

SHORTHAND IN SECRETARIAL PROFESSION: WHAT RELEVANCE IN TODAY'S NIGERIAN ORGANIZATION?

By

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Abstract

A study on the use of shorthand in Nigerian organizations as a means of facilitating correspondence, examines the extent executives and their secretaries use shorthand in the performance of their duties, considering many factors. Literature was relevantly reviewed. A sample of 60 was randomly chosen from 30 private/public organizations in Port Harcourt. Two sets of questionnaire, one for executives and the other for their secretaries, were used after their validation and reliability tests. Findings: both the executives and their secretaries scored shorthand use irrelevant in the present day organizations; shorthand skill is very difficult to acquire, resulting to secretaries' low performance in the art. Recommendations: providers of secretarial training/their relevant professional bodies should fashion out better/faster ways of assisting executives in handling correspondence in the absence of shorthand. Until new technologies emerge making shorthand totally irrelevant, users of the art should continue its application for speed/timely service delivery.

Shorthand, according to Encyclopedia Britannica, is “any system of rapid writing using symbols or shortcuts that can be made quickly to represent letters of the alphabet, words, or phrases,. The shorter Oxford English Dictionary describes it as “a method of speed writing by means of the substitution of contractions or arbitrary signs or symbols for letters, words, etc”. Other terms used for shorthand are Brachygraphy: short writing (from the Greek word meaning ‘short’.) Stenography: narrow writing (from the Greek word meaning ‘narrow’.), Tachygraphy: swift writing (from the Greek word meaning ‘swift’). The characters used in shorthand systems are based on two main approaches.

Script or cursive: This system uses letters, signs or symbols derived from normal handwriting or ~~print forms based on the Roman alphabet.~~

Geometric: this system uses an arbitrary alphabet of signs or characters which may be derived from a geometric pattern such as a circle or ellipse. The signs may be angular or they may follow the slope of normal hand writing.

Similarly, there are two principal abbreviation approaches in shorthand writing, namely -

- Orthography: system based on the way words are spelt
- Phonography: systems based on the way words sound or are pronounced.

Early shorthand systems tended to use the orthographic approach, but most of the more successful systems from the eighteenth century onwards have used the phonographic approach.

The art of shorthand has a long history going back to the ancient Greeks and Egyptians. Greek stenographic symbols have been found on the so-called “aeropolis stone”, ca. 350bce. Xenophone is said to have used shorthand to write down the memoirs of Socrates. The earliest recorded shorthand system by Tiro of Rome, dates from the first century bce. Tiro was a liberated slave of Cicero whose speeches he

recorded. It was a form of abbreviated longhand which both Julius Caesar and Emperor Titus are said to have used (Daniels and Bright, 1996).

So many systems of shorthand were invented over many years and centuries, but few most notable ones are as listed below.

- Bezensek Shorthand (Anton Bezensek German)
 - Munson Shorthand (James Eugene Munson)
 - Boyd's Syllabic Shorthand (Robert Boyd)
 - National Simplex Shorthand. Rev. Percival Hubert Chase (1919)
 - Current Shorthand (Henry Sweet)
 - New Rapid ,C.E. McKee (1890)
 - Caton Scientific Shorthand (Thomas Jasper Caton)
 - New Art of Real Shorthand, John Malham-Dembleby (1919)
 - Dacomb Shorthand (B.E. Dacomb, 1934)
 - Paragon Shorthand, A. Lichtentage (1895)
 - Dutton Speed words, a shorthand with an international *hand* auxiliary language (Reginald J.G. Dutton)
 - Personal Shorthand, originally called *Brief* the dual function of
 - Pitmand Shorthand, Isaac Pitman (1837)
 - Easy Script Speed Writing
 - Polygraphy, Aulay Macaulay (1747)
 - Eclectic Shorthand (J.G Cross)
 - Reformed Phonetic Short-Hand (Andrew J. Marsh), 1868
 - Forkner shorthand (Hamden L. Forkner)
 - Simson Shorthand (James Simson)
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- Shorthand in Secretarial Profession...**
- Gregg Shaorthand (John Robert Gregg)
 - Speedwriting, Emma Dearborn
 - Gregg Computer Shorthand/Productivity Plus
 - Tironian notes, Marcus Tullius Tiro, 63 BC
 - Groote (A.W. Groote) (Dutch)
 - Universal Stenography, Samuel Taylor (1786)
 - Herout-Mikulik's system, used in the Czech parliament (Alois Herout and Svojmir Mikulik)
 - Wang-Krogdahl's system, Used in the Norwegian Parliament, Leif Wang and Olav Krogdahl (1945).
 - Malone Shorthand
 - Melin Shorthand, the dominant Shorthand System used in Sweden (Olof Werling Melin)

This work however focuses attention on Pitman shorthand system as it is the system that is dominant in Nigeria, having come from Britain through colonialism. Sir Isaac Pitman who lived from 1813 to 1897 published his book 'Stenographic Sound-Hand', in 1837 and this marked a new era in the development of phonetic shorthand systems. In 1840, however, he published the second edition of his work under the name 'phonography' or 'writing by sound'. It is one of the most important geometric systems of shorthand, although it had, expectedly, some contemporary critics. Thomas Anderson regarded the system as "one of the most ill-constructed and deficient systems ever invented" while Thomas Malone in his own chose to enter into a long critical debate about the merit of Pitman's 'phonography' and alternative 'cursive' systems. In the Pitman method all words are written according to their sound and the consonant alphabet is based on the pattern of a crossed circle and uses paired thick and thin strokes.

Pitman system of shorthand has grown in usage and today three major systems have evolved from the original work. They include

- Pitman New Era
- Pitman Script
- Pitman 2000

These are all variants of the original work and all aimed at improving speed, easy mastery and readability. The uniqueness of Pitman shorthand is found in the foundation principles in the art which have remained unchanged. These principles include

- consonant symbols which are geometrical and derived from segments of a circle.
- consonants with similar sounds are paired and distinguished by shading.
- vowels are disjoined and indicated by light and heavy dots or dashes
- a contracting principles (writing half the outlines). This is taught for taking dictation under extreme pressure.

Academic Excellence

What is more, the art has metamorphosed into high phraseography level when, to gain speed, many words and phrases can now be written together without lifting up the pen. Smith (1988) stated that the ability to write at high speed must depend upon some secret knowledge of an extensive range of short-cuts.

And so from its invention in 1837, and spread in Nigeria in the mid 19th century, Pitman shorthand has continued to shape the world of business and office administration/management. The merits of the art have also been reaped. Busy business executives engage the services of trained shorthand writers (confidential secretaries, stenographers or shorthand typists) to handle their correspondences, especially those that are somewhat routine. All an executive needs is simply dictate the letter, memo, report, circular and other correspondences to the shorthand writer and in few minutes the document is ready for signature.

The art, with time, became very widely accepted in many organizations as the fastest means of recording spoken words. Shorthand writers then came to stand out as different from typists in the emerging secretarial profession. Typists only typed from the manuscript already written out or transcribed from shorthand outlines. To function as a secretary, on the other hand, required the ability to write and transcribe shorthand. Gradually, shorthand writing grew in importance to business organizations and government offices as support service, usage and tool for career growth and development. Typists and or secretaries then who obtained General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level certificate prior to their training and passing Royal Society of Art. (RSA) London or Pitman shorthand and typewriting single subjects' proficiency examinations, were highly sought after in organizations. Their salaries were also far above those other colleagues without GCE.

Today, the definition of a secretary has almost excluded the word 'shorthand' as component part of what a secretary should know or knows. The National Secretaries Association of America in Eni (1999) defined a secretary as "an assistant to an executive, possessing mastery of office skills and ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, who displays initiative, exercises judgment, and makes decisions within the scope of his/her authority". Funk and Wagnol Standard Desk Dictionary defined a secretary as 'a person employed to deal with correspondences, keep records and handle clerical business for an individual, business or committee'. The Webster New Collegiate Dictionary sees him/her as 'a confidential employee, one employed to handle correspondence and manage routine and detail work for a supervisor, a business concern, organization, or society; one responsible for its records and correspondence; an officer of State who superintends a government administrative department." Eni

(1987) defines a secretary as “a member of the clerical staff whose fundamental functions are concerned with the preparation, preservation and presentation of correspondence and communication in all forms ~~within the organization and to its customers~~” He further stated that anybody whose main functions do not involve communications and who does not assist executives in his/her activities, and whose functions are not confidential in nature is not a secretary or is not performing the functions.

These definitions corroborate the fact that secretarial profession today has grown far beyond what it was previously construed and perceived to be. Shorthand has now rightly been subsumed into office skills a secretary must possess, and little is therefore heard of it, even though it is there very prominent in practice.

Polytechnics and, lately, universities in Nigeria have popularized shorthand writing as a key course or subject in the study of Secretarial Administration, Office Management Technology, or Office Technology Management where the art is relevantly domiciled under Management Sciences Faculty. To further buttress the importance of shorthand in secretarial practice, Ahukannah and Chukwumezie (2008) recommended shorthand and typewriting speeds of 120 /50 words per minute respectively as must skill levels. Shorthand speed of 120 words per minute puts the executive at ease when dictating important business correspondence to the secretary. It is frustrating to the executive when his secretary complains at the end of dictation session: “sir, I am sorry I did not catch up with the speed, and can therefore not produce anything”. When there is no back up dictation recording machine, all the dictation exercise was in futility.

Side by side with the increasing importance of shorthand as a key tool for the secretary in the organization, is the word processing application as another powerful tool for the secretary to improve his/her efficiency and effectiveness. Apart from the computer, there are other modern office machines which tend to pose a very serious threat (or so it seems) to the art of shorthand writing. With the increasing use of dictating machines by executives which enable the secretary play back the dictated message and transcribe same even in longhand without resorting to the use of shorthand, the art is beginning to appear not very relevant, especially in the view of mediocre writers who find the skill very difficult to master and apply. Admittedly, shorthand is an art difficult to acquire, but when well acquired remains part of the writer for a very long time. No wonder Shyllon (1993) observed that “it is not uncommon to see students who have been writing shorthand for about two or three years without success at a speed of 80 words per minute. Again just by ably manipulating the laptop, some executives see themselves already as capable of performing all secretarial functions which shorthand writing is part of. In fact, more and more executives are now preparing their correspondence themselves (whether they do it properly or not). They compose their correspondence and key same into the computer directly and print out without the assistance of the secretary. In some cases, the secretary is requested by the boss to draft such letters and memo for their perusal before typing is done. It is, here, either the secretary lacks sufficient speed to take dictation in shorthand correctly or that the boss lacks adequate education or ~~Academic Excellence~~ ~~compose to articulately and fluently dictate meaningful and coherent correspondence~~. Whichever is the case, the use and application of shorthand to enhance speed in organizations’ service delivery obviously suffers serious setbacks.

This study therefore is an attempt to find out the continued relevance or otherwise of shorthand in today’s organizations. In other words, how disposed are executives to employ mostly secretaries with sound shorthand skills, considering other possible alternatives open to them in terms of speed, accuracy and cost effectiveness.

Objectives

1. To find out whether secretaries of today have accurate shorthand skills to encourage their bosses to take advantage of the skill in the organization by dictating most of their correspondence.

2. To determine the extent to which executives are willing to take advantage of their secretaries' shorthand skills in doing their work, considering accuracy and cost effectiveness
3. To find out whether the present technological growth has made the use of shorthand irrelevant in organizations.

Methodology

A sample of 30 top executives and their 30 secretaries randomly drawn from both private and public organizations in Port Harcourt, Rivers State were used in the study. Two sets of questionnaire were used to get opinion of the 60 respondents on the use and relevance, or otherwise, of shorthand in their organizations. One set of questionnaire marked 'A' went to the executives and the other set marked 'B' went to the secretaries. The two set of questionnaire, each containing six items/variables, were sent to experts in the Business Education and Secretarial Administration Departments of Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, for validation before they were subjected to reliability tests. The items/variables were scored using 5-point rating scale - Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Disagreed (D), Strongly Disagreed (SD) and Undecided (UND). Analysis was made using percentage of the frequencies.

Results

Table 1: Analysis of Responses on the use of shorthand in the organization.

A: Executives

S/NO	Items/Variables	SA	A	D	SD	UND	Total
1	My secretary has good grip of shorthand skill and writes it well.	8 26.7%	9 30%	7 23.3%	4 13.3%	2 6.7%	30 100%
2	I dictate frequently to her in the performance of my duties	7 23.3%	8 26.7%	10 33.3%	5 16.7%	0	„
<i>Shorthand in Secretarial Profession...</i>							
3	I am not willing to dictate shorthand notes to my secretary as I believe it is not faster and more accurate than writing everything out myself.	11 36.7%	7 23.3%	8 26.7%	4 13.3%	0	„
4	My secretary is efficient and does correspondences for me, and I don't need dictating.	10 33.3%	10 33.3%	4 13.3%	3 10%	3 10%	„
5	Thoughts come and go and it is not possible for a busy executive to articulately and coherently dictate a letter/memo to the secretary without going back to correct something in it after production.	12 40%	8 26.7%	8 26.7%	2 6.7%	0	„
6	Advances in technology (e.g dictating machines, recording tapes which enables the secretary play back at any preferred speed, computer, etc) has made the use of shorthand irrelevant in today's Nigerian organizations, considering accuracy, costs and speed.	8 26.7%	9 30%	7 23.3%	5 16.7%	1 3.3%	„

B : Secretaries

1	A secretary should be proficient in the art of shorthand writing	13 43.3%	11 36.7%	4 13.3%	1 3.3%	1 3.3%	30 100%
2	A working shorthand speed for a secretary in the organization should be 100 words per minute and above.	7 23.3%	6 20%	10 33.3%	5 16.7%	2 6.7%	„
3	I prefer my boss to ask me to draft correspondence for him/her instead of shorthand note-taking as it makes for greater accuracy and reduces delivery time	11 36.7%	10 33.3%	5 16.7%	3 10%	1 3.3%	„
4.	My boss is not usually disposed to dictating notes to me, he believes that effecting corrections on the draft print-out before the final production is	9 30%	8 26.7%	5 16.7%	7 23.3%	1 3.3%	„

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5	Shorthand, though a valuable art that assists the secretary, is a skill too difficult to acquire enough to meet all correspondence challenges in the organization.	12 40%	7 23.3%	6 20%	5 16.7%	0 -	„
6	Advances in technology (e.g dictating machines, recording tape which enable the secretary play back at any preferred speed, computer, etc) has made the use of shorthand irrelevant in today's Nigerian organizations, considering accuracy, costs and speed.	10 33.3%	12 40%	6 20%	2 6.7%	-	„

From table 1 above it was discovered that executives have differing opinions as it concerns working with secretaries and the use of shorthand. Out of the 30 executives 8 (representing 26.7%) and 9 (representing 30%) ticked 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' respectively, to support their knowledge of the fact that their secretaries have good grip of shorthand skill and write same well. 7 executives (23.3%) and 4 (13.3%) disagreed and strongly disagreed to the statement to mean that their secretaries have no shorthand skills and do not write same. Only 2 (6.7%) undecided cases were recorded.

7 executives (23.3%) and 8 (26.7%) strongly agreed and agreed respectively that they dictate to their secretaries in the performance of their duties. 10 respondent (33.3%) and 5 (16.7%) similarly disagreed and strongly disagreed to the view, to mean that they do not dictate to their secretaries.

(11 executives (36.7%) were strongly unwilling to dictate shorthand notes while 7 (23.3%) were unwilling to dictate shorthand notes to their secretaries. They believe that shorthand is not faster or more accurate than writing in longhand themselves. 8 executives (26.7%) and 4 (13.3%) however disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively to prove a view that they dictate shorthand notes to their secretaries and that the practice is faster and more accurate than writing in longhand.

10 respondents (33.3%) and another 10 respondents (33.3%) ticked strongly agreed and agreed respectively to the view that their secretaries were efficient and do correspondences for them; they do not

need to dictate as a result. 4 respondents (13.3%) and another 3 (10%) took the opposite view of disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. There were 3 (10%) undecided cases.

12 executives (40%) and another 8 (26.7) answered strongly agreed and agreed respectively to the view that it is not possible for them to articulately dictate shorthand notes straight to their secretaries without having to go back to it making corrections after production. However, 8 executives (26.7%) disagreed to the view and another 2 (6.7%) strongly disagree to the view.

Shorthand in Secretarial Profession...

To the fundamental question of whether shorthand is still relevant in the present day Nigerian organizations, 8 executives (26.7%) and another 9 (30%) opined strongly agreed and agreed respectively, to mean that the art is no longer relevant considering many factors like advances in technology, accuracy, cost and speed. 7 respondents (23.3%) and another 5 (16.7) disagreed and strongly disagreed to the view respectively, stating that shorthand is still relevant in our organizations. There was only 1 (3.3%) undecided case.

B Secretaries

To the statement that secretaries should be proficient in shorthand writing, 13 secretaries (43.3%) answered strongly agreed; 11 (33.7%) answered agreed. Only 4 secretaries (13.3) and 1 (3.3%) disagreed and strongly disagreed to the statement respectively. There was only one (1) undecided case (3.3%).

7 secretaries (23.3%) strongly agreed that working shorthand speed for a secretary should be 100 words per minute and above. 6 (20%) agreed to the view. However, 10 secretaries (33.3%) and another 5 (16.7%) disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively, meaning that 100 word per minute speed for secretaries is too high. 2 (6.7%) secretaries were undecided.

11 secretaries (36.7%) strongly agreed to be asked to draft correspondences instead of taking shorthand notes from the boss stating that it is faster for them. 10 (33.3%) agreed to the same view, but 5 secretaries (16.7%) disagreed and another 3 (10%) strongly disagreed. Only 1 secretary (3.3%) was undecided.

9 secretaries (30%) strongly agreed that their bosses do not dictate shorthand note to them because they believe that the art ultimately takes more time than without it. 8 (26.7%) agreed to the view. 5 secretaries (16.7%) however, disagreed to the view while another 7 (23.3%) strongly disagreed. One (1) secretary (3.3%) was undecided.

12 respondents (40%) and 7 (23.3) chose strongly agreed and agreed respectively, that shorthand, though very valuable art to the secretary, is a skill too difficult to acquire enough to meet all correspondence challenges in the organization. 6 respondents (20%) however disagreed with the view while 5 (16.7) strongly disagreed that shorthand is a very difficult skill to acquire.

10 secretaries (representing 33.3%) of all the sampled respondents in this category strongly agreed that shorthand is no longer relevant in today's Nigerian organizations considering may factors – technology, accuracy, costs and speed. 12 (40%) agreed also to the statement. However, 6 respondents (20%) and another 2 (6.7%) disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively to the view that shorthand is no longer relevant, after considering all the factors.

Discussions

It is of great concern that only 17 executives out of 30 know that their secretaries have shorthand skills and use the art. This means that a greater number of executives out there know nothing about what role the art can play in facilitating their work. That only 50% of the executives dictate shorthand notes to their secretaries suggests that the art is not dominantly pivotal to organizations secretarial high performance. The unwillingness of executives to dictate shorthand (18 out of 30) is a testimony of near frustration in the use of the art. Either the art really is not faster and more accurate, or that secretaries' competence in the art is below the executives expectation. The fact also is that secretaries who are competent and dexterous enough in the art are few. The executives themselves are not all knowledgeable and articulate enough to freely dictate shorthand notes. It takes more than average intelligence for any

executive to give a straight-forward dictation that does not require corrections later. Some executives in the alternative, resort to either doing their correspondence themselves or delegate their secretaries to do so for them.

The secretaries themselves, as seen from the analysis, lack sufficient shorthand skill to encourage their bosses. They therefore, overwhelmingly, prefer to be asked to do correspondence for their executives rather than take dictation, even though they overwhelmingly subscribed to the statement that a secretary should be proficient in the art of shorthand writing. A whopping 19 secretaries out of 30 (63.3%) blamed their poor performance in shorthand to the difficult nature of the art itself. They agreed that shorthand is a valuable art that assists the secretaries, but stated that the skill is too difficult to acquire enough to meet all correspondence challenges in the organization.

The research proved shorthand irrelevant in the present day organizations. This is both worrisome and funny when it is observed that more secretaries than their bosses (22 secretaries, 17 executives) scored shorthand irrelevant. This portends a dangerous trend for a subject which brought secretarial profession into reckoning among dominant professions in the business sector. As technology is a fast growing phenomenon, there are fears of further erosion of more subject areas in the secretarial profession.

Conclusion

The research has shown that the major reasons why executives in our organizations hardly dictate to their secretaries is the fact that most secretaries lack adequate shorthand skill capability to effectively handle correspondence using the art. Secretaries are more comfortable working with bosses who play down on dictation and use of shorthand. Skill acquisition is never an easy thing in whatever profession, and shorthand is no exception. It is therefore a lame excuse for most secretaries to blame their inefficiency or poor shorthand skill on the difficulty in learning and mastering the art.

Recommendations

1. Providers of secretarial training and relevant professional associations should look inwards and fashion out better and faster ways of assisting executives in handling organizational correspondence in the absence of shorthand.
2. Executives and their secretaries who use shorthand as a faster means of handling their correspondence in the organization should continue to enjoy the art until further technologies

~~*Shorthand in Secretarial Profession* emerge to make abandonment of shorthand art obvious and palpable.~~

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