

# CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF ETHICAL SECRETARIES IN UNETHICAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

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## **Abstract**

*The study x-rays the challenges and prospects of ethical secretaries who find themselves working in unethical work environment, the objectives being to find out, among other things, those challenges secretaries face, what constitutes unethical work environment, what prospects await ethical secretaries who ethically serve with honour and integrity even in organizations that encourage unethical work practices, etc. Literature was reviewed which traced the historical development of secretarial profession, ethical requirements for secretaries, ethical and unethical work environments, etc. Conclusions: ethical secretaries, who persevere, in the midst of unethical work environment, stand the chance of getting unusual promotions, recognition and upliftment from their organizations. Recommendations: secretaries who endure the pains of unethical work environment without getting involved in unethical practices should be adequately rewarded; rather than succumb to unethical practices to remain in employment, such secretaries should resign their appointments to preserve the confidence which the society has on them and secretarial profession.*

In every organization, big or small, private or public, there exists the need for secretarial services because secretarial functions are inherent in organizations whether or not a secretary is employed. The secretarial function is just pervasive in every organization and no organization can easily function without a secretary. This explains the importance of secretaries to the success and growth of organizations. A secretary, it must be explained from the onset, is an assistant to an executive who has office skills in handling correspondences and functions to provide communication support services on matters of routine and administrative issues.

In whichever organization she works, a secretary faces a lot of challenges in the performance of her job. Challenges come in diverse ways – sexual harassment, pressure from co-workers to disclose official secrets which she has easy access to because of her work relationship with the chief executive, playing the risky role of shielding her boss in almost all circumstance even when it involves doing the illegal or unethical thing. The challenges are much more serious when the secretary is ethical and upright, doing her job with honesty and integrity in a work environment that is unethical. Doing the right thing in an environment that does not allow or favour such is a very difficult thing.

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Work environment is unethical when, according to Azuka and Azuka (2006), “workers or employees are made to do their work under intimidation, threat of sack if they fail to act on instructions that are not right and which go against good conscience, equity, justice and fair play”. In this situation, an ethical secretary sees herself in a dilemma - resign from the just found employment or ‘stubbornly’ shun unethical practices in a work environment that breeds and favours it?

She bravely stays on doing her work in such an unethical environment and gradually begins, in her little way, to introduce ethical practices in the organization. What prospects awaits her? What future and growth opportunities are open to secretaries in this category?

This study therefore x-rays the various ramifications of challenges and prospects of those ethical secretaries who find themselves working in unethical work environment.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study which aims to x-ray the various challenges and prospects of ethical secretaries who work in unethical environment has the following specific objectives;

1. To determine the various challenges secretaries face in the performance of their duties.
2. To identify the ethical roles of the secretary and the practicability of these roles in unethical work environment.
3. To assess the prospects that are open to ethical secretaries in the organization that encourages unethical practices.
4. To proffer workable recommendations that will be of benefit to both secretaries and organizations as a whole.

### **History of Secretaryship**

No one knows exactly when secretaries originated. The role arose out of the natural need for a prominent person to whom confidential matters could be entrusted and who could act as an assistant for a principal. It is known that secretaries existed in Rome prior to the establishment of the empire. They were usually educated men who took dictation as “scribes”, and often times acted as trusted advisers.

In early modern times, members of the nobility have secretaries, who functioned quite similarly to those of the present day. They were always men; most of them had command of several languages, including Latin, and were required to have what we would consider today as a broad generalized education. Ahukannah and Chukwumezie (2008) observed that prior to Nigerian independence in 1960 not many Nigerians were qualified and capable to train as secretaries. For the few who were found qualified and capable, training facilities were not available for them in the country. They were sent to Pitman College in London to train.

As commerce and trade expanded people of wealth and power needed secretaries (confidants and trusted agents) to handle their correspondence on private or

confidential matters. Men continued to dominate clerical and secretarial roles; they maintained account books, in addition to performing stenographic duties, and were known for their exemplary penmanship skills. Secretaries often attained an elevated status and held prominent positions.

During the industrial expansion at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, business offices faced a paper-work crisis. Women solved the crises by adapting well to new technologies such as the adding and calculating machines, telephone, and the typewriter. Many women held, or aspired to hold, positions as secretaries. They attended secretarial schools and worked to attain superior skills. The demand for secretaries was so great that it outpaced the supply.

In the 1930s, the number of men with the title secretary dwindled. Women dominated the office workforce. Recognizing that continuing education was important to career success, a group of secretaries in America's heartland became the nucleus of an association that would help to professionalize the occupation. In 1942, the National Secretaries Association (NSA) was formed (now known as the International Association of Administrative Professionals). The NSA first administered the Certified Professional Secretaries Examination (CPSE), a standard of excellence for the profession, in 1951.

Today, secretaries (also known as administrative assistants, office coordinators, executive assistants, office managers, etc) are using computers, the internet, and other advanced office technologies to perform vital information management functions in the modern office. Secretaries no longer "simply" type correspondence for "the boss". Now, they often write that correspondence, as well as plan meetings, organize data using spreadsheet and database management software, interact with clients, vendors, and the general public; supervise the office and other staff, handle purchasing, and even train other workers. It is the new role of secretaries that has given the profession a new definition by the Professional Secretaries International (PSI-1984) in Eni (1999) thus: "an executive assistant who possesses a mastery of office skills, who demonstrates the ability to assume responsibilities without direct supervision, who exercises initiative and judgement, and who makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority".

But it must be noted that no two secretarial positions are alike. Azuka and Agomuo (1993) noted that the factors that determine the nature of secretarial position include, among other things, "the size of the organization, the nature of the organization's business, the willingness of the boss to delegate work, the status of the secretary's immediate boss as well as the ability and willingness of the secretary to assume responsibility".

## **Challenges**

Secretaries face a lot of challenges in their effort to carry out the onerous tasks and responsibilities conferred on them by the profession. For example they are expected by the profession to shield their bosses, and to do this effectively requires, sometimes,

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some level of unethical behaviour or practices. Secretaries tell little lies to protect their bosses, to save a delicate situation. For the secretary to tell an anxious casual visitor that the boss is not available to prevent the boss being distracted is one of such challenges of the profession. To smartly deceive the boss's wife and sway her away from entering her husband's office when the boss is playing amorously with a strange woman inside his office is yet another.

But greater challenges confront the secretary when her boss is grossly unethical. What does the secretary who is, as it should be, loyal to her boss do if the boss indulges in unethical practices? Does she (the secretary) continue to be loyal to the boss? Does she boldly warn the boss of the consequences of such unethical practices, report her boss to higher authorities, or resign her appointment in obedience to her conscience?

Secretaries by their professional calling usually work late in the office to ensure that their executives' tables are cleared or decongested of files that would have lingered untreated, and overflow into the next day's work. They also stay on receiving and keeping visitors for the boss even after office hours, especially when the boss is away but desires to meet with such visitors. This situation, for most secretaries, could be very tempting as it becomes difficult to resist possible sexual overtures from men during these uncontrolled moments. It takes strong will of the ethical secretary to riggle out of this situation.

Sometimes it could not be about sexual overture, but request on the secretary to divulge essential organizational secret. In these days of severe competition, organizations look out for ways of out-witting their competitors, even when their method of doing this is unethical. The challenges of a secretary in the performance of her job become more apparent during organizational restructuring which usually leads to downsizing. Every employee wants the secretary to secretly give information on the names of employees marked out for dismissal, termination, lay-off or put on redundancy. The secretary sees herself under pressure to do unethical things. The pressure is, in fact, part of the profession.

Obodo (2005) argued that the reason why secretaries face a lot of challenges is because of the proliferation of professional associations for secretaries. He observed that there are over three different secretarial associations in Nigeria with each laying claims to the control of the profession. This paper, however, disagrees with the view as none of these challenges are traceable to the secretaries or their professional associations.

### **Ethical Prescription for Secretaries**

Every profession has a well-articulated code of ethics that guilds its members behaviour or conduct. Secretarial profession is no exception, and the following, according to Emeti (2009) are notable ones.

**Confidentiality** All confidential matters must be kept confidential. Careless discussions must be avoided as such could lead to involuntary disclosure

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of official secrets. The secretary should resist commenting or passing remarks on official issues, particularly on issues of which knowledge came to her in her capacity as a secretary.

**Honesty** The standard of honesty expected of the secretary is as high as, if not higher than that, of an accounting officer. She should be transparent in all her dealings as anything on the contrary would adversely affect her reputation and integrity, both of which would render her unfit for continuous employment as a secretary.

**Politeness** One of the most cherished qualities of a secretary is politeness. She must be polite at all times and must never allow pressure or the complex nature of her job affects her dealings with other people. She must wear a cheerful look always and talk to people nicely, even when she is not happy.

**Orderliness** The secretary should be organized at all times. She should plan her work in such a way as to achieve maximum result within a short time. Time should never be wasted on trivialities and she must never be jolted by pressure of work. In other words, she must be calculated at all times.

**Tactfulness** The secretary should exhibit a great deal of tact in performing her duty. This becomes more essential in handling the public and when shielding her boss from unwarranted guests.

**Loyalty** The secretary must be loyal to her boss, and show much respect for top officers of her organization. She does not need to fear anybody. All that is expected of her is respect for constituted authority. This will enhance her relationship with her boss and others.

**Punctuality** The ethics of the profession demands that the secretary must not only be punctual to her duty, but must make punctuality her watch-word on all occasions. She must be in the office before her boss so as to be able to organize the day's work and bring up any outstanding matters before the arrival of her boss. She also leaves the office after her boss, to make sure that she clears her table of the day's tasks.

**Good Dressing** This has recently gained increased importance due to organizations' quest for competitive advantage. Secretaries should therefore dress corporately and smartly always.

In addition to these ethical demands on the secretary, she should maintain good human relations in her organization, relating well with all and sundry in the spirit of team working which is essential tool for high organizational performance. She must relate with workers in her unit in a manner that portrays her as having the mandate and authority of her boss.

**Ethical and Unethical Work Environments**

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To talk of ethical and unethical work environments brings first to mind the essence of an organization and people working together in a work environment. People must work together for the objectives of the organization to be achieved. This also means imposing the tenets of good human relations to bear on organization workers. This involves the sum total of a person whereby he reaches out to others, with genuine care and understanding. Good human relations which has its basis on the Biblical golden rule – “do unto others as you would want others do unto you” – finds expression on such issues as: how a man sees himself and as others see him; the ability to get along with others, inwardly and superficially, with whom he lives, works or associates. It is only by accepting and understanding others that we can bridge the gap of imperfection thereby helping to handle situations which might otherwise escalate into disputes in a working environment.

Azuka and Azuka (2006) observed the need for some form of human relation to prevail whether people are at work, at a play, in places of worship or at a social gathering. They noted that human relations are essentially the development of an effective working office environment through effective manipulation and persuasion of the personnel. It therefore means getting people to want to work together to meet the set goals of the office. It involves the study of the interaction between the individuals within the office, either as a group or as individuals. In fact, its main objective is the planting of stability, effective standards, simple functional and achieving systems and efficiency by managing the diversities of interests, skills, and aptitudes in satisfying the goals of the office.

Whatever human relations tries to achieve in the organization can easily be diminished by human problems. When an employee ceases to cooperate, a human problem has arisen. In this circumstance, even when the physical environment of work is excellent, and machines and materials are perfect, the performance of the group may still fall below expectation. The only answer can be found in the attitude or change in attitude of people at work.

From the perspective of this work - secretarial - it is believed that a work environment that is unethical and un-conducive can, to a great extent, minimize, diminish or even frustrate ethical secretaries' job performance and productivity. Ethical work environment, on the other hand, will enhance productivity. Work environment is ethical when workers or employees are allowed to do their work without intimidation, threat of sack if they fail to act on instructions that are not right and which go against good conscience, equity, justice and fair-play. Secretaries in this circumstance see the organization as good as their home; they put in their best and serve their executives with utmost care, respect and integrity for the general good of the organization participants. Leadership has a major role to play to ensure that conducive operational environment continues to be maintained.

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Conversely, unethical work environment can find expression in so many different ways in the organization and ethical secretaries become uncomfortable. A perfect example always cited in this circumstance is sexual harassment. A hostile work environment is one in which unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature creates an uncomfortable work environment for an employee or employees. Azuka and Azuka (2006) stated that hostile work environment harassment occurs “when unwelcome sexually harassing conduct is so severe, persistent, or pervasive that it affects an employee’s ability to participate in or benefit from an activity, or creates an intimidating, threatening or abusive work environment”.

Sometime, unethical work environment is forced down on the organization by economic difficulties which managers must attempt to overcome in the interest of their job and that of corporate existence of the organization generally. There could be a situation where the manager’s continued stay on his job is threatened by poor sales return and he is confronted with two choices. First, impose unethical work conditions or systems on the workers by forcing them to engage on illegal and unethical practices just to push up sales. In this case salesmen and women with questionable character, but who can turn the poor sales trend around for the better could be hired with specific instructions on what to do to competitors. Some banks in Nigeria were in recent times accused of what was termed ‘corporate prostitution’, a situation where female bank marketers were given normally unrealizable targets of attracting a specific amount of deposit into the bank. Not to achieve the target could cost the staff her job. Second, the manager sticks to ethics/ legality and gets fired for low sales returns.

The above situations corroborate Nicole Machievelli’s view on ethics and morality. To him, a prince or a ruler must put aside such questions as integrity, morality and honour. He should follow any tactics that will maintain him in power and preserve his position. He asserted that it was desirable for the ruler to appear to be straightforward, humane, clement and trustworthy but that he should always be ready to follow the path of evil if the occasion should arise. He should have a spirit to adapt to the varying winds of fortune (Haralambos 1980).

### **Prospects for Ethical Secretaries**

The knowledge base of secretaries in recent times, exposure to wide variety of information, communication, business relations and professional linkages (local and international) have all summed up to make secretarial profession one of the most dynamic and growing professions in the business area. In other words, growth opportunity for secretaries has continued to attract others into it. Eni (1999) observed “many successful secretaries have reached executive positions by being promoted from the secretarial rank. But it is observed that most secretaries do not grow beyond the middle level class. It is only those who brace up to the challenges of their professional calling by dint of hard work and insistence on sound ethical practices, at all times, that make the difference.”

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Organizations are quick to nominate, recommend and send for further studies locally and abroad, their most valued secretaries who have demonstrated high level of integrity and commitment to organizational objectives. This opportunity is, without words, reserved for few ethical secretaries who have over time suffered under the weight and pressure of unethical work environment and still stand out unblemished and uncompromising.

From time to time in organizations, we hear of and witness unusual and unconventional promotions by the board of directors, of workers to very high offices in recognition and appreciation of the workers' unflinching dedication, perseverance and high performance over a long period of time. To retain a worker whose ethical disposition is very high and whose continued stay in the organization will help to change, for the better, the bulk of unethical staff in the work place, is usually a major reason for such usually promotion.

Through consistent demonstration of bravery, gallantry and sacrifice, corporals in the Nigeria Police Force have been known to be promoted by the Inspector General to inspectors, unconventionally playing down the career growth path of sergeant. In secretarial profession, similarly, instances abound where secretaries were promoted to General Managers in recognition of their professional and ethical sound practices.

Sound ethical behaviour must continue to be rewarded in organizations even when the Chief Executive at the helm of affairs is unethical, as nature must always divinely intervene to shape the affairs of man, consciously or unconsciously, to the path of rectitude. After-all the holy book (Bible) admonishes us not to be weary in doing what is right, stating that in the fullness of time, we must be rewarded. No matter how bad the work environment, an ethical secretary has so much to benefit from his/her organization, although usually in the long run.

### **Conclusion**

It has been seen from the logical presentations that ethical secretaries face a lot of challenges in the performance of their job in the organization. Problem situations confront them that require unethical approach as solution; how they maneuver the situations and come out still ethical is what makes the difference in their practice. The work environment under which secretaries work is yet another challenging factor. When work environment is unfriendly and unethical an up-right worker finds it difficult to perform optimally. Human relations practice in this situation is at its lowest ebb - team working, mutuality, comradeship, free flow of communication and other ingredients that make people work co-operatively together suffer a serious set back. Secretaries in their unique function of dedicated service to their executives become helpless. She must shield her boss in almost all circumstances to retain his confidence.

It is observed also, that sometimes organizations deliberately allow unethical practices to persist in the work place if only such will push up their sales, and



subsequently profit. In this situation ethical staff are pitched against their conscience: to be unethical or take the consequences of remaining ethical.

But in all, there is always light at the end of the tunnel. We saw situations that proved that remaining ethical in the midst of unethical work environment is a great advantage and reward to the secretaries who persevered and kept fate with their professional calling and personal integrity. The holy bible supports that any good work has a reward. There is therefore bright prospects for secretaries who, at all odds, remain ethical in their practice.

### **Recommendations**

1. Although executives appreciate their ethical secretaries, efforts should be made to translate the appreciation into a more visible accolade in the organization so as to make other workers take challenge and start to imbibe the virtues of uprightness
2. Secretaries, especially the new entrants who are faced with the present harsh economic realities, should look beyond present economic gains in the performance of their job, and focus more on maintaining their integrity and sound ethical standard in their profession which ultimately leads to recognition, respect and unusual upliftment at the long run.
3. Organizations should put in place a deliberate policy that shuns unethical practices even at the time of operational difficulties, realizing that at the end of every sharp and unwholesome practice, there is always a painful prize to pay. Due to sharp practices of the past decades, some oil companies in Nigeria are today spending so much money on remediation or environmental repairs to the oil bearing communities where they had operated and left them in ruins.
4. In situations of unmitigated unethical work environment practices where secretaries find themselves in a web of forceful unethical practices to remain in employment, it is recommended that such secretaries should resign their appointments rather than succumb to such pressures that will ultimately lead to erosion of confidence and high esteem which the society has on secretarial profession.

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