

# OFFICE AUTOMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SECRETARIAL ROLES

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## Abstract

*The sporadic technological changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has affected all the facets of life including office environments. The old-time known office equipment is becoming obsolete which call for new orientation and poses challenges to secretarial staff. This could be further buttressed in the way the name metamorphosed from Secretarial Education to Office Technology and Management (OTM) and the title from the word secretary to a more appropriate professional titles like executive secretary or management assistant. This paper, therefore, examines the new roles of Secretary as compared to its age-long functions. Efforts were made at describing office automation, secretary and her modern roles. It was concluded that, secretaries who refuse to dance to the tune of technology in discharging their duties will be considered obsolete, unfit, irrelevant, rejected and unappointable. It was, therefore, recommended that both private and public offices should endeavour to procure technological invented machines and equipment while secretaries should be engaged in training and retraining seminars to be able to compete favourably with colleagues in developed countries of the world..*

**Keywords:** *Office Automation, Secretary, Technology, Secretarial Roles, Micrography and Reprography.*

## Introduction

Office automation can be described as application of information technology to the typical clerical and secretarial tasks such as communication, correspondence, documenting and filling. It refers to various computer machinery and software used to create, collect, store, manipulate and relay office information needed for accomplishing basic tasks. Raw data storage, electronic transfer and the management of electronic business information comprise the basic activities of an office automation system. Ejeka (2006) sees office automation as a way of utilizing personal computers such as word processors and electronic intercom mail plus other technologies used to upgrade workers productivity and efficiency. It is the technique of making a processor system electronically operated in an office. Ejeka went further to assert that office automation is the merging of technologies, an integration of providing quality information and communication facilities designed to improve professional and management productivity.

According to Geoffrey (2003), office automation is an aid to the secretary who makes constant use of the machines, hence, the machine can carry out routine work or clerical jobs quickly, accurately and automatically more than the ordinary human being can do, thereby, freeing the secretary in working out payroll, and other numerous letters and calculations which need an expert and excellent touch to be done correctly. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2012), the term secretary is derived from the Latin word *secernere* "to distinguish" or "to set apart", meaning to keep secret. That is, secretary is seen as an executive officer who is expected to open his/her eyes widely and keep her mouth shut. Secretaries are regarded as the life-wire, the blood and the backbone of an organization. All these synonyms are directly pointing to the vital roles played by a secretary in an organization. In short, it is not an over-statement to say that no organization can survive without secretaries.



Robert & Henry (2011) observed that a secretary is a person whose work consists of supporting management, including executives using a variety of project management, communication and organizational skills. These functions may be entirely carried out to assist one other employee or maybe for the benefits of more than one. In other situations, a secretary is an officer of society or organization who deals with correspondence, admits new members and organizes official meetings and events.

Today's secretaries are exposed to office technologies including the internet that makes work easier and knowledge more accessible (Edwin 2008). It is now an easy task to send messages by telex, electronic mails (e-mails), fax and telephone. Other office gadgets within the reach of a modern secretary are photocopy machines, dictating machines, printers and the likes. Nwogwugwu (2002) asserted that the introduction of sophisticated telecommunication equipment, computer and word processors, information technology machines coupled with the new management techniques have changed old work habits, thereby resulting in complete job-re-designation and acquisition of new skills. As a result of technological innovation brought into secretarial profession, the role of secretaries in business organisation has changed greatly from that of typewriting and shorthand dictation, receiving and processing of telephone calls and processing of mails, both incoming and outgoing mails especially the ones tagged 'Confidential' to a more enlarged one. The more enlarged secretarial roles, the more important and relevant a secretary remains in any modern organization.

A secretary, popularly refers to as an administrative assistant is engulfed with many roles in an office set up (Bureau of Labor statistics, 2012). These roles are nowadays dynamic to the realm of mastering Microsoft office applications word, power-point and excel to mention but a few. The duty varies according to the size and nature of an organization. In some small organization, a secretary combines the work of a receptionist with secretarial work like welcoming visitors into the organization, receiving and recording telephone calls, preparation of her boss' itinerary, maintain websites, preparation of expenses report (keeping of imprest account for her office), preparation of appropriate venue for an executive meeting, placement of necessary facilities and equipment in the venue (like directory), preparation of agenda and the likes. On the day of the meeting, prompt arrival of the secretary is highly required, taking down of minutes of the meeting, keeping proper attendance, returning used materials to the appropriate place after meeting, transcription of minutes of meeting and production for distribution to members.

### **Modern Roles of a Secretary**

According to Adriaan (2015), duties of a modern secretary include the following:

- Mastering software used to create spreadsheets, databases, record or presentations.
- Processing physical and digital information and data.
- Maintaining executive schedules.
- Using contents management system.
- Serving as the hub of communication in an office, liaising between employees and management.
- Serving as office administrator.
- Assuming (HR) human resources responsibilities such as training junior staff.
- Managing projects and conducting research
- Liaising with clients and suppliers
- Being involved in decision-making processes.



The knowledge and skills required of a modern secretary can include:

- Knowledge of legal practices, if she works as a legal secretary
- Knowledge of the legal practices specific to his/her organization
- Public administrative knowledge if she works in public sector
- Public Relations Management skills
- Financial Management if she works in an accounting firm
- Time management skills
- Research skills
- Computer skills
- Communication/interpersonal skills
- Note-taking skills

Etoneyeaku (2010) noted that secretaries in the organizations of yester years were dealing with papers, worked with manual machines, relied on postal services for external communications and kept office records in the cabinets. These technological innovations demand new skills, attitudes and the development of new professional and intellectual concepts among secretaries. This is in accordance with Esene (2012), who observed that the modern offices of today, lay due emphasis on paperless office as a way of facilitating the process of correspondence handling and operation. For instance, Ekuala (2008) stated that in offices, computer, database, management and other accessories are increasingly being used to organize and control records. Secretaries are now being required to be able to operate computer using Dbase, Excel, Coreland Word packages such as Word Perfect, MS word, Power Point, Adobe Page Maker and in particular, the dexterity to use most of the application packages contained in Windows 2000 to 2010 respectively.

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## **Office Automation Equipment**

### **Word Processor**

According to Nwosu, Anaka and Eleoba (2003), word processing is an electronically processing of alphabetic and alpha numeric information. A word processor consists of keyboard, electronic memory, a display unit and printer. Word processor is capable of performing the functions of storing, editing information and retrieving text, insertion and deletion of text, underlining using different types of fonts, moving text page numbering and saving, storing or retrieving texts. Despite these roles, the capability of a word processor depends largely on the attributes of the application software. Word processor protects secretaries from boredom of performing repetitive task of typing, printing and filling, makes the production of documents less tedious and yields greater productivity.

### **Micrography**

According to Staffady (1998), micrography provides for the storage and retrieval of information through efficient utilization of magnetic storage and electronic transmission. It can therefore be described as the science and technology of creating image of micro-photography. Chukwumezie (2002), micrographic as modern ways of recording information in electronic data storage the speed or retrieval of information, allow greater and easier



access to large quantities of records without the need to store papers in bulky cabinets. An automated secretary has been greatly relieved of the stress of searching for information held on papers, in a file jacket and stored in a file cabinets or shelves.

### **Reprography**

According to Abayi (2003), reprography is all aspects of copying and duplicating which have a lot of impact on office information processing and dissemination. Reprography also known as copy processing ranges from the use of carbon and ink duplicating (in the traditional office) to the very sophisticated photo typesetting equipment connected to the computer like photocopying machine, printer and scanner. This aspect of automation is relevant to secretarial roles, saves time, space, cost with greater accuracy and should be adequately emphasized in training and retraining of secretarial staff.

### **Dictation Machines.**

This automated equipment is used to record speech, letters, memos and reports. A chief executive who wishes to draft a letter or memo, may decide to dictate it while performing other tasks. This is made easy because speaking is much faster than writing. The type of equipment chosen depends largely on the choice of the dictators, number of users, frequency of use and fund made available for the purpose. Some dictation equipment uses cassettes tapes, while more modern version record digitally and may even prefer a phone system.

One piece of equipment that may not seem essential to many people is the dictation machine. Although speech recognition software continues to evolve, it is not without pitfalls. Executives who need to draft letters, memos, and reports are best off dictating the copy and recording it, since speaking is much faster than writing and can be done while performing other tasks. The type of equipment chosen depends on the choice of the dictators. However, the audio is recorded, this file is then processed by another employee, who transcribes the audio into a written document and saves, emails, or prints it.

### **Printers**

Any office that runs even one personal computer (PC) needs a printer to create hard copies of electronic documents and files. Despite the promises of paperless offices in the future, that era has not yet arrived. All sorts of business documentation need to be printed, whether the business is a product- or service-oriented industry. Examples of common office documents include, memorandum (internal and external), invoices, paying slips, flyers, and letters. Printers can be used not just to generate transfer electronic files to paper but also to create composite documents containing digital information and scanned images. All the user needs to do, is to get the make of the printer installed on his/her system without which the printer will not work.

### **Scanners**

While the fax machine was once considered an indispensable piece of office equipment, electronic copies of just about any document are now possible with the help of a scanner. A scanner copies an image of papers that were not created electronically and converts them into digital images so that they can be stored on a computer or emailed. Examples of items that might need to be scanned include photographs, pages from print publications, cash register receipts, drawings, and forms that have been filled out by hand. Even a letter that was created in a computer software program might have been received in hard copy and so



would need to be scanned into a storage system if the digital file was not available. Before the invention of the scanner, the best that could be done with miscellaneous materials was to photocopy and file them, a practice which is still followed today in some places.

### **Copiers**

Before the automation, the only way to make a copy of a document was to replicate it by hand, either by typing it again or actually rewriting it. Offices used to employ special clerks called scribes, scriveners or writing master to perform this task. Even though the printing press was popularized in the West as early as the 15th century by Johannes Gutenberg, such presses were not always practicable for everyday office use. Some offices did purchase small printing presses when their business required multiple copies of documents; other firms simply outsourced these tasks to a larger printing press. Eventually, a variety of copying options came into practice, such as letter copying presses, copy pads and books, and roller copiers. Later developments included carbon paper, mimeographs, and the Ditto machine. Eventually, xerography technology (dry writing) was perfected and led to the development of the copiers with which modern consumers are familiar. The first photocopiers produced black and white images, and these are still useful for many basic copying purposes. The choice of whether or not a color copier is needed is up to the office manager or business owner and depends on the types of documents that are copied regularly. Some businesses keep only a black and white copier on hand and send color copies out to an offsite print shop, but color technology is becoming more and more affordable, particularly with the introduction of combination copier/printer/scanner units.

### **Laminating Machines**

Laminating machines are seldom used in most offices. When someone has gone to the trouble to print or copy a document, that document can be preserved by heat-sealing two thin layers of clear plastic over each side. A piece of paper is inserted into a laminating sheet, which is generally is twice the size of a standard document but then folded in half. Enough of a margin remains on all sides of the document so that the plastic melts to itself and creates a permanent seal. The document and plastic are inserted into a special laminating sleeve that enables the document to pass through the machine smoothly and keeps the melted plastic from getting stuck between the hot rollers. This device helps in protecting the laminated documents from water-split, dirtiness and risk of being torn. The lamination does not prevent the document from being photocopied.

Laminators can be used to:

- Create signage
- Produce ID badges
- Preserve photos
- Create long-lasting business cards
- Reinforce pages in a flip chart or spiral-bound booklet

### **5. Label Makers**

Like a laminating machine, a label maker might seem more like an extra than a needed piece of office equipment, but if this is the case, then it may be that one



terms of acquisition of modern skills to cope with new challenges. For a secretary to fit into the world of work, he/she must possess adequate mastery of his/her roles. A secretary who refuses to adjust to the new technologies will look unfit, obsolete, redundant, rejected and unappointable.

### **Recommendations**

It is, therefore, recommended that:

1. Both private and public offices should endeavour to procure new technological office machines to be able to compete favourably with modern secretaries in the developed countries.
2. There should be organization of workshops and seminar for the existing staff to brace up with the new technologies.
3. Newly appointed secretaries should be involved in induction course to open their eyes to the challenges ahead of them in discharging their duties.
4. Secretaries should be sent on international conferences and workshops to learn new ways of discharging their duties.

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simply does not realize the scope of what can be done with such a handy gadget. The following list is just a handful of the many wonderful ways in which a business office can be better organized by using a label maker:

- To create file folder labels
- To label three-ring binders
- To assign mail cubbies
- To make "out of order" signage
- To leave brief instructions on breakroom appliances, such as "Please clean after each use" on a microwave or "Please remove items each Friday" on a refrigerator
- To stick an important number on a phone extension
- To identify computer hardware
- To create name tags
- To label cords and wires ("monitor to power," "tower to monitor," "router to modem," and so forth)

Office personnel still tend to perpetuate the habit of printing out full sheets of paper for certain purposes; most of these tasks can easily be done with a label maker instead. While there is some cost involved in replacing the tape cartridges used in label makers, the amount of paper saved is worth it.

## **7. Shredders**

In a world where identity theft runs rampant, one of the most important pieces of equipment for any office to own is, ironically, the one that destroys all of the documents that the employees work so hard to produce. Tearing papers into bits by hand is not only time-consuming and tiring but is not always as effective as it needs to be. Paper shredders cut a sheet of paper into so many pieces that it is extremely difficult or even impossible to put them back together and recover the lost information. A shredder is a necessity in any business where confidentiality is a legal requirement, such as law, medicine, and education. Of course, any office that has employees keeps documentation on human resources, and much of this information is confidential as well.

Shredders range from inexpensive units that fit over a wastebasket to large, heavy-duty machines that can destroy several pages at once; every office supply buyer needs to consider the needs of the office and take them into account when making a decision on which type of shredder to buy. The more rugged shredders can handle stapled papers and can also shred plastic credit cards and other such cards with identifying information on them.

Secretarial profession is now wrestling with the skills of handling the electric typewriters, scanners, word processors, facsimile (Fax) machine, the computers etc. This is to enable secretary meet up with the increasing demand of information and compete favourably with colleagues in developed countries.

## **Conclusion**

Secretarial profession is a profession that is being blown by the wind of technology. The technological changes in the society today make secretarial profession to be a dynamic one which calls for a redress and a high degree of adaptability on the part of secretary in



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