

The Secretarial Profession in the Digital Age: Adapting to Technological Advancements

Felicia Bosede Kehinde Fasae

Management Sciences

Office and Information Management

Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti

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ABSTRACT: *This paper looked into the secretarial profession in the digital age and how the professional can adapt to technological advancements that are staring on his face. Many modern office technology and equipment have evolved to assist in enhancing the secretarial performance rather than decreasing it. The paper reviewed the secretarial professional, the modern office, technological development, the secretary and technological development, challenges posed by modern technologies, and expectations from modern secretarial professionals. It was concluded that the dynamism in the world is also being affected by the office which greatly requires that the professional secretary updates his knowledge by reskilling and upskilling in order to meet up with modern challenges. It was recommended, among others, that organizations should organize refreshers courses for secretaries already on the job to enable them have in-depth knowledge of new technologies that may pose challenges to them, and create opportunities for reskilling and upskilling for secretarial professionals in view of their continuous relevance to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives.*

KEYWORDS: secretarial profession, digital age, technological advancements

INTRODUCTION

The secretarial profession has seen a significant change as a result of digitization. Consequently, the skills and abilities needed in the modern digital workplace have important consequences for both career advancement and organisational effectiveness within the profession. In the present-day workplace, professional secretaries are frequently referred to by various names such as office professionals, office information managers, office coordinators, and office managers. This change in nomenclature is a result of their extensive knowledge and experience in office operations, which has become increasingly important due to the advancements and complexities in both the workplace and technology. The secretarial office professional, as an office manager, has become an integral part of the management

team in any organisation. This is due to their specialised education, training, skills, and experience. They fulfil a variety of responsibilities that contribute to the progress of the organisation. Therefore, they are considered an essential employee who is proficient in office information processing and administration.

Undoubtedly, the use of contemporary technology has significantly and favourably influenced the efficiency of workers in various domains such as engineering, law, education, medicine, communication, business, science, and the secretarial field is no exception. The utilisation of modern office machines and equipment, facilitated by technology and science, has enhanced job output and efficiency, leading to improved production of office services, communication, and records within organisations.

The significance of the secretarial profession remains crucial, despite the increasing advancements in technology inside the modern workplace of the 21st century. Fasae and Elemure (2007) argued that due to the growing reliance on technology, some executives mistakenly believed that the advancements in modern office technologies would render secretaries obsolete, leading them to replace them with computer operators or individuals capable of operating the technology. Regrettably, some individuals are being misguided into believing that the advancement in information and communication technology will result in the complete elimination of the role of a secretary, rendering their presence unnecessary in office settings. It is distressing to witness individuals exhibiting a negative attitude towards the secretarial profession and perceiving it as subordinate to other professions. These pessimistic ideas are in direct opposition to the principles and development of the profession. The secretary's functions in achieving organisational goals are vital and cannot be eliminated. They are unavoidable.

A computer lacks inherent intellect and solely executes commands given to it. The true challenge of computer technology is in effectively navigating and understanding the intricate nature of the digital world it constructs. This task necessitates a comprehensive education, as well as a combination of instinct and abilities essential for achieving success in the corporate realm. Despite their sophistication, contemporary devices cannot function autonomously and require workers. Despite significant advancements in technology, the services provided by secretarial professionals remain highly valuable in achieving organisational goals. The roles of administrators and executives, such as government officials, company directors, and private businessmen and women, are highly important. They require competent secretaries who can efficiently handle office and information management tasks, allowing them to delegate their demanding schedules. The company is seeking a reliable administrative professional with appropriate qualifications who can fill a vacancy and actively participate in official decision-making processes. This individual should also be capable of exercising independent judgement and handling circumstances with minimal supervision. These individuals understand the value of a competent office professional and are willing to provide the necessary support to enable the secretary to perform at their best. They also expect the secretary to be knowledgeable about all office matters, so they can provide appropriate advice when needed.

This study is important because it provides essential insights into the impact of technological development on the secretarial profession. It is crucial for secretarial practitioners and their organisations to understand the increasing demand for technological and digital skills and knowledge. This understanding will help ensure the profession's continued relevance in the digital age.

The Secretarial Professional

The secretarial professional is a highly skilled assistant to an executive, possessing the requisite education and training in office and administrative tasks. They are capable of taking on responsibilities independently, demonstrating initiative and exercising sound judgement in making decisions within their authorised limits. According to Microsoft Encarta (2007), Fasae and Elemure (2007), a secretary is a clerical worker who does administrative and clerical tasks at an office on behalf of an individual or an organisation. The secretary is not only responsible for operating machines, but also for combining professional skills in shorthand and typewriting with a comprehensive understanding of secretarial tasks. She carries out diverse administrative tasks and effectively oversees the workplace. Additionally, she has enhanced her comprehension by broadening her knowledge through courses in administration, accounting, social science, and English Language. According to Oluiya (1990), a secretary is an individual who possesses fundamental secretarial abilities in shorthand and typewriting, as well as sufficient knowledge and practical experience in office management..

Adeyemo (2003) submitted that secretaries are needed in industries and organizations (whatever the nature) to:

- (a) broaden the scope of administration;
- (b) relieve the executives of some of their duties;
- (c) present a good outlook of the organization, and
- (d) serve as influence on the executive in his decision for a better working environment.

The services provided by the contemporary professional administrative secretary/office manager remain essential due to the diverse range of responsibilities they handle. An organisation typically divides its operations into various departments, such as accounting, sales, production, personnel, etc. In the case of an educational institution, departments may include bursary, works, health, school/faculties, etc. These departments are overseen by managers or leaders who rely on the assistance of a secretary. The secretary's broad expertise allows her to effectively do many specialised tasks, as the general duties of a secretary are consistent throughout different specialisations. While her executive's responsibilities may vary, her secretarial skills and experience, which are her main assets, will be valuable to any executive in the department.

Apart from processing information, some other duties performed by secretaries are:

- an important partner in handling the boss' extensive correspondence;
- acting as the representative of the organization by the way she dresses, conducts herself and attends to visitors;

- displaying amazing ability to maintain a calm, peaceful environment for visitors and others;
- relieving her executive of routine and private business matters;
- assists/supervises subordinate staff;
- taking dictation and transcribing into mailable correspondences;
- taking care of petty cash and bank transactions;
- keeping employer's diary and arranging appointment and engagements;
- making travel arrangements and hotel bookings;
- arranging/attending meetings.
- making requisition for stationeries;
- handling incoming/outgoing mails;
- drafting and signing letters on behalf of her boss, etc.

In addition, the secretary is tactful, loyal, orderly, alert, diplomatic, patient, possessing initiative and ability to keep secrets secret. All these attributes assist in promoting the perfect image of the organization.

The Modern Office

An office serves as the administrative hub of an organisation, where information is processed and analysed to facilitate decision-making and assure the achievement of the organization's goals and objectives. Efficient management of any organisation is crucial. A contemporary office is anticipated to be equipped with advanced digital technology, which will facilitate the efficient execution of tasks by the professional secretary, ultimately leading to enhanced organisational performance.

Young (2021) viewed the contemporary workplace as an intelligent environment that incorporates technology to gain a competitive edge and streamline daily operations, resulting in increased efficiency and enhanced sophistication. It is a space specifically designed to enhance productivity and profitability by maximising the use of technology. Vault (2022) defines the office, according to Mills & Standingford, as the central administrative hub of a business that serves the aim of providing communication and record-keeping services. According to Teknion (2024), a key feature of the modern office is its integration with technology, allowing employees to work from any location within the office and providing reliable internet connectivity throughout. The development of modern workplaces today has been brought about by technological advancements, leading to enhanced execution of office duties.

Several contemporary office machines have made significant contributions to the advancement of the modern office. These machines are specifically designed for secretarial use to improve speed and efficiency in work. As a result, secretaries play a crucial role in the office, as machines are indispensable tools for their duties. The professional secretary, as an essential employee, possesses specialised training in office management to ensure the smooth execution of office tasks and operations. He is a technologically proficient employee who is skilled in operating all types of office technology. Therefore, the introduction of new

technology should not intimidate the professional secretary, but rather motivate them to become more valuable and efficient for their organisations. According to Idoko (2023), the secretarial staff faces the issue of familiarising themselves with new information technology devices through training or retraining, without being intimidated by them. Despite the process of digitalization, secretarial practices continue to involve a variety of skills that remain vital in the modern digital era. Effective communication and time management are key for achieving success in secretarial work, as they contribute to the establishment of a productive and efficient work environment.

Technological Development

Technology is the utilisation of specialised knowledge to accomplish a practical objective. Technology in the context of the secretarial profession is utilising technical knowledge to accomplish practical objectives in secretarial work. It encompasses the use of machinery to accomplish tasks and directly influences office protocols by governing the means through which information is acquired and conveyed.

Secretaries undergo training to develop skills in administrative tasks and information processing, facilitated by the utilisation of information technologies. Anikeze, Abonyi, and Okafor (2023), referencing Oyedokun and Adeolu-Akande (2022), define information technology as a broad term encompassing various technologies that facilitate the production, processing, manipulation, storage, communication, and dissemination of information. These technologies include computer hardware, networks, software, data, and other related materials used to construct information systems. Information technology has become indispensable in nearly all organisations today. Digital skills encompass the knowledge and abilities required to effectively utilise digital devices, communication apps, and networks for the purpose of accessing and managing information. These skills are of utmost importance in the modern workplace (UK Study Centre, 2021). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2020) stated that technology has had a significant impact on the world of work for a considerable period of time. In recent times, advancements in automation, robotics, and AI have increasingly impacted work and the workplace. These technologies have been altering jobs by either replacing, enhancing, or creating new tasks for workers. However, it is worth noting that although technology has the potential to replace or undermine jobs, recent research by the CIPD suggests that the positive effects, such as job enrichment and the creation of new professional development opportunities, tend to outweigh the negative impacts.

Nwaobiakara and Amasike (2014) acknowledged that modern information technology has significantly impacted the world by successfully tackling numerous challenging tasks. In recent times, it has played a crucial role in the growth and development of organisations, particularly in enhancing the capabilities and efficiency of secretaries in small and medium-scale enterprises. The secretary must possess the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively handle the current and future challenges of the modern office. This includes managing and organising various types of office documents, as well as performing confidential secretarial tasks at different levels within an organisation. According to Okoro

and Ndinechi (2013), professional secretaries today need to have specific skills and knowledge in order to effectively use modern information processing facilities. These facilities include word processors, data processing equipment, micro-computers, and records management systems that focus on paperless files and reprographics. The necessary webpage design skills for secretaries include software application assessment, HTML coding, table formatting in HTML, applying colour to HTML elements, hyperlink creation, webpage publishing, webpage refreshing, webpage document printing, using shared devices in a network, and webpage termination. Secretaries should possess advanced proficiency in a web design software tool in order to enhance their online performance and effectively utilise the internet for professional tasks.

The utilisation of technological advancements in the modern office is highly beneficial and should be optimised to enhance productivity and efficiency.

The Secretary and Technological Development

The use of digital technologies in modern offices has been extensive and demanding. These technologies have greatly contributed to the success of secretarial operations by assisting professionals in relieving executives of their workload, generating documents that can be sent by mail, and managing incoming and outgoing correspondence. Furthermore, the use of mobile and landline phones has significantly facilitated the secretary in fulfilling her conventional responsibilities such as collaborating with the boss, receiving and assisting visitors, scheduling appointments and engagements, making travel and accommodation arrangements, and more. Ezeano, Ezeano, and Isineye (1994) noted that modern secretaries can enhance their productivity in a busy office by utilising word processing technology. This allows them to delegate the repetitive tasks involved in document publication, freeing up their time to focus on more important aspects such as accuracy, coverage, and non-routine functions. Digital tools enhance their ability to organise data, cooperate with coworkers, and create superior documents with greater efficiency. Additionally, these tools facilitate remote work and virtual collaboration by enabling interaction with colleagues, clients, and superiors through virtual meetings, emails, and chat applications. This presents both new opportunities and challenges in the field of communication.

Azih (2016) highlighted that the advent of Information Communication and Technology has impacted the responsibilities assigned to graduates of secretarial studies, since traditional office technologies have been steadily replaced by modern technologies. She observed that ICT is utilised to enhance the delivery and accessibility of efficient and effective office management, thereby improving the comprehension of secretarial practices and functions. This, in turn, enhances the quality of secretaries' work attitude and increases their influence on office management.

Despite the significant advancements and enhancements in technology, the demand for secretaries remains high. The CIPD (2020) observed that the latest technological revolution has had a widespread impact on how organisations generate value and the manner in which individuals perform, encompassing all industries, economies, and segments of society (WEF,

2019). Advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), more digitization, and the rise of big data have led to the development of new technologies that can help with more intricate jobs. These technologies have the potential to enhance existing roles and potentially alter the way work is done. Employers are investing in new technologies to improve business performance by enhancing quality and reducing costs. However, it is important to consider the impact of these technologies on people's jobs and working lives, especially as technology continues to play a larger role in modern work. The vast majority of surveyed employees expressed scepticism regarding the automation of either a portion (72%) or the entirety (91%) of their job within the next 12 months. However, less than 30% of employees who anticipated some level of automation in their roles have received training to adequately prepare for this impending change. 32% of employees who predicted a certain level of automation also anticipated enhancements in their job quality. This highlights the necessity for office professionals to collaborate closely with IT in order to guarantee that they are equipped with the necessary tools to work efficiently from any location.

Technological developments enhance the efficiency of professional secretaries by automating monotonous and repetitive tasks, but they cannot replicate the creative and critical thinking abilities of humans. Duncan (2011) noted in Ngotngamwong (2019) that proficient Executive Assistants (EAs) provide significant advantages to executives by effectively handling delegated high-level jobs, allowing executives to focus on more crucial responsibilities and living a more fulfilling lifestyle. He stressed the importance of CEOs having Administrative Assistants (AAs) as it typically leads to increased productivity and better preparation. Additionally, new managerial recruits greatly benefit from experienced AAs who act as reverse mentors, assisting and instructing them as they adjust to their new positions. According to Barmak (2013), they have also been described as 'amazing' and can serve as a valuable assistant to executives. EAs execute delegated authority, thereby minimising the distractions of high-ranking executives and effectively serving as gatekeepers for them (Help Your Execs by Decreasing Distractions, 2009). According to a study conducted in the UK, CEOs who had Personal Assistants (PAs) were found to be 32% more productive. The study also concluded that hiring PAs was a very cost-effective approach (Licence to Strategise, 2012).

Challenges Posed by Modern Technology

Considering the rapid technological progress worldwide, Li (2022) emphasised the importance of individuals and companies dedicating themselves to acquiring new skills and improving existing ones. Career development is becoming a crucial aspect of the future workforce, and it requires significant efforts to ensure that reskilling and upskilling opportunities are accessible, widely available, and affordable for employees. According to the Future of Jobs Report 2020 by the World Economic Forum, it is projected that by 2025, half of all employees worldwide will require reskilling. This projection does not include individuals who are currently unemployed. The report also highlights that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, advancements in automation and new technologies had already significantly changed the job market. As a result, there is a pressing need for widespread upskilling and reskilling. This need has become even more crucial in order for individuals to

take advantage of opportunities and contribute to the economic development of the 21st century.

Introducing new technology in the workplace without adequately considering the people involved can have a detrimental effect on the long-term performance of the organisation. Factors such as the complexity of the job, the utilisation of skills, and the autonomy of workers play a significant role in determining the success of technology in supporting strategic objectives. The relationship between technology and the human experience and organisational performance is interconnected, as developing technologies have the capacity to affect job quality in both beneficial and detrimental ways. The prevalence of alternative employment models has increased due to the growing use of digital platforms and technology-enabled remote working, leading to a greater dependence on contingent labour. Occupations are getting more intricate and captivating, offering enhanced educational prospects and heightened independence for individuals (People and machines: from hype to reality). Business executives need to transition from the conventional approach of emphasising redundancies and job automation to prioritising reskilling, redeployment, and job reinvention (HR4.0, 2018).

In addition, the implementation of technology that allows workers to have more flexible work arrangements may lead to decreased job stability and increased stress due to the merging of work and personal life. The CIPD (2020) emphasised that it is crucial for modern office professionals to prioritise understanding the effects of technology on work and the workforce. They have a critical responsibility in comprehending the human consequences of utilising various technologies. The advent of AI and automation is revolutionising the nature of work. However, in order to fully reap the benefits, it is crucial to effectively manage and support individuals. This entails enabling them to adjust to evolving job responsibilities, acquire new skills if required, and address any apprehensions they may have regarding the limitations of technology. Fasae (2023), emphasizing on the continuous relevance of the professional secretarial practitioner in the 21st Century, outlined, among others, the following as essential skills to be possessed:

- (a) **Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities:** The secretarial professional should possess electronic communication competencies, skills, knowledge and abilities for effective job performance.
- (b) **Continuous learning:** As an intellectual, the secretary should be continue to learn and relearn and be more knowledgeable and versatile in his basic functions, able to utilize office technology skills and ICTs for efficient operations within the organization and outside. He needs to read wide to gain more relevant knowledge in fields relevant to her field such as fields of information and communication, data management, data security, among others. Idoko (2023) also submitted that continuous learning and adaptation are necessary to keep up with evolving technological tools.
- (c) **Ergonomic Practice.** The need to practice ergonomics becomes imperative because of the heavy and frequent use of technologies which demand that the working environment is well organized and structured in order to avoid injuries, discomfort, pain, muscular fatigue,

numbness, tingling, burning feeling, heaviness, weakness, or clumsiness, among others, in the hands caused by stress or repeated tasks involving the use of computers, office equipment, or current office technology.

Furthermore, Idoko (2023) submitted that there should be:

- open communication and collaboration between technology users and secretarial staff;
- a balance between modern technology and secretarial practice to maximize productivity;
- an embrace of technology as a tool to enhance secretarial practice.
- effective utilization of technology and leveraging secretarial skills for harmonious workplace; and
- continuous evolving and adaptation to the digital era in order to meet up with technological disruptions and advancements.

Expectations from modern secretarial professionals

In order to meet the needs of reskilling and upskilling, it is imperative for the contemporary secretarial professional to anticipate future developments in their field and take proactive measures to address any challenges. It is important to recognise that new skills will constantly emerge and evolve. Nwaobiakara and Amasike (2014) stated that we are currently in the information age, when knowledge is highly valued and considered a crucial resource for business and technology. They emphasised that technology serves as a means to efficiently deliver relevant information to individuals when they need it. The office professional should therefore seize the opportunity to adapt to each circumstance that arises. The following are expectations from the modern secretarial professional:

Awareness of Digital Skills: Ocholi, Aina, and Ezeani (2022), in agreement with Olaopa (2015), emphasised that secretaries must first comprehend the digital skills that are most relevant to their profession and industry. This understanding is crucial as it ensures their career longevity upon securing employment and minimises the likelihood of being replaced by automation. With the increasing dependence on digital communication, secretaries must stay updated with the required abilities. It is important to recognise that the skills needed will keep changing as digital transformations continue to evolve. It is crucial for secretaries to acquire and continually enhance their fundamental digital skills in order to stay up-to-date with the most recent advancements.

Upskilling: Fasae (2023) emphasised the significance of having digital skills in the contemporary business climate and future workplace. This is due to the emergence of new work opportunities resulting from technological improvements, which will create a demand for professionals who possess the ability to adapt and acquire new skills. She concurred with Iberdrola (2021) that digital skills encompass more than just acquiring and developing technological abilities. They also require gaining knowledge, values, attitudes, rules, and ethics related to information and communication technology (ICT) in order to maximise the benefits of technology. According to Oliseh (2010), the ever-changing nature of office work due to rapid technological advancements should enable secretaries to broaden their

intellectual horizons. This will allow them to adapt to new career opportunities that are emerging as a result of the increased usage of advanced technology in modern office settings.

Demonstrate Technological Competence: Rae (2021) stated that upcoming secretaries are need to exhibit technological proficiencies in utilising laptops and smart gadgets for carrying out secretarial or word processing duties on a daily basis. Proficiency in utilising contemporary office equipment to efficiently transmit and receive information in the most suitable, expedient, and dependable manner is crucial in the contemporary and future workplace. These technologies are anticipated to enhance secretaries' job performance in various areas such as record keeping, memo/letter writing, cooperation, image creation, data retrieval, information sharing, efficient decision-making, email communication, and data collection, among other tasks.

Deepening Their Technical Skills: It is imperative for every secretary to cultivate a growth mindset since technology advancements will persistently progress. According to a study conducted by the UK Study Centre (2021), a secretary who possesses a growth mindset will be capable of addressing the skills gap and generating more stimulating career prospects for themselves in the contemporary or future workplace. The report emphasised the importance of providing comprehensive training to secretaries in order to provide them with the necessary tools, technology, and digital skills to succeed in the office, especially considering the increasing prevalence of remote work and the ever-evolving nature of technology. Iberdrola (2021) stated that digitization does not hinder social and economic progress, but instead promotes prosperity, social equality, and a more competitive economy. As the digital revolution transforms traditional workplace roles and creates new jobs, there is an urgent requirement for secretaries to enhance and expand their technical skills in order to improve work quality, foster creativity, and maintain employability. Providing training to secretaries on digital skills is an essential element in staying abreast of the increasing trend of remote working and the rapidly evolving technology industry.

The contemporary technologically proficient secretary utilises a range of devices including telex machines, email systems, word processors, computers, dictation machines, mobile and landline telephones, duplicating machines, photocopiers, fax machines, and printing machines. In addition, they employ software applications such as Microsoft Word, Microsoft Outlook, Microsoft Access, and Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to improve their work. All of the aforementioned tools are utilised for the purpose of processing information, possessing the ability to swiftly access, input, process, and generate output.

Demonstrate effective Leadership: Leadership is a crucial attribute that the contemporary office professional must possess. The secretary is expected to contribute to the successful management of a modern office by their leadership qualities, expertise and awareness of office technology, and their capacity to adapt to change. The study conducted by Li (2022) examined the process of reskilling and upskilling for the workforce in preparation for the future, namely in the era of Industry 4.0 and beyond. The study discovered that by 2025, some of the increasingly important talents will include technology-related abilities, cognitive

reasoning, and leadership proficiency. The CIPD has emphasised the importance of professional secretaries taking on strategic and active leadership roles in the process of designing and implementing workplace changes that involve technology. They should also serve as influential advocates within the organisation, particularly when it comes to decisions about investing in new technology. This requires a deep understanding of the human aspects of technology use and the ability to positively influence the success of any changes by effectively communicating the views and challenges raised by employees to other senior leaders.

Given the significance of the office professional, every organisation utilises information technology to process data and deliver up-to-date and precise information to management. Additionally, every organisation requires secretaries who possess the ability to access, interpret, process, and effectively utilise information. The secretary plays a crucial role in the process of organisational development.

CONCLUSION

In our ever-changing world, the office is also witnessing this dynamic shift in technological breakthroughs. Traditional secretarial services have faced significant challenges, necessitating professional secretaries to enhance their skills through reskilling and upskilling to effectively address modern demands. Secretaries, as the custodians and processors of information, are the primary users of contemporary technological devices in offices. Undoubtedly, the demand for secretarial services is essential and is expected to persist.

Recommendations

- Organisations should arrange refresher training for secretaries who are already employed to ensure they get comprehensive understanding of new technologies that may present difficulties for them.
- Organisations should provide chances for secretarial professionals to acquire new skills and enhance their existing skills, recognising their ongoing importance in achieving organisational goals and objectives.
- Organisations should cultivate a culture of ongoing training and development to empower secretarial professionals to adjust to emerging technologies. Relevant entities could collaborate with government and private institutions to supply the required resources for training and retraining secretaries, equipping them with the essential skills demanded in the workforce.
- Professional organisations and groups should develop awareness initiatives to educate others about the significance of the secretarial profession, with the aim of eliminating any unfavourable perceptions associated with it. This could be accomplished through the implementation of seminars and workshops.
- Individual secretarial professionals must be prepared for ongoing learning and upskilling to remain relevant in the contemporary workplace.
- Practitioners should enhance the reputation of their profession through their interactions and collaborations with individuals.

- Secretarial professionals should seize the opportunity presented by new technologies to enhance their personal growth and skills. Regardless of the degree of technical progress, this will inevitably render them significant..

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