

The Indispensable Secretary

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ABSTRACT A secretary is an assistant to an executive. He is trained to type and perform many office duties. He possesses personal and business attributes. He guards his professional ethics of confidentiality, superb appearance and absolute loyalty. There are legal, medical and bi-lingual specialists in their own way. The personal attributes of a secretary include adaptability and self-confidence while his business attributes include secretarial skills and responsibility. The employment of new technologies in the office threatens the secretary. The secretaries are jittery and apprehensive about their jobs. The executive thinks he can use the computer himself and thus not needing the secretary. This is so because the modern laptop does not require the executive to know keyboarding because he can talk to or write on the screen and everything would be typed. He can employ internet teleconferencing facilities for meetings. All these notwithstanding, the secretary is indispensable. This is because the executive needs an assistant who invariably must be the secretary who is trained in receiving visitors, answering and making telephone calls when the executive is busy on very important engagements. What the secretary needs in order to keep his job is to be abreast of the new technologies. He should continually undergo retraining in secretarial or office skills and communication skills.

INTRODUCTION

There is apprehension in offices by secretaries as to what is their fate due to inventions and innovations in modern technologies. The computer has been invented to do many things that are hitherto done by the secretary. A chief executive can stay in his office or room to make flight and hotel reservations. He can manage information. He does not need any knowledge of keyboard to input his information. He can now use a pen to input his letter or document on the computer and with internet facility and with efficient server he can send his mail and receive reply. He can store, edit, retrieve and print his information.

However, the secretary's roles and personal attributes still make him somebody to reckon with in the office and in the organization.

This paper will focus on who a secretary is, types of secretary, secretary's nomenclature, his personal and business attributes, professional code of ethics, the secretary's fear of new technologies, his fear is allayed and why a secretary is indispensable. A conclusion is given at the end.

WHO IS A SECRETARY

The word Secretary has been defined variously by different authors and employers. Some of these definitions are:

Onifade (2004) defined a Secretary as "An

assistant to an executive, possessing mastery of office skills and ability, assumes responsibility without direct supervision, who displays initiative, exercises judgment, and makes decisions within the scope of her authority." A Secretary is the person who performs the myriad of daily chores that nibble away at an executive's time. "A Secretary as the principal administrative support position in an office increases the effectiveness of program staff by coordinating the paper flow of the office and carrying out the day-to-day administrative support activities required to accomplish the work of the organization." (<http://www.cs.state.ny.us/tsplan/tsp>) Talking about Etymology, "A secretary's main purpose is to; bring food to meetings, especially ice cream and hot chocolate. The term is derived from the [Latin] word *secernere* "to distinguish" or "to set apart," the passive participle (*secretum*) meaning "have been set apart," with the eventual connotation of something private or confidential. A *secretarius* was a person, therefore, overseeing business confidentially, usually for a powerful individual (a king, pope, etc.). (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/secretary>). "A Secretary is either an administrative assistant in business office administration, or a certain type of mid or high-level governmental position, such as a Secretary of State."

Having expressed a few shades of opinion about who a secretary is, the ingredients that must be contained in explaining who a secretary

is should include – confidentiality (secrets), assistance or support or help, professional code of ethics, typing skill and communication skill. A Secretary should be able to keep secrets of the organization and that of his boss. His role is principally that of support, assistance or help. He carries out activities assigned to him by his executive or takes initiative which is within his authority and responsibility. A secretary is a professional who has some code of ethics which he should guard jealously. He should be dynamic and versatile because he works in an environment that is not static. He should be ready to accept change and challenges of the office and the world of work. His title changes in conformity with his responsibilities. For example a legal secretary has some professional responsibilities different from those of a medical secretary. The computer's functions now change. You can now talk or use pen to write on the computer and what you say or write is typed devoid the use of the keyboard. What an amazing innovation in the world of modern office technology! Because the secretary interacts with people as the first contact of people visiting the organization and because of the operation of the telephone for the organization and his boss, his communication skill, human and public relations skill must be super. His appearance must be superb.

TYPES OF SECRETARY

There are two major categories of secretaries. We have the generalist and the specialist secretaries. The generalist secretaries are those who can work in any organization with some limitations when we talk of special or technical terminologies and skills.

The specialist secretaries are the legal, medical, educational, bi-lingual, technological, and government secretaries

Legal Secretary

Wilson (2008) identified the following peculiar characteristics of a legal secretary:

- Must be an expert at time management, juggling many activities and roles at the same time.
- Must possess psychological skills, dealing with many personalities.
- Must possess excellent judgement to make dozens of critical decisions, and

- Must have talents as a travel agent, personal chopper, living calendar, telephone directory, and mentor.

Government Secretary

In the USA, they have Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Interior or the Secretary of Defense. In the United Kingdom they have Parliamentary Private Secretary who is the chief assistant of a Secretary of State or minister of the Crown. In Nigeria, we have Permanent Secretary who is the highest civil servant and there is Secretary to the Federal or State government.

Medical Secretary

A medical secretary works with doctors or pharmacists in hospitals and helps to provide necessary support services.

Bi-Lingual Secretary

A bi-lingual secretary works in foreign embassies and helps to translate correspondence accordingly. Many typewriters have German, French and English characters and only the trained secretary in foreign languages can use them.

Educational and Technological Secretaries

These are secretaries who are very conversant with relevant terminologies and provide necessary support services to their chief executives.

NOMENCLATURE

It has been said many times that a secretary is an assistant who plays a supportive role to his manager or boss or executive. Because of the new roles or responsibilities of the traditional secretary, the modern secretary has such title or nomenclature as office coordinator, executive assistant, office manager and administrative professional.

Personal Attributes of a Secretary

Lauria (1972) highlighted the personal attributes of a secretary as Adaptability, Level headedness, Good observer, Intuitiveness, Flexibility, Tact, Friendliness, Accuracy, Thorough-

ness, Fore-thoughtfulness, Initiative, Self-confidence, Good listener, a good telephone personality and a good appearance.

Business Attributes of a Secretary

Harrison (1979) gave the business attributes of a secretary as Secretarial skills, Organising skills, Efficiency, Reliability, Responsibility, Discretion, Initiative, Tact, Diplomacy, and Punctuality.

Professional Code of Ethics of a Secretary

Tied to the personal and business attribute of a secretary is the professional code of ethics. The ethics of a secretary and office professional are moral principles relating to the job that he will be bound by. These ethics include confidentiality, honesty, loyalty, reliability, responsibility, work unsupervised (meet deadlines, set priorities), cooperativeness, flexibility, multi-skilling (learn as much as possible about computer program and other positions in the firm), and bribery (do not be tempted to accept gifts or favours from internal or external clients just in case there is an underlying reason). (<http://www.secretarialsite.com/secretarialethics.htm>).

DO THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES THREATEN THE SECRETARY'S JOB?

There is no doubt that the modern technologies have thrown some secretaries out of job and the trend will continue for some time.

The innovations and inventions in computer and its facilities have made the office to reduce the number of secretaries. The jobs which the secretaries perform in the office and the errands they run have been taken over by the computer. Let us look at the functions of the computer and its facilities which aided the reduction in the number of secretaries needed in the office. These functions of the computer and its facilities are:

1. Information which is the most important ingredient of the office can be stored, processed and retrieved by the computer facilities.
2. It can be used to produce fast and accurate information.
3. It provides very cheap services.
4. Messages can be sent to many people simultaneously with the use of computer's internet.

5. Security of information is assured.
6. Time, effort and money are saved.
7. Stress is minimized.
8. You can purchase office items online.
9. You can book airline tickets and hotels online.
10. Space is saved as little or no paper is used in the office.

The most recently manufactured laptops accept voice whereby you talk, your message is typed without having any need to use the computer's keyboard. In the same vein, this computer accepts handwriting whereby you can write with a particular pen and all that you write is typed on the screen ready for editing and printing.

An executive who does not know how to type may use either his voice or pen to produce his document. An office that has two or more secretaries can afford to sack one of them and keep just one of them. Looking at these functions, the secretary is not needed to go to the airport to book flight for his boss. Many jobs which were hitherto performed by the secretary are now performed by the computer.

THE SECRETARY'S FEAR OF LOSING HIS JOB IS ALLAYED

Organizations and secretaries are now working to ensure that secretaries are retained in their work stations. What are these efforts that are being employed to ensure that secretaries keep their jobs? Some of these efforts are highlighted below.

1. Secretaries are continually retrained in order to keep abreast of innovations in the office machines, organization, attitude and responsibilities.
2. It is said that "As office automation continues to evolve, retraining and continuing education will remain integral parts of secretarial jobs. Changes in the office environment have increased the demand for secretaries and administrative assistants who are adaptable and versatile."
<http://www.allthingspolitical.org/careers/secretarytraining.htm>
3. Secretaries are encouraged to tackle challenges through assignment of new responsibilities.
4. Secretaries are motivated in order to accept changes in the office. They are introduced to change in the office. They can see reasons for flexibility.
5. Secretaries act as members of a team work and thus making them to participate in some decision-making process.

6. Secretaries are encouraged to use their initiatives in taking some decisions that are beneficial to the organization.
 7. Secretaries are encouraged to be financial and active members of professional organizations.
 8. Secretaries attend workshops, seminars and conferences which may be self-sponsored or organization-sponsored.
 9. Secretaries are encouraged to own a laptop or personal computer.
 10. The organizations have computers which secretaries use for office work.
 11. In order to ensure continued use of the computers, most organizations have standby generator.
 12. Employers look for good customer service and interpersonal skills. Well trained secretary should possess good human and public relations and communication skills.
- There is no doubt that any secretary who works very hard to benefit from the opportunities provided for him through the programs stated above, cannot be afraid of losing his job. If an organization sacks him or refuses to promote him, he can easily get another organization. A secretary is very versatile. If an organization says "No" another one will say "Yes". The "sky is the limit."
6. He possesses good communication skills and thus making him good in human and public relations.
 7. He keeps a good imprest account.
 8. He ensures an efficient and effective office by being current in records management and organizational ability.
 9. He organizes meetings making sure that preparation before the meeting is faultless and activities during the meeting are carried out properly and after the meeting, things are put in order. He ensures accurate recording of minutes and prompt dissemination of the minutes.
 10. He is the acceptable assistant of the chief executive since the chief executive cannot perform all the office functions despite his knowledge of the computer. He prepares light refreshment for the boss. He keeps his diary and constantly reminds him of his schedule. He prepares his itinerary and makes flight and hotel reservations for the chief executive.
 11. It is the secretary that other office workers look up to for solving office problems and who can help them with required information.

WHY IS THE SECRETARY INDISPENSABLE IN AN ORGANIZATION?

First and foremost, the secretary is indispensable in an organization because he is a very versatile human being. He is a human being unlike the other office ingredients or resources that do not have initiative that can only be manipulated by the secretary. He is the organization's image maker. He is the most important officer to be seen first and last by visitors to the organization.

Although the computer does many jobs hitherto done by the secretary, the computer cannot replace the secretary because of the following peculiarities of the secretary.

1. It is the secretary that is trained to manipulate the computer and thus making it to function.
2. The secretary is trained to receive visitors in a manner that neither the computer nor any other person can do.
3. He knows how to keep secrets and confidential documents.
4. He is the custodian of office information and correspondence.
5. He is in charge of the supplies of the organization.

CONCLUSION

There is no gainsaying the fact that the secretary is one single employee of any organization that is most important and needed. No matter the innovation or invention brought about by the computer, the presence of the secretary (a human being) is needed for the computer to function.

The secretary is a subordinate and an assistant that is needed by the chief executive for making telephone calls and receiving telephone calls. He is the only person trained in the efficient and the effective management of information, office correspondence and human resource for the benefit of the organization and in attaining the organization's objectives.

The computer is only an instrument or tool in the hand of the secretary and it cannot replace the secretary. The secretary will always be required in the office. Although they may not be many as it used to be, they are still needed and useful.

One thing the secretary needs in order to keep his job is retraining, which can be done by attending classes or participating in online education for more knowledge on how to operate new office technology such as internet and teleconferencing computer facilities. As long as

the secretary keeps abreast of challenges in modern technologies he will not be redundant or found wanting and he will always be relevant in today's modern office.

The importance and indispensability of the secretary in any organization cannot be overstressed. We now have automated offices or what some people call "paperless" offices. These offices use modern machines and methods in order to save such resources as time, effort and money. Human labour is also reduced greatly.

The automation, notwithstanding, secretaries are still indispensable for the attainment of organizational objectives because of their roles and characteristics which are already highlighted in this paper.

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