
CHALLENGES OF MODERN PROFESSIONAL SECRETARY/OFFICE MANAGERS IN ACHIEVING SUCCESS AT WORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks into Challenges of Modern Professional Secretary/Office Managers in achieving success at work using SWOTT Analysis, discussing duties of professional secretaries/office managers in the past at present and in the future, how to succeed in modern offices etc. The paper concludes with the fact that managing modern office requires continuous learning, acquisition of skills, knowledge and experience which is ever changing in these technologically implied offices.

Keywords: Professional Secretary, Office Managers, SWOTT Analysis, Challenges, Skills

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to write on challenges of modern professional secretary/office managers in achieving success at work shall attempt in this presentation, to x-ray the challenges of modern professional secretary/office managers in achieving success at work though a simple but pragmatic SWOTT Analysis; where S stands for Strength; W for Weakness; O for Opportunities; T for Threats and; the last T for Trends. A curious mind at this juncture is wont to ask who a Professional Secretary is.

The Professional Secretary

The Professional Secretaries International (PSI) defines a secretary as an executive assistant who has mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative and judgement and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority. From this definition, we can see that although various office workers perform some facets of secretarial work, but not all office workers are secretaries. Secretaries have more responsibility for their work. A Professional Secretary performs tasks similar to an executive or administrative assistant. Generally, a Professional Secretary coordinates the daily routines of an office and organizes the office schedules and paper work. A secretary's duties require analysis of the situation, judgement, technical knowledge and creativity. And because a secretary's responsibilities are more complex than entry-level responsibilities, additional on-the-job experience and/or education is required. The number and type of activities secretaries are assigned depend on whether they are generalists (multifunctional secretaries) or specialists (such as legal or word processing secretaries). Secretaries use many different talents and work with many different people. As an office professional, the secretary has the responsibility to organize the work flow so that the employer will feel that everything is under control, with all projects completed when needed. Modern professional secretaries are now referred to as office managers by some people because of their activities, education, skill acquisition, knowledge and even expectations from their bosses, customers, clients and even the general public. Whether called a secretary, a manager or a personal assistant, a professional secretary is no more the man or woman sitting behind the typewriter, taking shorthand dictations and attending to visitors. Office management

is now more concerned with office occupations or the exhibition or use of skills, aptitudes, attitudes and knowledge for carrying out successfully the functions of the office. (Ohakwe 2001). The office manager who is at the centre of information has the duty of providing comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date information promptly to enable them take quality management decisions. Now and ever changing Technology in offices has evolved the functions of the office to rely on different types of improved and standardized equipment. They have also devised varied stages and concepts for effective operators and relationship within and outside the organisation. Despite the technologically inclined operators and activities of modern secretaries, many old duties and activities are still part of them. While submitting that the term 'Professional Secretary' is somewhat outdated and has been replaced with other job titles, such as administrative assistant or executive assistant, the International Association of Administrative Professionals (www.iaap-hg.org) highlighted the essential duties of Professional Secretaries as follows:

i. Professional Secretary – Phone Calls and Visitors

A Professional Secretary acts as a gateway between visitors, callers and other workers in the office. The Professional Secretary knows enough about the office he or she works in to answer inquiries about the specifics of the office. He or she screens visitors and phone calls and arranges callbacks or appointments. A Professional Secretary may also need to find back-up material related to the caller or visitor to prepare his or her boss to talk about different issues with different people. He or she may also prepare a meeting area for visitors and take care of any requested amenities. On the phone, a Professional Secretary may be responsible for conducting phone surveys or inquiring after information.

ii. Professional Secretary – Other Communication

In addition to answering the phone and helping visitors, a Professional Secretary must handle written communications and the mail, as well as inter-office communications. A Professional Secretary generally sorts the mail for the boss or the office, prioritizing it and throwing out junk mail. Sometimes he or she will be responsible for replying to the banal correspondence by preparing responses for the boss's signature. A Professional Secretary also prioritizes work based on deadlines and communication with others in the office.

iii. Professional Secretary – Appointments and Meetings

A Professional Secretary not only maintains a boss's schedule, but also prepares the boss for meetings and appointments. The Professional Secretary keeps a calendar of the boss's appointments as well as all meetings within the office and determines what events the boss needs to attend. She arranges his or her employer's commitments to avoid overlaps and to make sure that the boss has enough time to prepare for such commitments. Often times, the Professional Secretary prepares an agenda for meetings, arranges for the facilities and amenities and records the discourse in the meeting.

iv. Professional Secretary – Other Responsibilities

A Professional Secretary has many duties, ranging from priority duties to routine duties. Other responsibilities of a Professional Secretary may include:

- * Supervising other clerical staff
- * Keeping an updated mail and phone directory
- * Ordering office supplies when needed
- * Organizing files and other data

SWOTT ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL SECRETARIAL PRACTICE

➤ **Strength**

Secretaries have always been indispensable individuals in all types of organizations, for they have relieved countless executives of detail and cut red tape for customers and employees. The traditional role of a secretary was to support an executive, by helping to manage his schedules, handle visitors and callers, and produce document and communications (Mugisha, 2009). In recent times however, the nature of secretarial work has changed drastically, with more professional managers keying in their own correspondences and more files being stored electronically. As the reliance on technology continues to expand in offices, the role of the office professional has greatly evolved. With office automation and organizational restructuring, secretaries are increasingly assuming responsibilities once reserved for managerial and professional staff. In spite of these changes, however, the core responsibilities for secretaries and administrative assistants have remained much the same: performing and coordinating an office's administrative activities and storing, retrieving, and integrating information for dissemination to staff and clients. Secretaries, in today's occupational setting, are doing more professional work. They are involved in training, supervision, desktop publishing, information management and research. They are involved with equipment purchase and maintenance, customer service, project management, public relations and supervision of outside vendors.

➤ **Weakness**

One key area of secretarial practice and skill in Nigeria, especially in the public service, that is being unconsciously neglected is the use of shorthand. Secretarial Skills: Although a secretary is required to possess a good shorthand and typewriting skills, good knowledge of secretarial duties and communication skills, the occupational dynamics in the Public Sector has greatly reduced the daily use of shorthand skills, as more managers are getting involved in the word-processing of tin the Public Sector has greatly reduced the daily use of shorthand skills, as more managers are getting involved in the word-processing of their document. Without prejudice to the foregoing, the use of shorthand by secretaries rather than go into extinction; has been confirmed to be complimentary to e-administration and efficient secretarial practice internationally. It saves time, serves as a testimonial of secretarial competence and provides a veritable medium of expression that qualifies secretarial practice as a unique and universally accepted profession similar to medical practice. Suffice to note that the use of shorthand also enable the Professional Secretary to effectively codify information in a safe medium for diligent management and confidentiality. In succinct terms, a professional secretary that is deficient in the knowledge and use of shorthand is at best a glorified Typist. Regrettably so, that many secretaries in the public sector fall into this category; not because they could not know or use shorthand in their daily practice, but because they have imbibe the limiting culture of doing daily only the needful, which does not require the application of shorthand.

➤ **Opportunities**

Far from being an endangered profession, secretaries are employed in organizations of every type. Around 90 percent are employed in service-providing industries, ranging from education and healthcare to government and retail trade. Most of the rest work for firms engaged in manufacturing or construction. The Occupational Outlook Handbook (2010-11

Edition) noted that secretaries and administrative assistants held about 4.3 million jobs in 2008, ranking it among the largest occupations in the U.S. economy.

The following tabulation shows the distribution of employment by secretarial specialty:

✚ Secretaries, except legal, medical, and executive	-	2,020,000
✚ Executive secretaries and administrative assistants	-	1,594,400
✚ Medical secretaries	-	471,100
✚ Legal secretaries	-	262,600

Employment is projected to grow about as fast as the average. Secretaries and administrative assistants will have among the largest number of job openings due to growth and the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave this occupation. Opportunities would however be best for applicants with extensive knowledge of computer software applications. Employment of secretaries and administrative assistants is expected to increase by 11 percent, which is about as fast as the average for all occupations, between 2008 and 2018. Projected employment varies by occupational specialty. (Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 Edition).

➤ **Trends**

Developments in office technology are certain to continue. Many secretarial duties are of personal and interactive nature and are not easily automated. Responsibilities such as planning conferences, working with clients, and instructing staff require tact and communication skills, which technology cannot substitute. Secretaries nowadays use a variety of office equipment, such as fax machines, photocopiers, scanners, videoconferencing and telephone systems. In addition, secretaries often use computers to do tasks previously handled by managers and professionals; they create spreadsheets, compose correspondence, manage databases, and create presentations, reports, and documents using desktop publishing software and digital graphics. They may also negotiate with vendors, maintain and examine leased equipment, purchase supplies, manage areas such as stockrooms or corporate libraries, and retrieve data from various sources. At the same time, managers and professionals have assumed many tasks traditionally assigned to secretaries and administrative assistants, such as keyboarding and answering the telephone. Because secretaries do less dictation and word processing, they now have time to support more members of the executive staff. In a number of organizations, secretaries work in teams to work flexibly and share their expertise. Many secretaries and administrative assistants provide training and orientation for new staff, conduct research on the Internet, and operate and troubleshoot new office technologies. It is projected that increasing office automation and organizational restructuring will continue to make secretaries and administrative assistants more productive in coming years. Computers, e-mail, scanners, and voice message system will allow secretaries and administrative assistants to accomplish more in the same amount of time.

➤ **Threats and Challenges**

I wish to note that the use of automated equipment is also changing the face and distribution of work in many offices. In some cases, traditional secretarial duties as typing, filing, photocopying, and book-keeping are being done by clerks in other departments or by the professionals themselves. For example, professionals and managers increasingly do their own word processing and data entry, and handle much of

their own correspondence. In some law and medical offices, para-legals and medical assistants are assuming some tasks formerly done by secretaries. Also, many small and medium-sized organisations are out-sourcing key administrative functions, such as data entry, book-keeping, and internet research, to virtual assistants. Despite various research studies and a far larger quantity of speculations on the impact of new office technology, there has been a lack of empirical evidence focusing on the secretaries' working patterns, interactions, and communication as well as how new office technology has changed the experience of work in the culture of offices. Halimatun Khalid (2000) in a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield, Malaysia examined the effects of new office technology on secretaries' attitudes and training in the United Kingdom and Malaysia. The main findings of the research are as follows:

- * Whilst significant cultural changes are subtle and complex, there are certain shifts which stand out as particularly important. Both managers and secretaries are using new office technology and software packages, regardless of the size of organizations. They both access almost the same information, indicating a possible breakdown in the traditional hierarchical structure of management.
- * As secretaries have access to, and are able to manipulate information, they are becoming more powerful. There are no significant differences in using new office technology because of gender and age. Secretaries are more proactive with new roles and responsibilities.
- * The study found that secretaries both exhibit more positive attitudes toward new office technology and welcome the changes. The results also demonstrated that both internal and external communication has increased with electronic communication. The secretaries are able to communicate with all levels of employees.
- * The study found that personal interactions are extensive as secretaries not only prefer personal contacts but find the technology becomes a means of making this happen.
- * The findings also suggest that both formal and informal training are more extensive than in the past due to the ever-changing technology, but especially in Malaysia more informal training is utilised to improve the understanding of the technology.
- * Although there are many similarities between the findings in two different countries, there are some differences due to cultural backgrounds.

➤ **THE PROFESSIONAL SECRETARY AND ETHICAL CONCERNS**

This presentation considers it expedient at this juncture, to appreciate the ethical demands on the Professional Secretary. These involve the application of ethical values such as: integrity, fairness, respect and openness in one's behaviour. It relates to how the Secretary develops, processes and distributes information, to relations and interactions with clients both internal and external and the wider society. Because of their many different responsibilities, Professional Secretaries should both be able to multitask and prioritize tasks well. Strong communication, interpersonal, organization and management skills are also critical for a Professional Secretary career. Since many tasks required of a Professional Secretary are performed on computer, Professional Secretaries should be comfortable with computers and word processing software.

Some of the ethical demands on the Professional Secretary include:

1. **Flexibility and Adaptability:** A good secretary must be able to work in any organization by adapting to the situation he finds himself.
2. **Poise:** The Professional Secretary should be calm and poised always.
3. **Intuitiveness:** The ability to develop one's mind to visualize and sense things. It requires immediate recognition of and sharp insight into things. The Secretary should develop a keen eye for error detection in his work and draw the attention of his boss to it.
4. **Tact:** You need tact in what you do or say so that you do not offend your boss, co-workers and customers. The Secretary should be able to communicate with all people and should be able to keep the organization's secrets secret.
5. **Punctuality:** A good Secretary should be regular and punctual at work.
6. **Courtesy:** The Secretary should observe the basic codes of human relations such as 'Good morning', 'Good day', 'Please', 'Thank you'.
7. **Due Diligence:** Means avoidance of mistakes or typographical errors and paying attention to details. This is an important asset of a secretary in order to produce mailable document.
8. **Being proactive:** The secretary should be able to take necessary prior action to forestall its happening. The secretary should use her initiative and discretion in doing the job without waiting for the boss. She should always think of improving herself and her job.
9. **Self-confidence:** Fear causes tensions and affects our emotional stability negatively as well as our self-confidence. You should learn to control your emotions and develop your self-confidence.
10. **Good Telephone Personality:** Telephone communication requires good voice, pleasant manner and friendly attitude.
11. **Appearance:** The secretary should be neat and decently dressed always.
12. **Organizational skills:** These skills are required in order to achieve organizational objectives.
13. **Confidentiality:** The security of the office and equipment falls within the 'corporate schedule' of the secretary. Consequently, one of the ethical core values which facilitate the success of the professional secretary is confidentiality.
14. **Leadership:** The leadership competence of the secretary is usually required for the effective management of co-workers and observance of decorum in the office.
15. **Capacity-building:** Through peer-review mechanisms, attendance at professional workshops and conferences, and membership of professional associations, like: National Association of Professional Secretarial Staff of Nigeria (NAPSSON), International Association of Administrative Professional (IAAP) e.t.c.
16. **Computer Competencies:** Your knowledge of the computer will not be an asset to your organization, until it adds value, hence the secretary needs to move from the level of computer appreciation to being computer-proficient.

➤ **THE PROFESSIONAL SECRETARY AND UNETHICAL PRACTICES**

Let me at this juncture highlight from a dialectical perspective, some of the unethical practices of the modern professional secretaries in Nigeria as follows:

1. Some entrants into the secretarial profession only did so as a means of last resort for waged employment and not out of interest; hence the passion for excellence is lacking.

2. Communication deficiencies, usually as a result of the porous basic foundation in English usage.
3. Low confidence level.
4. Poor organizational ability.
5. Unlawful trading in offices during corporate hours.
6. Improper delineation of hierarchy and command structure that often create conflicts between the professional secretary and other support staff like: secretarial assistants, clerical officers etc.
7. Information diarrhoea/Leakage/Mismanagement.
8. Gossip/Rumour mongering.
9. Lateness/Absenteeism (A.W.O.L).
10. Erroneous notion of the professional secretary's career as being meant solely for females.
11. Promotion above level of competence (Peter's Principle)/Low productivity.
12. Poor human relations.
13. Quarrelling.
14. Un-ending discussion.
15. Improper dressing.
16. Poor listening technique.
17. Poor leadership and followership styles.

Succeeding At Modern Offices

For a secretary to achieve success at work is a challenge which must be overcome in order to remain on the job and at the same time be relevant to the job and office. Brent D. Ruben and Jogelyn De Anglis listed out the following as competencies and skills needed by secretaries in workplace.

Personal Competencies

1. **Positive Attitude:** A positive attitude in relation to managing work relationships and coping with change. This can be referred to as "can do" attitude and approaching work with enthusiasm.
2. **Self Motivation:** Self motivation refers to an internal drive to get things done. This quality is associated with a positive attitude.
3. **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Being flexible to and adapting well to change, whether it be in regard to position changes, changes in responsibility, or general organizational reorganization.
4. **Integrity:** Honesty, especially as it applies to interpersonal dealings.
5. **Active Learner:** Willingness to continue to learning process on the job. Employers are looking for candidates who want to grow their knowledge-base for themselves, and to help the company.
6. **Problem Solving:** The skill to resolve issues, and identify solutions to problems. The ability to understand a company's problem areas and to actively seek solutions to address the problems.
7. **Decision Making Ability:** Fact-based decision making, which includes the skill to assess potential decisions based on facts, not assumptions.
8. **Analytic/Cognitive Ability:** The skill to thinking analytically.

9. **GPA/Academic Achievement:** Grade point averages (GPA) refer to the overall grade point, with the higher the GPA being more desirable. An average of 3.0 or above is sought. GPA has been positively correlated to potential success on the job. Other academic achievements include academic awards and scholarships.
10. **Loyalty:** Commitment to the job and organization.

Communication Competencies

1. **Communication, Written and Oral:** Competency in effectively articulating ideas in both written and oral formats.
2. **Public Speaking:** Oral communication skills, public speaking skills, and presentation skills. Presenting information clearly to groups.
3. **Listening Skills:** This skill refers to the individual as an "active listener". Some articles indicated that a good listener is one who repeats back to the speaker the essence of what they are saying to make sure that the meaning is understood.
4. **Social Skills:** Getting along with others, participation in the creation of positive working relationships. This term is linked to team/group skills.
5. **Team/Group Skills:** Skills to work well in a team or group on projects and jobs. Drawing on combined strengths, including leadership ability and social skills, and the ability to be one of many who collaborate to get the job done.
6. **Networking:** Skills to make connections between people, in offices or departments. This skill may be more important as it relates to company size.

Organizational Competencies

1. **Organization Skills:** Managing tasks and projects, and files well.
2. **Leadership/Management Skills:** Skills to manage other people to get results and taking the initiative.
3. **Meeting Skills:** The skill to successfully run meetings and participate in meetings, which is also connected to social skills and team/group skills.
4. **Systems Perspective:** This quality defines the individual as working within a broader system, and employers are seeking candidates who acknowledge that they are not working alone, but are part of a bigger system, part of the company as a whole.
5. **Computer Skills:** The skill to use a computer competently is a quality sought by employers. This includes knowledge of MAC/PC and software packages. Other technical skills that employers mentioned included knowledge of photocopiers, fax machines and other office equipment.
6. **Economics/Statistics:** Business courses in economics and/or statistics.
7. **Quality Approach Knowledge:** The understanding of work as a process. Several authors indicated that TQM knowledge is desired, since companies are looking to offer quality services and products, and analyze processes for improvement.
8. **Work Experience:** Through an internship, externship, co-ops or other employment, companies seek those who possess some work experience. This quality is paired with Business Understanding.
9. **Customer Orientation:** The skill related to both social skills and problem solving ability. The skill to relate to people/clients/customers, and address concerns or

issues in a positive way. This skill has been more closely identified with smaller organizations (those of 200 employees or less).

10. **Extra-Curricula Activities:** These activities are those that a new graduate may have been involved in outside of class while attending college.
11. **Business Understanding:** Relating to a business environment and its processes. This kind of understanding would be gained through some sort of prior work experience.

International/Intercultural Competencies

1. **Cross-Cultural Competency:** The skill to deal with others unlike themselves and to do so with a positive attitude. Since some individuals may not have extensive experience in dealing with diverse people, this trait in a new graduate is viewed positively by employers.
2. **International Knowledge:** A basic understanding of international business workings.
3. **Second Language:** Some employers are seeking candidates with skills in other languages.
4. **(International) Management:** Business course in management or international management.
5. **(International) Marketing:** Business course in marketing or international marketing.
6. **(International) Trade Theory:** Business course in trade theory or international trade theory.
7. **(International) Human Resources:** Business course in human resources or international human resources.

Domain Competencies

1. **Basic Business Courses:** Some business courses were identified as being useful for new graduates to have taken. Certain undergraduate business college courses were valued because they provided the new graduate with some basic knowledge. Often articles pointed out that a new employee would be taught what they did not know and that sometimes prior knowledge (as gained through such classes) may not be applicable.
2. **Domain Knowledge:** Reflects the knowledge that a person gained through their undergraduate major. Domain knowledge is the one area of concentrated skills/ability gained through college education.
3. **Accounting:** Business or management course in accounting.

Others

1. **Strategy:** Business or management course in strategy.
2. **College Expense:** The contribution to paying for some, or all, of the educational cost.

CONCLUSION

In these ever changing technologically implied offices, modern secretaries/office managers need to be more concerned with updating their skills, knowledge of the organization, modern equipment, modern office technology, personnel psychology and

acquiring more useful experiences through trainings, conferences, intimating themselves with the global office world through the internet etc.

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