



A N ASSESSMENT OF THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF THE SECRETARIAL PROFESSION IN ERA AGE OF OFFICE TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

Questions have been raised on the continued relevance of the secretarial profession in the age of automation. The study was conducted to determine the degree of continued relevance of the secretarial profession and professionals to the performance of office tasks in the age of Information and Communication Technology. The survey design was employed in conducting the study. The population comprises secretarial and management professionals is selected public and private organizations in Ibadan, Oyo State. The sample comprises 60 managers and 40 secretarial personnel (typist's secretaries and computer operators). Four research questions and one hypothesis guided the conduct of the study. A structured questionnaire was developed and administered on respondents. Mean and Standard deviation were used to analyze the research question while the hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance with t-test. The study revealed that secretarial personnel remain relevant in the areas of document preparation, office administration, human relations and executive assistance.

Introduction

The Advent of office automation has inspired questions on the continued relevance of secretarial skills and secretarial professionals in office situations. Some administrators point to the declining fortunes of the secretarial profession in the advanced countries, where vast proportions of the populations are computer-literate and can perform basic secretarial functions without the support of secretarial professionals, as evidence that the profession is in the twilight of its relevance (Igbinedion, 2003). Attention has also been drawn to the fact that in some offices here in Nigeria, the secretarial cadre is being phased out on the premise that every employee should be able to perform his own secretarial function. All these have led to questions on the continued relevance of secretarial profession and secretarial professionals in contemporary and future Nigeria offices. (Akpa, 2010).

In spite of these anxieties, nevertheless, secretarial studies departments in polytechnics continue to turn out graduates in secretarial studies, now called Office Technology and Management. The concern of this study is to determine the degree to



which secretarial professionals are still needed to perform office functions in the age of automation.

Agboola and Ademiluyi, (2014) describe secretarial personnel as comprising the typist, computer operator, shorthand-typist or stenographer, confidential secretary and the personnel secretary. With the exception of the computer operator, who is a new creation of the ICT age, all other secretarial professionals, to be so validly identified, must have attended formal schools, institutes or college or passed public examinations and must have written examinations in subjects including Typewriting, Shorthand, and more recently computer studies. However, with the declining enrolment in private secretarial training schools, formal secretarial training today resides primarily in the polytechnics, and to a lesser extent, the universities.

According to Onasanya (1990) the typist is a junior member of staff whose duty is to type manuscripts or hand-written drafts. A stenographer is a skilled worker who combines the skills of shorthand writing with that of typewriting. The confidential secretary combines shorthand and typewriting skills with a good knowledge of secretarial duties.

In Onasanya's view, "The confidential secretary is an indispensable alter ego of his boss" (Onasanya 1990:3). The duties of the effective secretary, according to Onasanya goes far beyond taking notes at high speed and producing letters that are readable and mailable. In his words:

The effective secretary should be able to work without supervision in accordance with laid-down procedures... A good secretary should be able to arrange meetings, compile minutes and reports, exercise control over subordinates. A secretary should be able to keep simple and accurate stocks. She acts as the medium through which the executive initiates and concludes actions... A secretary is a good source of information to the executive.

Agboola and Ademiluyi (2014) listed thirty-four functions which a secretarial professional should be able to accomplish. These range from taking dictation and transcribing it on the typewriter to keeping travel time-table and planning itineraries for the boss and using the computer for various purposes including typesetting, referencing, internet surfing, emailing, etc.

There is no doubt that at least some of the function listed above can be performed by non-secretarial personnel. Moncrieff and Sharphy, cited in Okoji 2004, state that the electronic mail has replaced a major part of business mail, substituted for many telephone calls and have replaced inter-office memoranda. This postulate suggests that with this new reality, the secretary is no longer really required. However, in the opinion of Oborah (2003), there is more to being a secretary than performing mundane office routines.



Oborah believes that a secretary is an information, communication and human management expert. Agboola and Ademiluyi (2014:18) also state:

A secretary is expected to ease the burdens of the boss whose works and responsibilities make a heavy demand on him. A qualified secretary who effectively performs that role will be regarded by the boss as a partner and not a servant.

Statement of the Problem

From the beginning of the ICT era, questions have persisted on the continued relevance of the secretarial profession in the modern office. Many Nigerian organizations, especially in the banking industry have laid off secretarial staffers or converted them to other uses on the premise that secretaries and allied professionals are no longer needed in the ICT age. Attention has further been drawn to the fact that in some Western countries, the population of secretaries has been dwindling since the beginning of the information and communication technology era (Nnaji and Bagudu, 2012).

In spite of these widespread anxieties, Office Technology and Management (OTM) departments in many polytechnics continue to churn out graduate secretaries in appreciable quantities. This has created considerable cognitive dissonance for many OTM stakeholders and has caused confusion for employers of labour (Akpa, 2010).

The concern of this study is to determine empirically the degree to which the secretarial profession and secretarial professionals in general, are still relevant in the modern office.

Purpose of the Study

This study set out to assess the degree of continued relevance of secretarial professionals to the performance of office tasks in the age of office automation. Specifically the study intends to determine the degree of continued relevance of secretarial personnel in the areas of: document preparation, office administration, human/public relations and executive assistance.

Research Questions

The study sought to find answers to the following question:

To what extent are secretarial personnel still relevant in the age of office automation to the performance of the following office tasks:

1. Document Preparation?
2. Office Administration?
3. Human Relations?
4. Executive Assistance?



Hypothesis

The following null hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance:

There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of administrative personnel and secretarial personnel to the performance of office tasks in the age of office automation.

Methodology

A survey design was used because the study sought the opinions of respondents. The population comprised the 271 senior managers/administrators and 63 secretarial personnel of ten modern government and business organizations in Ibadan, Oyo State. The organizations are:

1. International Institute for Tropical Agriculture.
2. University of Ibadan (Registry Unit)
3. Moor Plantation
4. The Polytechnic Ibadan
5. Oyo State Ministry of Education
6. Femi Johnson Brooking Ltd
7. Heinemann Educational Books Plc
8. Wema Bank Plc
9. University Press Ltd
10. Nigerian Tribune

The sample consisted of 60 senior administrative and 40 secretarial personnel drawn from each organization on the basis of six administrators and four secretaries from each organization.

A 40-items questionnaire based on the secretarial duties identified in Agboola & Ademiluyi (2014) and Onasanya (1990) was developed by the researchers. The instrument was validated by three experts drawn from Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife and Federal Polytechnic Ede. The questions were structured along the Likert-scale format. Each response was given a corresponding normal value as follow: Very Relevant (VR), 5, Relevant (R), 4, Undecided (U), 3, Not Relevant (NR), 2, Very Irrelevant(VI),1.

For an item to be accepted as Very Relevant, it had to score between 4.50 and 5.0. Items scoring between 3.50 and 4.49 were rated as Relevant; between 2.50 and 3.49, Undecided; 1.50-2.49, Not Relevant and less than 1.50, Very Irrelevant.

Results:

Research Questions 1

To what extent are secretarial professionals' still relevant to an automated office in the area of document preparation?

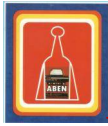


Table 1:
Respondents ratings of the continues relevance of secretarial profession in document preparation.

Items	X	SD	Remarks
Taking Dictation	4.58	0.72	VR
Typing/Typesetting Letters	4.76	0.86	VR
Composing Letters	4.82	1.02	VR
Composing Memos	4.57	1.09	VR
Typing Memos	4.72	0.96	VR
Preparing Reports	4.66	0.99	VR
Preparing Notice of Meetings	4.78	0.93	VR
Preparing Agenda of Meetings	4.56	0.87	VR
Preparing Minutes	4.73	1.15	VR
Sending Email	4.48	1.01	VR
Grand Mean	4.66		

The table above shows that secretarial personnel were rated as still very relevant on nine items (90%). Only on one item (sending email) (10%) were they rated as relevant. The grand mean is 46.66 (very relevant).

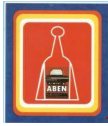
Research Question 2

To what extent are secretarial personnel still relevant to an automated office in the area of office Administration?

Table 2
Respondents' Rating of the Continued Relevance of Secretarial personnel on Office Administration

Items	X	SD	Remarks
Giving Information About Office	4.68	1.17	VR
Receiving Information	4.52	1.11	VR
Arranging Information	4.71	0.99	VR
Getting the Office Ready for the Boss	4.83	0.97	VR
Filing Documents	4.61	0.96	VR
Reading and Sorting Mail	4.73	0.98	VR
Ordering Office Supplies	4.51	1.06	VR
Keeping Imprest Accounts	4.61	1.13	VR
Managing Office Staff	4.83	0.86	VR
Protecting Office Assets	4.76	1.02	VR
Grand Mean	4.68		VR

The table above shows the respondents' ratings of the confirmed relevance of secretarial personnel in the area of office administration. Secretarial personnel were



assessed as being very relevant in all the items listed. The grand mean of 4.68 also represents a Very Relevant assessment.

Research Question 3

To what extent are secretarial personnel still relevant to an automation office in the area of human relations?

Table 3
Respondents Ratings of the Continued Relevance of Secretarial Personnel in Human Relations.

Items	X	SD	Remarks
Welcoming People into the Office	4.73	0.68	VR
Projecting the Organization's Image	4.63	0.92	VR
Making/Receiving Telephone Calls	4.48	1.31	VR
Projecting the Boss's Image	4.62	1.01	VR
Entertaining Visitors	4.77	0.99	VR
Keeping up with the Boss Interest	4.72	1.07	VR
Interceding between Boss and Subordinates	4.42	0.89	R
Making the Office Conducive for the Boss	4.51	0.96	VR
Helping the Boss Maintain good Relationship with members, Friends Colleague etc.	4.44	0.94	R
Maintaining Healthy Office Environment	4.84	1.03	VR
Grand Mean	4.66		VR

Of the ten items listed above, the secretary was rated as being very relevant on seven items (70%) while he was rated as being relevant in 3 (30%). The grand mean represents an average rating of Very Relevant.

Research Question 4

To what extent are secretarial personnel skills relevant in an automated office in the area of executive assistance?



Table 4
Respondents' Rating of the Relevance of Secretarial Personnel on Executive Assistance.

Items	X	SD	Remarks
Making Appointment for the Boss	4.92	0.83	VR
Acting as Memory Aid for the Boss	4.76	0.96	VR
Making Hotel Reservations for the Boss	4.81	1.07	VR
Accompanying the Boss to Meetings	3.38	1.21	Undecided
Acting as Go-between for the Boss	3.96	1.25	R
Preparing Briefs for Press Briefings	3.96	1.19	R
Writing Congratulatory Letters for the Boss	4.71	0.96	VR
Preparing Draft Speeches	4.32	1.06	R
Correcting the Boss Spellings/Grammar	4.81	0.01	VR
Making up of the Boss Limitations	4.63	1.08	VR
Grand Mean	4.43	1.62	R

Of the ten items tested above six (60%) were rated as being very relevant; 3(30%) as relevant; while the respondents were undecided on one (10%). None was rated either irrelevant. The grand mean (4.43) represents a rating of Relevant.

Hypothesis

There is no significant difference in the mean rating of administrative and secretarial personnel on the continued relevance of secretarial professionals to the performance of office tasks in the age of automation.

Table 4
The t-test values of administrative and secretarial personnel on the continued relevance of secretarial personnel to the performance of office tasks.

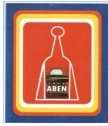
Responses	N	X	SD	DF	Alpha	t-Cal	t-Crit
Administrative	60	2.42	24.49				
Secretaries	40	2.46	16.32	98	0.05	0.98	2.00

The table above shows that the calculated t. is less than the t-critical. The null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance is consequently supported.

Discussion

Table 1-4 indicate that secretarial personnel are still very much relevant to the performance of most office tasks in automated offices in Nigeria. Secretarial personnel were adjudged to be very relevant or relevant to the performance of primary office tasks in areas of document preparation, office administration, human relations and executive assistance.

In the area of document preparation all the items listed were rated as very relevant. In the area of office administration all the items listed were similarly rated as



very relevant. In the cluster of human relations, 70% of the items listed adjudged very relevant while the rest were adjudged relevant. In the area of executive assistance, secretarial personnel were deemed to be very relevant on sixty percent of the items while they were judged relevant on thirty percent. Only on one item were the respondents undecided. Of the forty items listed, none was adjudged either irrelevant or very irrelevant.

Table 5 shows that there is no significant difference between the mean rating of managers/administrators and secretarial personnel on the continued relevance of secretarial personnel to the modern Nigeria office.

This validates the position of several scholars who have recently postulated that the rise of office automation is not likely to sound the death knell of the secretarial profession. According to Oborah (1998). The rise of automated information processing does not constitute an enduring threat to the secretary's job but rather an enhancement and facilitator. Oborah (2003) cites Chijioke (2002) as showing that the secretary remains in high demand in the labour market in spite of the onset of office automation. Amagoh (2004) quotes Jackson Gaius Obaseki as saying "Machines and tools can be replaced easily but human beings with professional skills and experience cannot be replaced alike." Okoji (2004:141) puts it even more succinctly:

Even with these communication devices, there are still very many personnel functions, which secretarial staff performs daily which these devices cannot do. Take the human relations in the office or the function of reception. These important and noble roles require knowledge of human relations. These (automated) devices (can only) play complementary roles.

If the statement quoted above is taken as a given, why is there a measure of apprehension about the continued relevance of secretarial personnel in modern offices? Why are secretaries being retrenched in a few banks and other offices? It may be that secretaries in those offices were hitherto being seriously under-utilized. A further answer may be found in this statement by Fayemi (2015):

Secretarial practice, secretarial training secretarial duties and secretarial personnel are rapidly evolving in response to the challenge and opportunities provided by the ICT revolution. New names, role, new career paths are being created. The secretary of the old, capable, affable, but technically competent only in typewriting and shorthand is an antiquity piece. In the new automated office of the ICT age, such a secretary will not find a place unless she adapts rapidly to the new ICT reality. In fact, for that receding bread, the slogan will have to be: "Adapt or die"

Conclusion

From the result of this study, there is no doubt that secretarial practice is alive and thriving even in this era of office automation. There is also no reason to doubt that secretarial practice will remain relevant to the performance of office tasks in Nigeria for many more years. However the ICT era is still evolving and there is no end in sight to the evolution. For what the ICT age actually signals are an era of change without end.



Today's state-of-the-art technology is tomorrow's antiquity. In the age of office automation, secretaries and office administrators have to keep perpetually abreast of time by mastering new practices, new technologies and new professional realities as rapidly as they emerge. Like medical doctors who are sometimes called upon to manage disease which emerged long after they left medical schools, the modern secretarial personnel must constantly husband old knowledge while acquiring new skills. The situation challenges not only the secretary, but also the administrator, who like the secretary, must constantly find new use for the practitioners of an old profession.

Recommendations

From the conclusions drawn, the following suggestions are proffered:

1. Secretaries must keep abreast of developments in office technology. They must be willing and able to master new tools and techniques to remain relevant.
2. Secretarial schools should constantly organize refresher courses to update the office technology skills of old graduates.
3. Administrators should be better educated on the proper roles, duties and capabilities of secretarial personnel.
4. Employers should be willing to grant new opportunities to well-trained, up-to-date secretaries who are willing to accept new responsibilities in return for greater authority.



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