d), a professional body is an organization with individual members practicing a profession or occupation in which the organization maintains an oversight of the knowledge, skills, conduct and practice of that profession or occupation. Green (2015) on his part states that professional bodies are dedicated to the advancement of the knowledge and practice of professionals through developing, supporting, regulating and promoting professional standards for technical and ethical competence.

The Secretarial profession suffers lack of core professional body. Some existing bodies that included the word secretary as part of their name do not seem to cater for the core professionals and the profession generally. In the views of Kabir, Danlami & Abubakar (2021), most of these bodies are not pure Secretarial Institutions and as such are not fully committed toward achieving the utmost professionalism of this profession rather than just hiding and making money at the detriment of this noble profession and its members. These attitudes of some among the registered professional bodies are no doubt among the reasons some employers of labour refused to recognize and honour the Secretarial profession. This is how most of these bodies operate thereby making this noble profession a second option.

One such professional body struggling for standardisation of the profession is the Association of Professional Secretarial Staff of Nigeria (APSSON), possible the body with the highest numerical strength of Secretaries. Its Bill for a Chartered Institute of Professional



Secretarial Staff Nigeria (CIPSSON) has already been concurred by the upper chamber, the senate and is awaiting the President's assent. It is believed that once life is breathed into that Bill and make it an Act, the travails of the Secretarial Profession would be greatly reduced. All friends of the profession and other stakeholders are called upon to support this Bill and help it come alive.

Attitude of practitioners in the profession is another area of concern. As far back as 1984 Jodie Berlin Morrow, co-author with Myrna Lebov of a book called "Not Just a Secretary" in Churchman (1984) remarked that a lack of esteem is indigenous to the profession. "A secretary doesn't get much respect today," she said. "Society underrates her job, her boss underrates it, her company underrates it, and, yes, she underrates it." The situation is not any less today. This researcher believes that secretaries suffer from a high dose of low self-esteem. Ohiwerei and Okosun (2021) worriedly asked 'if we all agree that the secretary is the chief organiser of meetings, and scheduling of appointments for or on behalf of the boss and these attributes have placed the secretary at the centre of playing very important roles in the efficient management of the office, why then are secretarial staff relegating themselves in the office? This is a question begging for answer indeed.

Lanre (2021) lent voice to this issue when he observed that the Secretarial profession is well abused and misused by the society because everyone in the profession looks down on himself/herself as a result of the fact that the society thinks the professionals are meant to be subordinates in their entire professional life. This ought not to be so. We are not second class but world class. The situation is so bad that practitioners of the profession never wish their children to train as secretaries. Reasons for this might not be unconnected with the myriads of issues bedeviling the profession, some of which have been raised in this paper.

Since Nigeria is not an island State, global trends equally impact on this profession, and unfortunately, views globally paint a dreary and sometimes conflicting picture. For instance, Morrow cited previously in Churchman (1984) noted that demands for secretarial skills increased in the 1980s. The field was expected to leap from 3.8 million positions in 1980 to 5.4 million in 1990, says the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Already thousands of jobs are going begging. "This is a fabulous field to be in right now," says Morrow, "because you can write your own ticket. Employers are particularly looking for secretaries with knowledge of the new office equipment, but all secretaries are in great demand," she says. What is the projection today? Fretzeig (2020) noted that more than 1.6 million secretarial and administrative-assistant jobs have vanished since 2000, according to federal data, an almost 40% decline. The number of executive-secretary and executive-administrative-assistant jobs fell 23% over the last five years. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects those jobs—which it says numbered 622,500 in 2018—will drop another 20% to below 500,000 by 2028.



Career Planner (2007-2021) provides quick statistics for the job as follows: Job Outlook for: Secretaries and Administrative Assistants:

Secretaries and Administrative Assistants Quick Stats	
Total Jobs in 2016	3,990,400
Expected Growth	-5% (Decline)
New Jobs To Be Added from 2016 to 2026	-191,900
Median Pay	\$35,000 to \$54,999

It adds that overall employment of secretaries and administrative assistants is projected to decline 5 percent from 2016 to 2026. Not a beautiful picture, indeed. However, it must be stated that such decline is a general trend with the downturn in world economy not because of relevance of the profession. Practitioners should be techno-savvy and work to keep in trend and thus remain relevant in the scheme of things.

What are the prospects for the profession? In an article published by Princeton Review (2021) it offers the following prospects in form of a timeline when it projects:

Five years out

Thousands of secretaries move on to other jobs in this period, often getting hired on the basis of their achievements as office professionals. Secretaries who stay on have found a means of coping with a tremendous volume of work and derive satisfaction from helping to make a business run smoothly. At this point, many secretaries train new secretaries, often in a training program of their own devising.

Ten years out

For those who have made the most of a secretarial career, the rewards are palpable. It is hard to last in a profession that demands organizational skill, meticulous attention to detail, efficiency, and patience. Secretaries who possess these qualities know how rare they are and can expect to reap the rewards they deserve, including a pension and benefits.

Way Forward

This beauty of a profession should be protected by all means in some of these ways:

1. Government should be consistent in its policies and remove all barriers to career progression of secretaries both in terms of grade levels and height of attainment. Secretaries should be allowed to reach whatever is the peak or pinnacle in the Civil Service. Also, employment embargo on the employment of professional secretaries should be lifted. Only professionally trained secretaries should practise as such.

2. Secretarial practitioners should embrace technology and become techno-savvy. They should view it as friend and not a foe. Doing this will surely enhance their self-esteem.



3. NBTE and NUC should synergize to have more Universities offering core secretarial training up to PhD level to attract new students and retain those already in the practice.
4. All friends of the profession and other stake holders should heartily support APSSON's CIPSSON Bill to help standardize the profession fully.

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