

MODERN CHALLENGES OF OFFICE SECRETARIES AND TIIF, SUSTENANCE OF NATION BUILDING

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Abstract:

This paper highlights modern challenges office secretaries and the sustenance of nation building. It elicits that there are a lot of challenges in secretarial work where automation of office equipment is now the order of the day as full functions involve: competence, good command of English, versatile typing of mailable and usable documents and use of shorthand skills including the mastery of computer system applications, and so on. These functions, therefore, have made the work of the office secretary to be of enormous national importance, and this is the reason why beneficiaries are found in every type of office from the medium-sized ones to that of multi-national organizations in every nook and cranny of urban and suburban centres in Nigeria, thereby, sustaining national unity. Problems such as: decaying habits of telling lies/faking of receipts and contract sums of facilities and supply of equipment/building of laboratories by highly placed Nigerian officials, poor filling of vacant secretarial positions, inadequate training, poor societal attitudes, poor remunerations, including others, have been discussed. Recommendations such as: regular training and re-training of office secretaries in the mastery of information technology and computer applications; good remunerations, and the need to reposition the training of secretaries in tertiary institutions through purposeful funding so as to guide against the production of half-baked ones, among others, have been suggested. .

Introduction

Nowadays the functions of the office secretary are centred on the following work goals:

- (a) The ability to use typing and shorthand skills with good speed and accuracy in some factory floors;
- (b) Effective competencies in daily routine work without being found wanting in any aspect of secretarial duties;
- (c) Good command of spoken and written English in the day-to-day office Communication;
- (d) Being able to organize the office with little or no supervision with creative initiatives;
- (e) Ability to solve minor problems without help from others;
- (f) Efficient use of the computer system packages in accordance with the need of the office;
- (g) Ability to handle the executive's activities and responsibilities in order to achieve the organizational goals and objectives;
- (h) To be trustworthy, loyal and honest especially when handling both personal and business confidential information or matters;
- (i) Ability to write minutes of meetings, reports, draft letters, take notes and file documents at all times;
- (j) being able to relate very well with the boss, subordinates, other members of staff and customers.

In this regard, the full implementation of vocational and technical education programmes (including secretarial skills) have not been realized in Nigeria when compared with abundant resources at the disposal of Nigerian leaders and other public/private highly placed officials in charge of sensitive areas of actualization. Therefore, this paper elicits that no foreigner is going be imported from

abroad to solve all forms of corruption for the people unless Nigerians have to discard decaying behavioral patterns like: telling lies through faking of official receipts, over-priced contract sums and other corrupt practices, and they are drains to the economy where nothing works for the general good.

The Office Secretary's Competence

An office secretary should excel in his or her secretarial skills. Typing, shorthand writing, and good command of English language are the basic tools for secretarial work. Imagine a secretary who does not know how to type documents accurately, cannot transcribe his or her shorthand notes after taking dictation or having covered departmental/board meetings, does not know spellings and simple grammar, he cannot withstand the duties of his calling. Therefore, a good secretary should be up and doing to improve on the work especially on the areas he or she is lacking. This tallies with the definition of competence by Hornby (2006) as "being able to do something well."

Office Secretaries and Good Command of English

Gartside (1970) and Ehiamentor (1990) opined that a good command of English is a veritable part of an efficient secretary. In fact, there is an adage which says that "as water is to fish, that is how English is to the Secretary." This means that a fish is dead when it is no longer in water. By the same token, a secretary cannot cope with his/her job without a good command of English. This is why the secretary should be well grounded in English language so as to enable him to excel in dictated correspondence, minutes writing and reports. Also, the language tool will aid his ability to expand his own initiative that can result in answering all routine letters. It will also enable him to read all matters that arrive on his desk except the highly confidential ones meant for the boss.

Invariably, a secretary's good command of English will enable him to mark up lengthy reports, underlining the most important phrases or sentences and making some remarks at the margin to show the boss that certain information is important to him for exercising some decisions (Whitehead, 2000).

As a general function, the secretary should use his command of English effectively to promote the work of the boss through drafting of letters, reports, answers to callers, wide reading of periodicals, brochures, company reports and so on.

Usefulness of Shorthand

In this vein, shorthand is still very vital to the work of the office secretary. Shorthand skill, according to Paul (2007), is an aspect of many functions of the office secretary which enables her to be fast at recording information in its raw form before using the knowledge of English and typing skills to produce mailable letters or other usable documents. Edmond (2008:230) added that the following areas still attract the use of shorthand writing in the work environment:

- (a) Factory floors where production work processes are always recorded especially areas of frequent break-downs which need regular replacement of tools or instruments;
- (b) In the recording of staff disciplinary committee matters for fact-finding procedures;
- (c) In the scientific laboratory requiring on the spot documentation of new (rends of bacteria conjugation);
- (d) In law courts especially for recording judicial inquiry into any matter of urgent concern,
- (e) Covering of departmental meetings, board meetings, and some other specialized conferences, and so on.

Sigmund (2007:210) has it that areas where office secretaries may not use shorthand frequently are:

- (a) Bank working environments; as they deal mainly with figures with short explanations.
- (b) General office routine work where there are no varieties of information, especially secretaries who are in charge of handling annual leaves, maternity leaves, sabbatical leaves, notification of public holidays, and so on.
- (c) Tenders board meetings,
- (d) Cocktail party meetings,
- (e) Swearing-in ceremonies, and so on

In this vein, when a secretary does not study shorthand during training, he or she will no

longer be called a secretary. What is happening in most offices nowadays is that many of the young modern managers, directors or chairmen do not know how to dictate letters, reports or scientific processes to their respective office secretaries. One would find them writing such documents by themselves before handing them over to their secretaries to prepare drafts for them. Such young executives do not really sit down with their secretaries to dictate the materials in their raw forms intelligently. Those executives who really made use of their secretaries are the experienced administrators, permanent secretaries, directors, etc., and many of them have retired from active service.

Additionally, as Nigeria is still a developing country, shorthand would continue to serve as a great employer of labour in the economy. Come to think of it, apart from the oil and banking industries, and a few foreign-based industries in Nigeria that have adopted full computerization as their working tool, a vast majority of indigenous industries, partnerships and the sole traders or proprietorships, etc., still use the manual typewriter with a skeletal use of the computer system. Many secondary and technical colleges, polytechnics, and some universities use the manual typewriters for training during the first few years of secretarial training before students are exposed to the use of the computer systems at their final years. This system of training is laudable because some firms, though computerized; still use the manual typewriters to test secretaries before they are employed.

Moreover, shorthand training skill would act as a catalyst for the modern secretary in the sense that it could inculcate in him/her a flair for writing office correspondences, including minutes and reports at regular intervals. Hornby (2006) explained that a catalyst is "a person or thing that causes a change." This is what makes a secretary to be worth his "salt" in the office. Virtues such as: mental discipline, good body posture, effective training in English (words and phrases) with matters relating to a wide range of cultural and general interests would serve as resource materials for the secretary and they would make him or her to excel in initiative, tactfulness, and being a partnership working mate behind the boss. In addition to this, it is worthy to note that the rudiments of learning shorthand skills are able to "cook" the secretary to attain stamina at work, endurance at correcting mistakes, and bridge the gap existing between good command of English, typing skills and the use of computer system. This is the reason why the secretary is stocked with a great amount of English words, phrases, sentences and dictions, and he could hold up to about ten words in memory after a dictation has ended (Paul, 2008).

The Sustenance of National Unity

Hornby (2006), explained that unity is the state of being in agreement and working together; the state of being joined together to form one unit. This is why the office secretary is the power behind the throne in many executive or managerial positions and situations in Nigerian offices. Whitehead (2000) opined that secretaries do more "to promote the efficiency of any nation than any other single occupation." Hence, he or she is found in every office whether private, public, government ministries, tertiary institutions, multi-national or foreign embassies including oil, banking and insurance companies.

In this vein, an office secretary, irrespective of his or her ethnic group affiliation, can work with any boss of another ethnic group in the same organization thereby encouraging unity. The link between them is the quality of work performed. Another example of the sustenance of unity by the modern secretary is through the establishment of business centres in every nook and cranny in urban and sub-urban areas of the country especially where tertiary institutions are situated. Customers would patronize the business centres that produce mailable letters and usable documents. They do not bear in mind whether or not such documents were produced by secretaries of the same ethnic groups. It is the quality of work that binds or unites people together in any place of work or through the patronage of business centres by the customers.

Problems

Some problems still stand against the way of the effective training of the office secretary. They are:

Poor Implementation of Vocational and technical Education Programmes (Including Secretarial Skills)

Both Nigerian Federal and State governments have not been able to fully implement laudable programmes of vocational and technical education because of the following reasons:

(a) **Inherent Decaying Behavioural Patterns of Highly Placed Government Officials in Charge of Work Stations**

Bailey (1986) opined that "decay is inherent in nature", and many people all over the world have allowed decaying behaviours to influence their thinking in the course of discharging their duties. This is the reason why many Nigerian government and private officials who are concerned with the various degrees of implementation of programmes resort to carrying out decaying behavioural patterns as ways of siphoning the funds allocated to them so as to get "rich quick" and personal aggrandizement to the detriment to the general good of all (a) By telling lies through Issuing of fake receipts and inflation of contract sums or unit prices.

Aguan (2007:58) explained that many government officials tell lies right from the beginning of implementation. The author further explained that such officials in charge of implementation plan: (i) Tell lies of varying degrees by issuing fake receipts to cover high costs supposedly incurred or expended on road construction, buildings, provision of electricity power, water, supply of

drugs to hospitals, etc.

- (ii) Inflated contracts for the procurement/supply of tools, gadgets, instruments, equipment, machines, laboratories, furniture and fittings, etc, to schools, colleges of education, polytechnics and universities,
- (iii) inflated hotel bills;
- (iv) inflated claims for kilometer or mileage coverage;
- (v) inflated telephone/GSM bills;
- (vi) frequent supposedly repairs of vehicle break-downs,
- (vii) Inflated receipts supposedly obtained to buy petrol/diesel for official cars, and so on.

In this regard, when so much money has been siphoned out through the above decaying habits, there would be nothing left to implement any programme for the general good and national development. This is why, Saraydarian (2005) opined that when many people are involved in telling lies with a view to gaining monetary or material reward, it is a sign that such people are personality-centred or self-centred, and their actions will never favour nation building. Hence, they misuse their positions to enhance their greed.

(b) **Influence of God-Fathers and Cult-Personalities in Nigeria's Political Life**

The influence of god-fathers and cult-personalities in Nigeria's nascent political and national life is another cause of poor implementation of vocational and technical education programmes. Speaking on "The God-Father Phenomenon in Democratic Nigeria, Silicon or Real", Nnamani (2006:8) stressed that "cult personalities have been built alongside the economic upheavals of the country" and that "one clear track of manipulation of the god-father is the segmentation of the political environment into immediate and perishable need zones." This is the reason why nothing works for the implementation of education programmes. Hence, the candidates they sponsor into various political positions like: president, governor, local government chairman, legislators, etc, resort to "paying homage" to them at regular intervals, thereby, side-tracking the votes of citizens and the implementation of programmes that could benefit national development.

Poor Filling of Vacant Secretarial Positions

Some problems in secretarial posts start right from when advertisements and interviews are carried out to employ new ones. Some employers emphasize "beauty", or "good body posture" rather than competence, work effectiveness or proficiency from intending applicants. At the end, the beautiful female secretary is employed. The motive for using beauty or appearance in selecting such office secretary is best known to the employer or boss; and often times, it ends up with seduction and sexual harassment in the office.

Some employers or bosses, after organizing tests or interviews, do not give the employment to the best candidates. Undue influence is used to select the candidates with lower scores. This trend is more prevalent in our society hence; the best secretaries are never employed.

Age Limit: Age limit is another factor affecting the caliber of secretaries employed to carry out secretarial work in offices. Nowadays, advertisements for senior secretarial positions would peg age at twenty-five (25) years old. This is not so in the advanced world where equal opportunity is open to everybody regardless of age. USA is a good example. One finds that the more experienced secretaries are not allowed to apply.

Emphasis on Female Secretaries Only: Some employers or bosses emphasize only female secretaries rather than giving ample opportunities for both male and female, as Nigeria is still a developing country. They, therefore, stress that "only female secretaries should apply." The intelligent male counterparts are side-lined. In very busy offices, the male secretaries are found to work more for long hours while the female ones, because of domestic inclinations, cannot work for long hours. Only few female secretaries can cope with the work of busy offices while some new entrants do not have the experience to cope with the job. One can easily find the bosses helping to do their work by closely supervising them in order to avoid obvious mistakes.

Inadequate Training

Poor funding of tertiary institutions by all stakeholders in the education sector is affecting the training of students. Nowadays, there is an acute shortage of equipment, e.g., typewriters and computer systems for teaching and learning, thereby, resulting in dividing students into many groups during practical sessions for the sake of learning, in this vein, students no longer have time for practice in addition to their normal lecture and practical hours. This has invariably lowered the texture of skills acquisition in tertiary institutions where secretarial education option is offered.

Societal Perception

In most cases, parents discourage some of their intelligent children from undertaking the secretarial course. Instead, they encourage the handicapped ones as well as the never-do-wells to do the course. This is one of the major reasons why the profession is full of weak professionals who do not pull their weight in the course of carrying out their functions in the office. Hence, a secretary who is lacking in any secretarial skill including computer applications cannot cope with the work schedule in any busy office. This is why one finds some bosses always quarrelling with their inefficient secretaries in some offices.

Poor Remunerations for Office Secretaries

The remunerations attached to secretarial grades in both public and private sector offices are very low when compared with that offered to graduates of other disciplines. There are some government departments and private organizations that do not pay graduate secretaries the same remuneration with graduates of other disciplines who are working in the same place. This is not fair. The situation does not encourage good working relationships among staff in the organization or government departments. With this development, good secretaries change their courses to other disciplines by way of further reading leaving the weaker ones in the profession.

Lack of Living Ethics/Manners

Some secretaries in the office lack living ethics or good manners when they receive visitors. They are very saucy in the way they interact with such visitors who call at the office by way of raining abusive words on them with the slightest provocation. By this action, such visitors would develop a kind of negative opinion on the organization or office and the secretary. Sometimes, such secretaries usually find it difficult to change their actions. This is why some employers either deploy them to other sections of the organization or terminate their appointments after several warnings.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to give succour to the situation:

1. Nigerian government/private officials and other citizens should shun all forms of corruption, cultism and god-fatherism in national life. All forms of corruption like: telling lies, faking of receipts, inflated contracts, etc, are all agents of decay to the implementation process of all vocational and technical education programmes. No foreigners can be imported from abroad to stop corruption, cultism and god-fatherism for Nigerians.
2. Government, organizations, consultants, and so on, should organize occasional seminars or induction courses for young managers, directors, chairmen, etc., on how to make effective use of top flight office secretaries. This will stimulate cordial working relationships in the office.
3. Government as well as other stakeholders should make frantic efforts to increase their remunerations of office secretaries in order to be at par with graduates of other disciplines. It will certainly discourage secretaries from drifting to other disciplines through fresh training.
4. Tertiary institutions should provide adequate facilities, equipment, including typing, shorthand, and computer laboratories in their institutions. This would certainly promote students learning, competence and work effectiveness, and could eventually assist them to become self-employed after graduation.
5. Computer applications should be made a compulsory course for secretarial education option. Although it has been approved in many tertiary institutions but the actual provision of computer systems to boost training is yet to be sufficiently actualized. It would enhance job opportunities after graduation. On the other hand, both public and private organizations should sponsor office secretaries to re-train them in computer applications so as to be at abreast with modern computer technology.
6. All tiers of government in Nigeria should encourage the employment of both male and female secretaries to fill vacant secretarial positions so as to foster national unity.
7. Government and private organizations should put in place a viable remuneration package for the secretarial career to be at par with other disciplines. It will attract good hands into the profession.

Conclusion

This paper has brought out the high level challenges of office secretaries as they also encourage the sustenance of national unity. By this token, the problems facing the office secretary are numerous but can be reduced through the concerted efforts made by the government, private organizations, the society and all other stakeholders in the Nigerian workforce.

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