



SECRETARIAL PROFESSION AND THE TRAINING NEEDS OF SECRETARIES FOR THE FUTURE OFFICE WORK

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Abstract

The study examined secretarial profession and the training needs of secretaries for the future office work. In this study, the concepts of digital skills and future office, the importance of digital skills for secretaries and the nature of future office, the digital skills training that the secretaries need and how secretaries can develop these skills were examined. It was concluded that technological revolution is creating new opportunities for secretaries with digital skills who are prepared to work in the future office. The study therefore, recommended that institutions offering OTM programme should expose office technology and management students to the manipulative aspect of the office automation so that the would-be secretaries will fit into the 'dreamt' paperless office of tomorrow.

Key Words: Secretarial Profession, Secretaries, Training, Digital Skills and Future Office

Introduction

Secretarial education is known as Office Technology and Management (OTM). It is one of the specialized programmes offered in the Department of Vocational and Technical, Business Education or School of Business Studies in Nigerian tertiary institutions that lays emphasis on the possession of practical skills necessary to operate office machines and serves as supporting staff to the management in an organisation. Aina (2018) asserted that vocational skills are empirical skills that individuals acquire in a specific area of interest which are more practical than theoretical skills. Individuals learn vocational skills from hands-on experience. The training takes place outside the traditional classroom setting where students are exposed to hands-on activities through first-hand experience and as well acquire classroom knowledge. One of the objectives of Office Technology and Management education programme according to Oyinloye and Asonibare (2019), is to equip students with the appropriate skills to engage in a life of work in the office as well as self-employment. The implication of the objectives and components of the OTM curriculum in the views of Nnaji and Okoro



(2019), is that its recipients are expected to be equipped with skills to use computer and its application software. This explains why a secretary should possess basic office technology skills, have business acumen and versatile in office ICT skills with sufficient knowledge of the operations of all departments within the institution or organization where he/she works.

A secretary is an important office staff in an organisation whose roles are pivotal to the growth and increased performance of an organization. Many higher echelons of management have a secretary who acts as a gatekeeper as well as a care-taker of complex but time-consuming tasks, that freeing the boss up. The International Association of Administrative Professional (IAAP) in Nnaji and Okoro (2019) described a secretary as an executive assistant who has mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative, judgement and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority. This definition has explained in detail, the type of skill, knowledge and ability that could be required of the secretary in the future office. The secretary's possession of mastery of office skills, knowledge and personal qualities require continual retraining in technology to keep abreast of new emerging and fast-growing office technologies and responsibilities. Umoru (2020) asserted that secretaries are marked from other staff because of ICT and office skills such as digital skill which they possess.

Digital skills refer to the skills related to the use of technology. UK Study Centre (2021) citing UNESCO defined digital skills as those needed to "use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information". Possessing digital skills is so essential to personal life, and in the workplace. With the remote work continuously on the rise and technology constantly changing, it is crucial to ensure that secretaries are effectively trained on the tools, technology, and digital skills to help them become successful in the office and at home. Therefore, training secretaries on digital skills is a key component in keeping up with this growth in remote working and the rapidly changing technology field.

Training helps a secretary to acquire requisite technical skill and attitude to adequately perform multi-tasks in office of the future. Hornby (2000) described training as a process of learning the needed skills to do a job. It is a process or set of activities aimed at assisting individuals to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for the effective performance of a specific task or job. Training relates to immediate, short-term upgrades and improvements. Thus, training secretaries will affect their behavior positively and drive their pathway upward thereby, resulting to performance gain in an office.

An office is the central nerve that coordinates the activities of an organisation. The office is the physical heart and soul of a business, reflecting its brand and culture. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the nature of work, workforce, and workplace of today. In fact, the outbreak of corona virus in 2019 (COVID 19) has popularised the use of virtual office across the globe as office workers were directed to work from their respective homes. Matić (2018) observed that the development of new technologies dictates the adjustment of traditional jobs and skills to the digital environment, requiring digital skills, collaboration and social hub where people come together to deliberate on ideas and come up with solutions to problems. Deloitte leaders (2020) believed that in a digital world, machines and humans will be enabled to do what they do best independently and in concert with each other but will mostly identify, attract and engage people with the right skills and experience to achieve its mission and purpose. Even though the future workplace will blend the physical and virtual environments, it is time to improve the nature of work, workplaces, leadership and cultural approaches no matter where people are working.

Rae (2021) stated that the nature of work continues to change, with such things as distance working and automation increasingly a commonplace. The manpower needs of many businesses as well as the functions are also affected as machines now perform complex tasks with greater speed and accuracy than human beings. Future secretaries are expected to demonstrate technological competencies in their use of laptops, and smart devices to perform secretarial or word processing tasks on daily basis. Their ability to use modern office equipment in the course of receiving and sending out information in the most appropriate, fastest and reliable form is germane in the future



office. The use of these technologies is expected to improve the job performance of OTM graduates in areas of record keeping, memo writing, collaboration, image making, data sourcing, information dissemination, timely decision making process, e-mailing, data-gathering and so on.

The 21st century skills are a set of abilities that students need to develop in order to succeed in the information age as office administrators. Like a force of nature, the digital age cannot be denied or stopped. According to Olaopa (2015), digital era has four very powerful qualities that will result in its ultimate triumph: decentralizing, globalizing, harmonizing, and empowering. The new and powerful tools that digitisation is giving rise to is trending towards greater freedom, and a diminishing attachment to fixed structures which increasingly calls for ability to think entrepreneurially, combine things well and, in particular, manage oneself.

The first step in developing skills is for secretaries to understand the digital skills that are most applicable to them and their business because this skill will give secretaries' career staying power the moment they get a job; it reduces risk of automation. As the reliance on digital communication grows, secretaries must keep up with the skill demand. It is also imperative to note that with the ever-evolving digital landscape, the skills requirements will only continue to change. It is significantly relevant for secretaries to arm themselves with the basic digital skills and continuously upskill themselves to keep pace with the latest developments.

Office Technology and Management in Tertiary Institutions

The Office Technology and Management (OTM) Programme in Nigeria tertiary institutions was designed to impart the youths with practical and employable skills. Office Technology and Management is an integral component of business education programme that is offered in Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, and the Universities primarily to educate and train students to become competent office managers as well as business educators (Okoli, 2019). **The business and administrative components of OTM programme according to National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) (2004) is designed for students whose goals include business management, human resource management, self-employment, entrepreneurial ventures, or a variety of different careers. This implies that a qualified secretary should possess basic office technology skills, have sufficient business acumen, be versatile in office information and communication technology and have sufficient knowledge of the operations of all departments within the organization where he/she works. This portends that OTM education is work-focused, skill-based, result-oriented, and technology-based.**

Office Technology and Management programme is a practical oriented programme designed to equip students with professional foundation, general education courses, vocational and interpersonal skills in OTM for effective work competencies in various organisations. OTM Education is a specialized phase of technical and vocational education (TVE) that prepares learners to enter into teaching and office occupation as capable and intelligent member of the work-force, making recipients to acquire skills to understand the ability of participating actively in business transactions/activities whether as producers or users of goods and services.

Concepts of Digital Skills and Future Office

Digital skills according to Quarto (2020), include the knowledge and ability to decide information needs from digital technology sources, and to properly use digital tools and facilities to input, access, organize, integrate and assess digital resources as well as to construct new knowledge. TechBoomers (2018) defined digital skills as the abilities necessary to understand, utilize, find, evaluate, navigate, share, create content and making use of digital technologies and the Internet, with little or no assistance. Possessing digital skills is so important in today's modern business environment and the future workplace. Iberdrola (2021) claimed that digital skills are not just about learning and developing technological skills but they also involve the acquisition of knowledge, values, attitudes,



regulations and ethics about ICT so as to get the most out of technology. In addition, they involve thinking and the valuable use of the data obtained through the use of technology.

Digital skills are characterized as tasks or communications performed on digital devices where information is accessed and managed. Digital skills according to the World Bank in Umoru (2020), are separated into three, namely: basic, intermediate and advanced. UNESCO divided digital skills into basic, generic and higher levels based on a digital skills framework. He explained that basic digital skills are entry-level practical skills needed to make elementary use of digital devices and applications, while intermediate digital skills are skills which assist a person to make essential and valuable use of online applications and services. Similarly, advanced digital skills are the group of skills that form the bases of specialist (ICT) occupations and professions.

In the future office, paper may be a thing of the past, mobile devices and laptops may become a popular choice for many employees. According to Theron (2016), the concept of the office of the future is more than just the space in which employees work - it includes the culture and vibe of the office as well as the cognizance of the health and well-being of all employees. This means, offices of tomorrow will consist of multifunctional spaces that can be utilised together for different purposes. The future work will be influenced by technological, generational and social shifts. Thus, the office of the future would encourage learning through unusual methods, appealing to all ages and adjusting to the changing times. This will allow for creativity, increased performance and encourage innovation. The future of employment will be a hybrid mix of office and home-working. Workers will spend less time commuting and more time collaborating (Samuels, 2021). This means people in the future will split their time between working from home and going into the office.

Importance of Digital Skills for Secretarial Profession and the Nature of Future Office

Technology should not be a reason for exclusion of secretarial professionals, rather a tool that empowers and helps to overcome adversities and discover new opportunities and education in digital skills is, without doubt, the best way to overcome this challenge. Iberdrola (2021) noted that digitisation is not adverse to social and economic progress but it brings prosperity, social equality and, ultimately, a more competitive economy.

With digital revolution altering conventional workplace functions and designing new jobs, there is a pressing need for secretaries to develop and deepen their technical skills to advance work quality, drive creativity and stay employable. A secretary with a growth mindset will be able to plug the skills gap and creates more exciting employment opportunities for himself or herself in the future office. Osborn (2021) outlined the importance of digital skills to include increasing revenue; businesses building stronger customer relationships; having a competitive edge over competitors; providing new strategies and approaches to working; improving productivity and effectiveness, and better communication, while FutureLearn (2020) stated that it boosts the career of those who want to embrace the flexibility of freelance work, enhances personal and professional skills that gives more options for getting a job.

Digital Skills Training Needs of the 21st Century Secretaries

There are a huge variety of skills that can be considered as digital skills. UK Study Centre (2021) stated the skills to include: skills to send emails securely, use email attachments, and post on social media; handle information and content, use search engines, understand that not all online content is reliable, access content across devices and on the cloud; set up accounts online, fill in online forms; find solutions to problems using tutorials/chat and improve productivity; and keep passwords secure, take precautions against viruses among others.

In their contributions, the Digital Marketing Institute (2017), TechBoomers (2018), Doyle (2019), FutureLearn (2020), Iberdrola (2021), Digital Skill Global (2021) and Randstad (2021) discussed the digital skills needs of the 21st century secretaries under the following subheads: Emailing Skill, Social Media Management Skill, Blogging Skill, Digital Marketing and Social Marketing Skill, Mobile Skill, Business Data Analytical Skill, Coding Skill, Cloud Skill, Artificial Intelligence Skill, Content



Management System (CMS) like WordPress Skill, Showcasing a Portfolio of Work Skill, Search Engine Marketing Skill and Content Marketing Skill.

Developing Digital Skills among Secretaries

One of the several ways to close skills gap according to New Jersey Institute of Technology (2021), is by reskilling or upskilling to compete in the marketplace. For those already engaged, the onus remains on companies to upskill them for relevance, while some ambitious employees may take the initiatives of self-sponsorship training to improve themselves. Secretaries need to invest in themselves, because when they do, they take that with them for the rest of their lives.

The following are some of the various ways by which the 21st century secretaries can adopt to develop their digital skills as observed by different scholars: Take free Online Courses: TechBoomers (2018) claimed that some websites have interactive tools such as The Skills Toolkit, FutureLearn, Google Digital Garage, BT Skills for Tomorrow, TechBoomers, to help one learn. **Certificate Programs:** Gross in UK Study Centre (2021) noted that the key to preparing students for the digital industry is early exposure inside and outside the classroom. Make an Effort to Use Technology for your Job: UK Study Centre (2021) viewed that a person can make it a point of browsing the World Wide Web daily in order to improve efficiency, integrate digital technologies into his or her job or personal endeavours. Little actions of these nature go a long way to increasing the level of digital abilities over time. The more a person makes an effort to imbibe digital technologies and the Internet into his/her life, the faster his/her skills improve.

Conclusion

Secretarial profession has more room for improvement in the future if secretaries can acquire digital skills. It is therefore, concluded that technological revolution is creating new opportunities for secretaries with digital skills who are prepared to work in the future office.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that today's secretaries should always update their digital skills to fit into the future office.
2. Institutions offering OTM should expose their students to the manipulative aspect of the office automation so that the would-be secretaries will fit into the 'dreamt' paperless office of tomorrow.
3. Secretarial education teachers should endeavour to attend seminars and conferences in order to be kept abreast of the latest development in the world of work and technology. This will help them to adequately impart the knowledge, skills and competencies into the students.



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