KNOWING THE GRADUATE OFFICE SECRETARY

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Abstract: This paper discusses the graduate office secretary as distinct from other secretarial hands. Arising from the general mistaken identity of the true secretary the paper identifies the true office secretary as a secretarial graduate who is an invaluable asset and assistant to top of business and government organizations executives without whose help the executives cannot function optimally. It highlights the qualities of the graduate office secretaries and discusses some of their executive functions. It emphasized the need for their training institutions to rise to the challenges of raising their training standard to meet the standard obtained in the world of work. This, the paper concludes would remove charlatans from the profession and ensure the right image for the graduate office secretary.

INTRODUCTION

Secretaries are ubiquitous office workers needed in every type of office (big or small) to assist their superiors or executives in carrying out their responsibilities. Graduate office secretaries are produced from the universities, polytechnics and colleges of education in Nigeria. The secretarial function, though a supportive function, requires a large amount of initiative, tact and resourcefulness to succeed. Some definitions of the term secretary are necessary at this stage to provide an insight as to who is truly the secretary. Jennings (1981), Igwe (1992), Oni (1999) and Ugiagbe (2002) adopted the definition of the National Secretaries Association (International) as follows:

An assistant to an executive, possessing mastery of office skills and ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, who displays initiative, exercises judgement, and makes decisions within the scope of his/her authority

The secretary has direct contacts with people who visit the office for one transaction or the other and their contact with the secretary can make or mar their relationship with the organization. Boladele (2002) quoting Winter (1964) expressed that:

A secretary is a warm, endlessly helpful and understanding individual whose sole aim is to alleviate, solve, prevent or soften problem workload and upsets

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for his/her executive. He/she is the means by which the executive initiates, handles and complete a project.

The above definition underscores the fact that inter-working relationship between the secretary and the organizational executive must be excellent for the organization to prosper and succeed. Whitehead (1977) identifies the secretary’s responsibilities to include; taking dictation and transcribing it into correspondence which is at once dispatched to its business destination. He highlights of some forms of these correspondence to include: letters, memos, circulars, orders, quotations, acceptances, contractual terms, and conditions, invitations, etc. Each of these items he claimed will invoke a response from the addressees, who will perhaps order materials, proceed to manufacture, insure cargoes, book hotels or engage in some other expensive activity which forms part of the intricate network of business life. Therefore the secretary must be regarded with some respect with reference to these onerous functions that impinge on the success of the organization.

From the foregoing definitions and explanations, the office secretary provides the human element in the rapid and constant flow of information of today’s business work. Jenning (1981) stressed that as executives deal with problems that cannot be solved in a routine way, they are involved in developing policies, making decisions, projecting for future operations, planning and organizing new project. The secretaries must be of great assistance by using their expertise to assist their executives. Thus, making the efficient secretaries the backbone of the executive as they make their work lighter and free them to engage in other productive ventures thereby contributing to the prospects and success of the organization.

Ehiametalor (1990) stressed that the secretarial vocation is providing challenging job after graduation to beneficiaries by offering them a wide variety of occupational areas to work. This is because rather than office automation replacing the secretary it has brought new challenges to the secretarial work that have enlarged and enriched it. This suggests that the training of secretaries must reflect the challenges and experiences in the world of work.

**QUALITIES OF THE GRADUATE OFFICE SECRETARY**

There is a serious misconception about who is the true secretary in Nigeria in spite of its numerous definitions. This is because the personality of the secretary has been misrepresented. There are many impostor secretaries whose activities have lowered the image of the secretary thereby discouraging many people who would have loved to take up the vocation. The typewriter and now the computer commonly used by secretary, stenographer, typists and data entry personnel constitute the major deceptive factor in identification of the true secretary.

For many people anyone sitting behind the typewriter or computer is a secretary, a notion that is entirely wrong. The real graduate office secretary has his qualities. He is, indeed, an executive secretary. The qualities required by the graduate office secretary have been outlined by Whitehead (1977) to include a wide general education, secretarial skills, business knowledge and personal qualities. In the Nigerian context wide general education will include university degree, Higher National Diploma, National Diploma and Nigeria Certificate of Education. Secretarial skills include Shorthand 100 – 120 wpm and Typing 50 – 60 wpm, accurate spelling, sound knowledge of reprography, information and communication technology. Business knowledge involves a basic understanding of economics, commerce, book-keeping and law is very useful. In addition, a comprehensive understanding of his particular firm and its personalities, products and markets is invaluable. The personal qualities are commonsense, tact, discretion, initiative adaptability, honesty, and others.

With the above listed qualities one can start to imagine the type of office graduate secretary being described and his contribution to organization prospects and success. One is not therefore referring to just anyone with basic secretarial or data entry skills, sitting behind the typewriter or computer when talking about the graduate office secretary who carries out executive duties. Certainly, these are not graduate office secretaries rather they are at best typists, stenographers or data entry hands. Although the computer and other information and communication tools have all helped to facilitate and upgrade the work of the secretary, his work, however, goes beyond the manipulative skills. Spencer and Pruss (2000) remarked that such technology should not replace flair and intuition, rather it should remove unnecessary obstacles from
the secretary’s work to enable him concentrate fully on writing with the flair and drive that all good writing should possess. It requires more than the basic secretarial skills and scanty education to function as a secretary and contribute or organizational development and growth. It therefore, amounts to organizational suicide to entrust the complex responsibilities of the secretary to just anyone with the basic secretarial skills because of cheap cost of labour. The eventual costs of these mistakes to organizations are enormous. The mistakes include errors in typing important document and the poor image they convey, inability to interpret issues in correspondence correctly lack of prompt initiative, misplacing of important documents due to poor filing approach, poor organization of work leading to unnecessary delays and inability to deal with technical complex matters because of the weak educational background. It is relevant here to highlight some of the executive functions of the graduate office secretary which show that these functions cannot be handled be less qualified and competent hands because they impact on organizational prospects and success.

**EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAL DUTIES**

The executive secretarial duties expected of the graduate office secretary include; business correspondence, public relations, meetings, conferences and function, dairies and appointment and records management, etc. Two of these are briefly discussed hereunder:

(i) **Diaries and Appointments**

The efficient secretary is the communication center for the effective coordination of his department and its inter-relation with the work of the rest of the organization. His ability to control his executive’s diary is of primary importance. He must supervise his appointment and assist the executive to proceed speedily to a fruitful conclusion by ensuring that he is supplied with everything needed to make a sound decision. The other activities of the day should be scheduled to revolve around the appointments so that each day’s programme will be planned to allow the time necessary to receive visitors, settle them down before the appointment. He must liaise with the executive to know his policy regarding appointment, so that he can get on with other work.

(ii) **Meetings**

According to Whitehead (1977) in modern business the meeting is one of the most important parts of procedure. It is in some of these meetings that important decisions are taken. Before a meeting is held the secretary has many duties to perform. In particular, he must arrange the date, time and venue in consultation with the chairman, prepare notices to be sent out to all those interested and draw up the agenda and minutes of previous meeting for approval by the chairman before circulation. The secretary will usually take down minutes of the meeting in one of three forms. The first is verbatim, where everything is recorded word for word. The second method is to record conclusions only, so that the discussion that took place, the motions proposed and seconded, etc are not recorded. The third method is to record a concise summary of the discussion and the conclusion arrived at.

The purpose of highlighting these two executive duties is to establish that fact that not just anyone who sits behind the computer has the ability to function as office secretary. The functions discussed require more that native intelligence and average education. The are very important duties that cannot be left for anybody without the required background.
CHALLENGES OF TRAINING GRADUATE OFFICE SECRETARIES

There are always openings for topflight secretaries in both the public and private sectors. These sectors rely on the nation’s higher institutions of learning to supply them with this indispensable category of manpower. The office environment has metamorphosed into a very modern one from the traditional office known. The move now is towards a paperless office. This new trend according to Chukwumezie (2002) has helped enrich and widen the scope and practices of the secretarial profession in terms of speed, quality, accuracy and variety. There is, however, the need for the graduate office secretary to be at home with internet resources and other new innovations that assist the secretary to facilitate his work and provide the much needed assistance to his executive.

The training institutions have not responded sufficiently to the changes in the office and emerging secretarial practices. Their skill laboratories lack the needed equipment to adequately train graduate office secretaries for the challenges in the world of work. The trainers, themselves, need retraining as most of them still rely on the old methods of training. They are not versed in modern information and communication technologies and even the use of computer, which are crucial to the work of the office secretary. Chukwumezie (2002) has deplored the idea of hiring outsiders as part-time computer trainers, or sending secretarial students to other departments to learn computer skills. The knowledge and skill of secretarial students’ trainers must be urgently upgraded for their output to be relevant.

CONCLUSION

The most fascinating challenge facing the office secretary is the usage of his talents and skills for the prospects of the organization. Rather than just being content with his routine responsibilities and duties he must be aware that he is the backbone of the executive. An office secretary who lacks these abilities and skills would not be of much help to the executive and organization. Whitehead (1977) notes that the office secretary is the power behind the work of many executives, as he does more to promote the efficiency of the organization than any other occupation. His work is felt in all aspects of the organization because he is the key link between the executives or top management, board members, panels, or committees and the other workforce and the public. The prospects and success of any organization, whether it be business, government or non-governmental depend on the leadership of the organization. A dynamic, resourceful, creative and intelligent leadership does not operate in a vacuum. He needs a superb assistant, a confidant, an organizer - who is the graduate office secretary - to make him succeed and ensure the organizational progress and growth in the right direction. His level of training is the most distinguishing characteristic. It marks him out from other secretarial hands. It is therefore incumbent on the higher institutions of learning which, train graduate office secretaries to be alive to their responsibilities. Their training cannot be left in the hand of charlatans otherwise the office secretary’s profession will also be infiltrated by charlatans and this would impact negatively on the image of the profession. Employers’ of office secretaries must recruit the right caliber (graduates) in order to ensure that they contribute maximally to their organizations’ success.
REFERENCES


