



Enhancing the relevance of secretarial staff in the acquisition of office technology and management skills in the polytechnic system

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Abstract

It is a well-established fact that advances in technology has affected different professions with a view to meet global trends in higher productivity. Considering the highly competitive nature of today's world of work driven by information and communications technology and coupled with the paucity of employment opportunities in Nigeria, secretarial staff need to value their positions and do whatever it takes to avoid becoming irrelevant and being replaced. Secretarial staff irrespective of their ranks and experiences, should as a matter of urgency acquire the necessary skills to enhance their relevance to accelerate their success in the workplace. Despite research studies on the impact of this technology, there has been a lack of empirical evidence on secretaries working patterns, interactions and communication, and specifically how office technology and management skills has changed working practices in the polytechnic systems. The sample of this study comprised secretaries and managers in Kaura Namodapolytechnic. The main findings revealed that sound knowledge of office technology and management skills increase the performance of the secretary for organizational growth. The findings also showed that the work of a secretary goes far beyond typing and taking down dictation. It has been noted that not everybody can perform the work of a secretary. It requires certain professional qualities such as diplomacy; tactfulness, initiative etc. and no executive can function well without a secretary.

Keywords: Secretarial staff, office technology and management skills, Polytechnic system

1. Introduction

Secretarial staff have been described as the key personnel concerned with office information processing (Nwosu, 2000, Obayi, 2009, Ezenwa for & Okeke 2012) ^[22, 24, 14]. The poly technicsystem deals with information processing to a very great extent and employs different categories of secretarial staff for the functions. The work of a secretary is very essential in any business organization. The smooth and efficient working of the organization depends in part upon the secretary. Secretarial training requires constant up-date of knowledge, skills and abilities to continue on the job. A trained secretary exercises initiative, and good judgment to make decision within the scope of assigned authority. The secretarial staff position in an office varies according to the size of the office. No office can function without a secretarial staff. Heads of units/sections would be faced with too much to contend with as no meaningful work can be done with visitors, customers, clients and even staff who want to see an executive, who have no secretarial staff to attend to these people, there would be chaos (Imolorhe, 2006) ^[17]. The secretarial staff in an organization or industry occupies an important place because he/she is the true ambassador of the organization where he/she works. The secretarial work is the link between the employer and the customer/public.

New technology has captured the secretarial profession and made it challenging. With this advancement of technology, the use of the computer and software programmes facilitates the work of the professional secretary. These include the use of machines such as printer, fax, pen drive, cell phones, photo copier, telex and internet. These requisite knowledge and skills make the position of the secretary rather challenging. However,

these new developments brought by technological challenges require even more knowledge and skills beyond being a professional secretary. For the secretary to be abreast with the changing times, face the challenges and overcome the old ways of doing things she or he needs training requirements in recent times to help meet organizational objectives.

2. Literature Review

Secretarial training requires constant up-date of knowledge, skills and abilities to continue on the job. A trained secretary exercises initiative, and good judgment to make decision within the cope of assigned authority. The secretarial staff position in an office varies according to the size of the office. As noted by (Edwin, 2008) ^[12], the roles of secretaries in modern-day times have changed enormously from the traditional roles. The traditional roles include typewriting and shorthand dictation, answering of telephone calls and processing of mails. Secretarial staff have access to modern office technology such as the internet, intercom and fax. These technologies make work much easier. Dulek and Fielden (1999) ^[10] also noted that it is easier to send messages using telex, electronic mails, fax and telephones. He noted that the era of computers and information technology helps users to write and edit and send memos, letters and reports. According to Duniya (2011) ^[11], modern day offices are equipped with technologically sophisticated gadgets that informs accuracy and efficiency of work output. Nonye (2013) ^[21] researching into the need for capacity building of secretaries in modern office technology concluded that secretaries should be abreast of the use of modern office technology and

recommended the need for periodic training programmes to be organized for secretaries to update their knowledge on modern office skills. As noted by Chukwumezie (2002) ^[8] the skills needed by secretaries to manage information on the internet are keyboarding skills, grammatical and communication skills, computer fluency, operating the telephone and surfing the web. The rest are browsing the net offline and online and downloading and uploading the software. With modern office skills, words, sentences and paragraphs are manipulated. This is made possible using word processor. This makes possible all range of editing options applicable. This makes possibilities for deleting and inserting sentences before they are printed. Designing of documents, filling of forms, retrieving information and finally printing have become simplified tasks with the use of word processors (Agomuo, 2005; Azuka, 2007 and Nwosu, 2002) ^[1, 7, 21].

2.1 Information and communication technology and secretarial staff productivity

The advent of information and communication technology has revolutionized secretarial functions and the office. Secretarial functions such as tying, mailing a letter that usually takes minutes or hours has to be carried out in seconds with high speed, accuracy and perfection, thus, secretary has to be well prepared to meet the present challenges and the challenges of the future in a modern office. For many years, series of modification have been taking place in all aspect of human life that included office technologies (Davenport, 2013) ^[9]. According to Margaret and Pac (2009) ^[18] for an office to run smoothly, sound and correct information are necessary for decision-making. In organizations, an effective way to improve productivity is to raise the level of information technology. Management support plays a vital role, office managers play a critical role in planning, controlling, coordinating and leading their employees in businesses, to ensure that the right technologies are brought into the organization. According to Ezenwafor and Okeke (2012) ^[14], secretarial staff consist of staff of different nomenclatures and levels such as confidential/personal secretaries, stenographers, typists and computer operators whose duties revolve around different stages and functions undertaking in an office information processing. Obayi (2009) ^[24] defined secretarial staff as office employees who deal with correspondence, keep records and assist supervisors to ensure progress of their organizations. Consequently, Nwosu (2000) ^[22] and Ezenwafor (2009) ^[23] asserted that secretarial staff are the live wire or blood stream of every organization. The implication of this assertion is that no office can run efficiently and effectively without secretarial staff who understand and play their roles actively. A study conducted by Azih (2013) ^[6] emphasizes the need for building secretaries' capacity in modern office technology. He mentioned that secretaries should be abreast of the importance and use of modern office technology, and recommended the need for training program to be organized periodically for secretaries to update their knowledge on modern office skills. Azih (2013) ^[6] also showed that training is important in complementing the use of modern office technology. He mentioned that secretaries and managers perform various office duties in their organization, and their ability to apply some of these modern office

technologies leads to efficiency in the performance of their assigned roles. The necessary office technology equipment should be provided in every organization, and training and retraining program should be organized for secretaries in every organization for occupational relevance.

2.2 Modern office technology

Today's secretaries are exposed to office technology including the internet that make work much easier and knowledge more accessible (Edwin, 2008) ^[12]. It is now easier to send messages by telex, electronic mails (e-mails), fax and telephones. Other office gadgets available to the secretary are photo-copy machines, duplicating machines, dictating machines, printers, among others. This is the era of computers and information technology which has become an enabler of greater convenience. The most popular types of computer software programme are word processing, which help the user to write and edit memos, letters and reports, data management programmes or databases, which help the user-secretary to use long lists of data and spreadsheet programmes, which handle tables and numbers (Dulek and Fielden, 1999) ^[10]. Secretaries now have many technologically advanced office gadgets to ease their jobs and enhance proficiency and productivity leading to improved access to goods and services globally (Akpomi, 2003; Anyakoha, 2002; Wofersohn, 2001) ^[2, 5]. Modern office technological gadgets such as smart-phones, faster windows operating systems e.g., Windows 7 and 8), laptops and tablets are being used by many managers and are helpful in terms of making their work very flexible and easy. Hritzuk and Jones (2014) ^[16] state that we live in an era of tablets, phones and computers, and IT has become an enabler for greater convenience. Users can access the most popular types of computer software programs, like word processing programs which help with the writing and editing of letters and reports, and data management programs which help us to work with long lists of data and spread sheets every day on our tablets, smart phones and laptops, thus, making some management tasks easier (Hritzuk and Jones, 2014) ^[16].

2.3 The Polytechnic system

A system is a set of interconnected or interrelated parts forming a complex whole (Robinson & Davidson, 1999) ^[25]. In simpler terms, a system is a collection of different components each performing a specific function but interdependently with other sub-systems for the realization of organizational goals and objectives. The polytechnic system consists of students from different parts of a nation, as well as of different age groups, cultures, languages and disciplines. It also consists of both academic and non academic staff of different nomenclatures, ranks, ethnicity, cultures, age brackets, educational levels and personality traits. Each of the two broad groups that make up the polytechnic system (students and staff) must accommodate and cooperate with others within and between in order to realize the objectives of the institution. The staff should demonstrate, in handling students and their matters, that they cannot be there without students and students should equally exhibit a clear understanding of the fact that they cannot be there without the staff (Ezenwafor&Okeke, 2012) ^[23].

2.4 Roles of Secretarial Staff in a polytechnic

A secretary is a professional who has a code of ethics which must be adhered to jealously. The secretary interacts with people and has the first contact with the visitors to the organisation. Ezenwa for (2011) ^[13] posited that functions of secretarial staff in a polytechnic cover production of different types of documents for the office, lecturers and students, proofreading the document for accuracy, disseminating, storing (traditionally or electronically) and retrieving stored documents when needed. Consequently, Ezenwafor and Okeke (2012) ^[14] affirmed that secretarial staff are the key personnel involved in different stages of data and information processing in the polytechnic. Thus the roles of secretarial staff in a polytechnic can be grouped under:

(a) Data generation or collection

In the past, data collection was heavy and time consuming as it involved flipping through pages of bulky files in the office, travelling for personal contact and search and letter writing. Today, the process of data generation is reduced to pressing some buttons or keys of ICT hardware components or clicking options in a software component. Such data could be courses taken by individual or group of students, scores of individual or group of students in the courses taken, the credit load for each course, etc. Sometimes needed data could be sourced promptly and effortlessly from other institutions or organizations via the internet with same process of pressing buttons or clicking options of different ICT hardware and software components.

(b) Data processing and interpretation

Some members of the polytechnic secretarial staff have not been able to appreciate their role in data processing and interpretation because of their little idea that the function only has to do with research. When generated data are not properly analyzed and interpreted, they serve no useful purpose. Data analysis and interpretation do not always involve statistical tools as some times simple mathematical tools and common sense are sufficient. Polytechnic secretarial staff should prepare and readily go beyond the collection of data which they keep for some specialists to analyze and interpret to handle the latter as further assistance to their supervisors and employers.

(c) Information and office management

The information management role covers creation of all types of documents, dissemination of the documents, storing, retrieval of stored documents and modification of existing documents as new information becomes available. The current trend in information management, however, involves the use of technological resources which every secretarial staff should endeavour to become very conversant with in order to discharge the roles effectively. ♦

2.5 Competencies needed by polytechnic secretarial staff for enhanced relevance

The instrument essential to improving productivity are becoming more and more complex with each new generation and, therefore, require more knowledge and training to get the most out of them. Egbokhare (2011) remarked that some of the local realities of our time are different types of reforms which have led to retrenchment or down-sizing or right-sizing in both

private and public sectors, employees who lost their jobs in the exercise are the ones who have become obsolete either because technology or knowledge has left the behind since, in the present knowledge economy, what a person knows is more important than who the person is or where he/she lives. Ezenwafor and Okeke (2011) ^[14] reported that confidential secretaries need competencies for effective performance in today's office.

▪ Secretarial competencies

These include keyboarding ability (speed and accuracy), ability to create mail able documents with effective display and format, ability to proof read and edit documents, ability to file and promptly retrieve documents from the file, ability to keep track of files, ability to suitably handle correspondence, ability to draft routine letters, ability to clerk meetings and produce suitable minutes, among others (Njoku 2000 &Obayi, 2009) ^[6, 9].

▪ Office technology management competencies

Office technology covers all electronic equipment and facilities that facilitate office information processing as well as the procedures adopted in utilizing them. The office technology management competencies needed by polytechnic secretarial staff include ability to connect hardware components, ability to boot and shut down computer, ability to effectively use input devices, ability to connect and use printer and relevant equipment for duplication, ability to use secondary storage devices, ability to use the internet for data collection and e-mailing, ability to prevent viral infection and generally care for the computer and other technological equipment, ability to use software such as word processor, spread sheet and data-base management, among others.

▪ Communication competencies

Nnabuife (2009) ^[10] posited that communication plays an invaluable role both within and outside the organization towards goal accomplishment to facilitate achievement or furtherance of an organization's objectives. the ability to understand the official language, ability to use oral communication effectively, ability to effectively use written communication, ability to spell words correctly in written communication, ability to pronounce words correctly and clearly in oral communication, ability to use suitable gestures to communicate, ability to communicate with facial expressions, ability to communicate orally with adequate tone and ability to write legibly and logically in written communication, among others.

Management competencies

Polytechnic secretarial staff need management competencies such as the ability to protect office documents from loss or willful destruction, ability to properly handle and adequately maintain their work equipment and facilities, ability to manage the work environment by properly arranging furniture, equipment, etc., ability to maintain different items of office furniture, ability to select suitable equipment and other devices for work, ability to procure relevant office stationery and supplies, ability to suitably use office hours and ability to maintain confidentiality of office records, ability to organize personal efforts and energy as well as those of subordinates and ability to persistently seek solutions to problems, among others.

▪ **Personality competencies**

Polytechnic secretarial staff constantly relate with different individuals and groups of individuals in the course of discharging their functions and need personality competencies for good success. Such personality competencies include ability to always maintain good appearance, ability to demonstrate team spirit, ability to speak and deal truthfully at all times, ability to maintain cheerfulness and be approachable, ability to tolerate other people, ability to innovate workable ideas and processes, ability to use initiative, ability to apply self-control at all times, ability to respect superiors and others, ability to persistently work even when extra time is needed and ability to be polite all the time, among others.

▪ **Human relations competencies**

For polytechnic secretarial staff, needed human relations competencies for enhanced relevance include ability to understand other people, ability to treat students as important members of the university community or system, ability for team work, ability to protect the interest of the supervisor, ability to show respect to the supervisor at all times, ability to get along with others, ability to be open and sociable, ability to be selfless, ability to listen and hear other people's point of view, etc.

3. Conclusion

Office Technology and Management is a major skilled area which is highly inclined to assist in achieving the demands of modern workplace and creating self employment. The availability and use of modern office equipment will inevitably affect the activities and output of the secretary in offices and business organizations. Office managers today use modern office technologies every day and find them to be very helpful. Managers need the help of office technologies to improve their communication standards and to extend their working hours. This paper has highlighted the the relevant competencies for effective duty performance in today's office among polytechnic secretarial staff and emphasized the need for them all to enhance their relevance in order not just to retain their jobs but to contribute maximally to the achievement of the goals and objectives of the polytechnic and enjoy job satisfaction and self fulfillment.

4. Recommendations

From the conclusion drawn, the following recommendations are proffered

- Secretarial staff (irrespective of rank and experience) should pursue enhanced relevance in their duty performance by pursuing the acquisition of the highlighted competencies. Management of the polytechnic should provide in service-training opportunities for their secretarial staff as well as support them in their up-grading and updating endeavors for mutual benefits.
- Secretaries should be flexible and adapt to changes as they come and keep abreast of innovations in the office machines, organization, attitude and responsibilities. Secretaries are encouraged to tackle challenges through assignment of new responsibilities.

- The organizations should furnish the secretary's office with necessary equipment to enhance their effectiveness e.g. computers, printers, photocopy machine, scanner, etc.

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