Human Resource Development

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Continuous Learning Through Versatility: An Imperative for Capacity Building and Effective Modern Secretariat Productivity

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the world we live in today is continuously evolving and industries are constantly experiencing changes and modifications to make processes faster and more seamless, and to improve output. The importance of continuous learning can never be over emphasized.

We saw the world as it experienced a massive turnaround after the Covid-19 pandemic. Some major and interesting industry-specific changes include the medical sector improvising into virtual consultancy, the education sector adopting e-learning at all levels, and the retail-to-End-Users sector stepping up implementation of e-payments, pre-ordering, and delivery services. Even the global economy experienced a significant shake up, with resilience attributable to only countries with prior and sophisticated technological capabilities, coupled with an industrial composition characterized by continuous knowledge improvement.[2]

This paper considers the importance of capacity building and continuous improvement in modern-day secretarial practice. It concludes with a clear recommendation for capacity building.

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2 United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)- *Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development Working Paper Series* WP 17 | 2021- <https://downloads.unido.org/ot/25/40/25407524/WP_17_2021.pdf>, accessed 18th February 2025.

2. The Evolution of Secretarial Practice

The role of secretary has come a long way in terms of evolution. Traditionally, a secretary is an administrative/clerical staff who handles tasks such as typing, filing and safe storage of documents and correspondences, receiving calls, scheduling meetings, and performing administrative support duties, to ensure the smooth running of the day-to-day activities of an individual or a corporate organisation.

Back in the 1970's, the skill requirements for secretaries were basically, good knowledge of the operation of a typewriter, shorthand, pacey typing, and drafting of letters and memoranda. However, secretarial practice has evolved from the traditional administrative support to a more dynamic and demanding role in various sectors. Therefore, secretaries now have to acquaint themselves with high in-demand requirements.

Major Changes Affecting Secretarial Practice:

2.1 Technological Advancement

2.1.1 The Shift from Type Writers to Computers:

Previously, typing was done with typewriters before the gradual evolution into the standard keyboard we see today. The journey began from the invention of typewriters with mechanical keyboard, to the advent of computer keyboard that were connected directly to mainframe computers, which were often large and clunky. This evolution was marked by impactful inventions such as the development of Personal Computers (PCs) by MIT in 1975, and IBM's introduction of model M keyboard in 1986.[3] As personal computers became mainstream, manufacturers introduced keyboards that use thinner and more flexible membranes, making them quieter and light weight to enhance user comfort and productivity. Today, secretaries use computers and various software applications for document preparation, formatting, word processing, presentation, and data storage.

2.1.2 Manual Communication to Digital Communication:

[3] See, 'Typing Through Time: Keyboard History' available at <https://www.daskeyboard.com/blog/typing-through-time-the-history-of-the-keyboard/> accessed 18th February 2025.

The introduction of digital communication such as Email has made it easier for secretaries to transmit information, receive timely feedback, follow-up and even make specific and self-evident references to past conversations. This development has been a game changer in place of the traditional post mailing system that was cumbersome and time consuming. Secretaries now manage correspondences more seamlessly and effectively.

2.1.3 **Manual Filings to Cloud Storage:**

With the invention of cloud-based tools, secretaries can process data over the cloud, breaking location barriers, making it easier to access, manage, and retrieve data at all times, in place of the old method of manual fillings.

This development requires the modern secretary to become acquainted with the use of digital cloud-based filing tools, and with the paper-less system to which a lot of organizations are still transitioning.

2.2 **Role Expansion:**

2.2.1 **Administrative Support to Key Decision-Making Support:**

Secretarial duties traditionally, were dominantly clerical tasks. Nowadays, the secretarial work environment demands the handling of more complex tasks such as project management, complex research, basic cybersecurity prognosis, and periodic reports that are used for decision making.

2.2.2 **Specialization:**

Many secretaries now specialize in the secretarial practice of various professions such as Law, where they work as legal secretaries, Medicine, where they act as medical administrative assistants. Secretarial practice in these areas surely requires specific sector-focused knowledge and skills.

Secretaries now engage in project research roles, requiring them to use various research tools in data gathering, comparison and compilation, report presentation. These responsibilities undoubtedly require the acquisition of special skills and knowledge to be competent.

2.3 **Capacity and Skills Development**

Secretarial service has always been a skill demanding role; however, various industries now require secretaries to acquire leadership skills and industry sought out skills as follows:

I. **Soft Skills**: There is now higher demand for secretaries with interpersonal and effective communication skills as they are the first point of contact in most organizations, also required to be adaptable and versatile as they are often employed to perform other tasks outside their primary duties.

II. **Technical Skills:** These are skills needed to create, process, store, and retrieve information from modern technologies.

Proficiency in various software such as Microsoft Office, Google Tools, and other project management software is in high demand for the secretarial role.

2.4 **Change in Working System**

Since the Covid-19 pandemic that introduced the shift to remote work, the increase in reliance on technology to perform numerous tasks has been spontaneous. For Secretaries, this means embracing evolution and harnessing technology to enhance productivity and effective secretarial practice through capacity building, which has changed how secretaries work and perform their responsibilities.

Secretaries now have to adapt to virtual meetings, acquaint themselves with the advent of digital platforms and virtual interactions, which means getting familiar with using email and virtual conferencing tools such as Zoom, Google-meet and other virtual meeting platforms.

2.5 **Professional Certification and Recognition:**

The perception of secretarial role has changed, with many secretaries earning qualifications and certifications such as Certified Administrative Professionals (CAP), Chattered Institute of Secretaries and Reporters of Nigeria (CISRN), Institute of Chattered Secretaries and Administrators of Nigeria (ICSAN).

These certifications enhance secretaries' professional standing.

3. Approach To Continuous Learning

Staying relevant is a good feeling but getting the right skills and staying up to date is where the real work begins.

The world today is global with diverse distractions such as engaging activities, social media platforms, making leisure easily prioritized over mental exercise and educational activities. For learning to be continuous, an individual must possess the following qualities:

a) **Passion**: natural desire to know and acquire knowledge about something.

b) **Desire for career advancement**: for the purpose of professional growth in a career path.

c) **Desire for personal growth**: self-motivation for personal improvement.

d) **Sense of satisfaction**: the feeling of fulfillment that comes with achieving something or reaching mastery.

All of these and more are various reasons people engage in the pursuit of learning continuously to acquire leadership skills, technological advancement, effective communications, and critical thinking skills. By adopting a mindset of lifelong studies, professionals, including secretaries, will be able to adapt to changes in industries and maintain a high level of proficiency.

However, the learning process is undoubtedly challenging, and a lot of people drop out despite what may be at stake for them due to various constraints such as financial issues, lack of time, unstable health, imposter syndrome and more. To overcome these challenges, it is recommended for individuals to focus on:

3.1 **Being open to learning**: Having a mindset that welcomes new knowledge and skills, this means being curious about new things, asking questions, and accepting mistakes and taking constructive advice. Celebrating each task completion is critical as a motivator into the next task.

3.2 **Avoiding procrastination**: One way to avoid procrastination is to develop strategies to manage tasks, whether official or personal, breaking down these tasks into smaller manageable pieces and prioritizing them efficiently.

3.3 **Being Value Oriented/ Prioritizing growth**: This is the act of focusing on acquiring new skills that add to one's personal and professional value.

By so doing, an individual will be interested in building a network of contacts who share mutual passion for growth and activities that add value and give less time to distracting activities.

3.4 **Prioritizing Mental and Physical Health**: A healthy mind and body is crucial for continuous and effective learning. This is achievable by maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life, while monitoring dietary needs, engaging in physical exercise, and getting enough rest.

3.5 **Consistency in reaching Mastery stage:** The key to mastery is committing to regular practice and sticking to a routine even when progress appears to be slow.

3.6 **Overcoming imposter syndrome:** Imposter syndrome is the feeling of self-doubt and lack of confidence. However one of the ways to build personal encouragement is to consistently acknowledge one's achievements, recognizing ones capabilities, and building confidence through continuous practice.

3.7 **Staying open to changes**: The learning structure is constantly evolving, and one way to keep up is to be adaptable and willing to embrace innovative learning, by being open to different learning procedures whether virtual, practical, or theoretical.

4 Conclusion

Fostering a culture of growth and continuous learning in the secretarial profession is important. Secretaries often find themselves working with professionals from different industries and handling documents of various types, such as legal, medical, and financial documentation, requiring a broad knowledge base of different contexts. Hence, being flexible and open to change and adjusting and aligning with new trends and technologies becomes paramount, and this can be achieved through formal education, seminars, webinars, online courses, subscribing to relevant publication, and even self-studies, and regular acquisition of new knowledge through a hands-on approach. More so, continuous learning is a proactive approach to ensure one is not just keeping up to date with industry changes but also to ensure personal and professional growth and staying relevant, competent, and competitive in ones chosen field.

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