

A Strategic Framework (Swot Analysis Construct) for the Future of Secretarial Profession in Nigeria

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Abstract:

With regards to the pessimistic and optimistic divides on the future of secretarial profession in Nigeria and anchored on the strength-based theory of professional development, the study constructed a strategic framework using SWOT analysis for the future of secretarial profession in Nigeria. Online survey was conducted on the secretarial educators and practitioners and the data analysed with descriptive and inferential statistics. The results revealed the SWOT construct indicating that the secretarial profession is formidable in curriculum contents, but weak in inclusiveness, state-of-the-art instructional facilities and equipment, adequate human teaching and technical resources and enrolment. In addition, advancement in technology, innovations and professionalisation are some opportunities for sustainable future, although there are threats of interlopers, economic downturn, new technology and government policy. Stakeholders should brace up to mitigating the negative impact of these threats by continuous review of curriculum, provision of the state-of-the-art technology and updated government policy on secretarial professional practice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Secretarial Profession, SWOT Analysis, Future of Secretarial Profession, Secretarial Curriculum and Office Technology, Management

INTRODUCTION

The secretarial profession is one of the oldest professions globally and perhaps a most dynamic one. In its early days, secretarial practice was implemented using tools and technology at the time. In the Pre-Roman Empire, the then secretaries (scribes) used chisels and styluses on clay, wood and waxes as writing tools. Then came the mechanical typewriters, Dictaphones, electric and electronic typewriters as well as the computers in the modern times facilitating the smooth functions of the secretaries (International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP), 1998 and Pril, 2011).

It is the capacity of secretarial profession to ‘absorb shucks’ of change occasioned by technology and business requirements that makes it dynamic. The profession, from history was inundated with changes in such a manner that some on the pessimistic side thought the profession would be extinct. Peril (2011) described two scenarios – the impact of economic recession and new technologies on the secretarial profession. It was reported that around two million secretarial staff lost their jobs in the United State of America (USA) owing to the recession in the economy and a discovery that the bosses could take advantage of technology to carry out some secretarial works on their own (Jacobs, 2015). Similarly, in Nigeria in recent times, under the guise of casualisation, and a fallout of automation, many secretarial staff of financial institutions lost their jobs (Adetayo, 2021). This is sending signals that with time secretaries could be replaced with technology and that the profession would no longer be required in employment.

However, on the optimistic standpoint, secretarial profession has come to stay. Commenting on the widely circulated concerns that the introduction of the computerised word-processing and voice recognition systems would replace the secretaries, Peril (2011) asserted that this has not happened since the early 1960s and that the secretaries of today have come to terms with the fact that technology is rather a facilitator of their jobs and has not succeeded in making the profession out modelled. Hence, by leveraging on the capabilities of technologies and the updates, secretarial profession would still stand tall in the future, though this calls for a strategic envisioning by the stakeholders. This paper provides an important strategic framework to sustain the future of secretarial profession in Nigeria. The framework modelled the SWOT analysis to construct the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats inherent in the contemporary secretarial profession in Nigeria.

Tracing the etymology of the term secretary which has existed for 500 years now (IAAP, 1998) found out that the word “secretary” ultimately comes from the same Latin word that is

translated to “secret”, stressing that its original meaning is: “one entrusted with the secrets and confidence of a superior.” In addition, in the Middle English it was *secretarie* and in Middle Latin it was *secretaries*, while in France, from the 13th to the 16th century, the word “*secretarire*” meant a confidant. It also became an administrative term meaning “someone who transcribes or arranges for another.” From the early days of profession, secretaries were required to assist a superior such as the king, clergy, and chief executives of organisations. They were entrusted with confidential matters of the principal.

As business expanded and technology advanced, the scope of secretarial practice broadened, and secretaries were required to work in a wide range of organisations just as the profession became more and more organised. The significant development of secretarial profession was marked by the establishment of a professional body in the USA. A professional body known as the National Secretarial Association was formed in 1942 and conducted the first professional examinations in 1951 and marked Secretary’s Day in 1952 to honour hardworking secretarial professionals in the office. To cater for versed entrants into the profession and for inclusiveness of secretarial and administrative jobs, the name of the association was changed in 1998 to International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) just as the day was also changed to Administrative Professional’s Day and Administrative Professional’s Week in 2000 (Evans, 2021). A corresponding development of the secretarial profession could also be noticed in the Europe, particularly the, UK. The Pitman house in London was very instrumental for the training of secretarial professional and the profession in the UK was modelled on specialist framework. The secretaries with specialisation in the medical, legal and the parliament are addressed as medical secretary, legal secretary, and verbatim reporters respectively. Brook Street (2019) reported that in the late 19th Century, Sir Isaac Pitman founded a school where students could qualify as shorthand writers. Originally, this school was only for male students, but as industrial expansion and World War I put increased pressure on the workforce throughout the early 20th century, more women started positions as secretaries. With the advent of the manual typewriter, the role expanded further to include correspondence typing and note-taking and by 1950's, over 1.5 million UK women worked as secretaries and the profession has become female dominated since then.

Today, secretarial profession has been firmly established all over the world and Nigeria has fully embraced the profession since independence in the 1960s. The definitions of the concept of secretary as given by the world-famous professional association (IAAP) and a famous British employment agent speak volumes of the context. The UK employment agent

(Indeed, 2021) defines secretary as an administrative professional who plays an integral role in business and other organizational environments, maintains, and organizes office tasks, implements procedures and carry out additional administrative duties, depending on the nature of their employment. For instance, the administrative tasks a secretary is responsible for can differ between industries such as law, private company sectors and government entities. The commonly encountered duties include: 1) working in a receptionist capacity to greet clients, customers and visitors, 2) answering and directing phone calls, 3) organizing documents and paperwork and maintaining a filing system, and 4) assisting supervisors and staff with company projects and tasks

Furthermore, (IAAP, 1998) defines an administrative professional (secretary) as an individual who possesses a mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative and judgment, and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority. On the home scene, the Chartered Institute of Certified Secretaries and Reporters of Nigeria (CICSRN), (2021), defines a secretary or official reporter as a professionally trained and qualified information technologist with mastery of modern office and administrative management processes and intuition for instantaneous comprehension of ideas and issues in human and organisation behaviours.

In the context of the current thoughts, the secretary has assumed a very versatile status which range generally from information processing and management, materials, and human relations management. Nigerian Institute of Professional Secretaries in Nigeria (NIPS) (2021) summed it up, writing that the modern secretary is an information, communication, and human management expert. To be effective in carrying out the professional duties, the secretary requires adequate training, tools such as information and communication technology devices and a host of soft skills.

The secretarial profession has been firmly rooted in other parts of the world such as the USA and the UK (United Kingdom) before it came to Nigeria following the activities of the colonial regime by 18th century. Secretarial practices continued after the independence in 1960 but was firmly established in the 1980s and 90s with its inclusion in the formal educational system, (FRN, 1998) and the establishment of professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Certified Secretaries and Reporters of Nigeria (CICSRN) in 1981 and Nigerian Institute of Professional Secretaries in Nigeria (NIPS) in 1998 and formally launched in January 2003, (CICSRN, 2021 and NIPS, 2021). These factors – inclusion in the formal educational system, establishment of professional bodies gave much impetus to the growth of

the profession in Nigeria and the optimism, the profession has come to stay and there could yet be a future for the profession in Nigeria.

The training of secretaries has been duly recognised in the Nigeria educational system especially at the sub-professional level. Some exploratory secretarial training take place in both the junior and senior secondary school levels in Nigeria. This is by the introduction of business studies that contains rudiments of office practice and keyboarding that a key to the take off in secretarial training (FRN, 2013). At the tertiary level (Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Universities), secretarial training is in full swing. The curriculum of secretarial training is enriched with contents that are general, liberal and ICT based, (Olukkems and Boluwaji, 2014 and Ukata, 2019). With the latest reviews of the secretarial curriculum, now with a nomenclature of Office Technology and Management (OTM) (Aina, 2019), there seems to be adequate inclusion of ICT courses in terms of the national minimum and the local contents. For example, at the Federal Polytechnic, Idah the Department of Office Technology and Management in addition to the national minimum standards, included Electronic Records Management and Keyboarding that is offered at both National and Higher National Diploma programmes in the curriculum. Other polytechnics and tertiary institutions are enriching the OTM curriculum as the times and environment demand. At the professional levels, the CICS RN and NIPS are at the vanguard of ensuring that all secretarial staff in Nigeria are professional certified, (CICS RN. 2021 and NIPS. 2021).

One theory of professional development fitting this context is strength-based as developed by Zwart, Korthagen and Atterma-Noordewier (2014). This theory focuses on the strengths and successes of the individual or the group of individuals for the development the aspired profession. Therefore, the author proposes SWOT Analysis as a strategic framework for the future of secretarial profession in Nigeria. SWOT was developed by management experts in Harvard Business School since 1950s as a tool for strategic management decision (Friesener, 2017). It has been made popular by the university and has been universally acknowledged as a strategic management planning and decision-making which can be applied on any issue involving education as well (Morrison, 2021). SWOT is an acronym that is rendered as: 1) S - Strengths: factors that are likely to have a positive effect on achieving the desired goal, 2) W- Weaknesses: Factors that are likely to impact negatively on achieving the desired goal, 3) O- Opportunities: External factors that could positively impact on achieving the goal, and 3) T- Threats: External factors and conditions that could hamper the achievement of goals. When this tool is well constructed, the desired goal on any issue involving the future

of secretarial profession could be achieved consequent on the results of the construct – the observed strengths.

It has been hinted that there are divides on the future of secretarial profession, particularly in Nigeria – the pessimistic and optimistic sides. Taking side with the optimistic divide, the researcher addressed a construct of strategic framework for the future of the secretarial profession. Therefore, the major purpose of the study was to construct a strategic framework for sustaining the future of secretarial profession in Nigeria. The study sought to identify: 1) strengths of the secretarial profession in Nigeria, 2) weaknesses of the secretarial profession in Nigeria, 3) opportunities of the secretarial profession in Nigeria, and 4) threats of the secretarial profession in Nigeria.

The research questions related to the four SWOT components – strength, weakness, opportunity and threats. The questions raised were ‘what are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of secretarial profession?’ The hypothesis raised was: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of secretarial educators and practitioners on SWOT factors for secretarial profession in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopts survey research designs, using online survey method of data collection to generate data for the study. The target population is all secretarial professionals in Nigeria consisting of the secretarial educators (those involving in teaching and training of secretaries) and the practitioners who are involved in practising secretarial profession in the industry. By purposive sampling technique online survey was target at the secretarial educators and practitioners that are registered on the social media (Facebook, Messenger and Whatsapp, etc). Instrument was self-constructed eliciting opinions on SWOT for the secretarial profession. It is Likert type instrument of 5-point rating scale with response mode of ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. The questionnaire items relate to the critically thought-out assertions in literature on SWOT factors for the secretarial profession in Nigeria. The Google Form was used to post the instrument online and for a space of about two weeks, 108 copies of the online survey instrument were delivered and used for analysis. The results were presented in tables and analysed using descriptive and inferential (t’test) statistical tools.

The decision rule was based on cut-off of 3.50 (upper limit of the mean of the 5-point rating scale used) to answer the research questions. Therefore, with a mean score of any item of the SWOT that is greater than or equal to 3.50, the item is on the affirmative and with a

mean score that is less than the cut-off, the item is on the negative. Thus, the SWOT factors are either a strength or not a strength, a weakness or not a weakness, an opportunity or not opportunity and a threat or not a threat respectively. For testing the hypotheses of no difference between the Practitioner and the educators, the t' test statistical tool was employed using SPSS (Statistical Packages for Social Sciences) version 23 for the computation. The probability cut-off is 0.05 on two-tailed distribution with a degree of freedom of 106 were determined. The researcher takes respective decisions based on the difference between the t' calculated and the critical value of t'. The hypothesis regarding an item of SWOT factor is rejected if the 't' calculated is greater than or equal to the critical value of 't'. On the other hand, if the 't' calculated is less than the critical value, the hypothesis is not rejected, and this implies that the two groups showed a significant or no significant statistical difference in their opinions on the respective items.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis of the data generated are summarised and presented in the respective tables as follows:

Table 1. Strengths in Secretarial Profession

No.	SWOT Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1	Strong digital curriculum contents	3.89	1.46	Strength
2	Diversification in curriculum contents	3.70	1.15	Strength
3	Entrepreneurial course orientation	3.70	1.33	Strength
4	Comprehensive communication contents	3.78	1.14	Strength
5	Core Office management skills orientation	3.81	1.13	Strength

From table 1, all the listed five items are strength factors of the current secretarial profession in Nigeria. These include strong digital curriculum contents, diversification in curriculum contents, entrepreneurial course orientation, comprehensive communication contents and core office management skills orientation.

Table 2. Weaknesses in Secretarial Profession

No.	SWOT Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1	Lacks inclusiveness	4.15	1.01	Weakness
2	Insufficient practical instructional facilities	4.44	0.74	Weakness
3	Inadequate teaching and technical human resources	4.04	1.04	Weakness
4	Lacks state-of-the art in technologies	4.48	0.92	Weakness
5	Insufficient enrolment	3.59	1.45	Weakness

The results shown in table 2 reveal that there are five weaknesses in the current secretarial profession, including lack of inclusiveness, insufficient practical instructional facilities and inadequate teaching and technical human resources. Others include lack of state-of-the-art technologies and insufficient enrolment.

Table 3. Opportunities in Secretarial Profession

No.	SWOT Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1	Advancement in ICT	4.89	.32	Opportunity
2	Diversification	4.33	.86	Opportunity
3	Innovations	4.56	.84	Opportunity
4	Professionalisation	4.48	.92	Opportunity

The opportunities revealed in this study as presented in table 3 are advancement in ICT, diversification for the professionals, innovations and professionalism.

Table 4. Threats in Secretarial Profession

No.	SWOT Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1	Interlopers	3.96	1.21	Threat
2	New technology	3.85	1.18	Threat
3	Economic Downturn	3.59	1.20	Threat
4	Government policy	4.26	0.93	Threat

The threats revealed in secretarial profession as shown in table 4 and activities of interlopers, incursion of new technology, economic downturn and government policy.

Table 5. Difference between Practitioners and Educators

No	SWOT Factors	Mean		'T'	Decision
		Practitioners	Educators		
A	Strengths				
1	Strong digital curriculum contents	4.15	3.64	1.84	Not Significant
2	Diversification in curriculum contents	3.69	3.71	-0.10	Not Significant
3	Entrepreneurial course orientation	3.69	3.71	-0.09	Not Significant
4	Comprehensive communication contents	3.54	4.00	-2.14	Significant
5	Core Office management skills orientation	4.00	3.64	1.66	Not Significant
B	Weaknesses				
1	Lacks inclusiveness	4.39	3.93	2.39	Significant
2	Insufficient practical instructional facilities	4.54	4.36	1.28	Not Significant
3	Inadequate teaching and technical human resources	4.31	3.79	2.68	Significant
4	Lacks state-of-the art in technologies	4.69	4.29	2.34	Significant
5	Insufficient enrolment	3.69	3.50	0.69	Not Significant
C	Opportunities				
1	Advancement in ICT	4.92	4.86	1.09	Not Significant

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2	Diversification	4.54	4.14	2.43	Significant
3	Innovations	4.54	4.57	-0.20	Not Significant
4	Professionalisation	4.31	4.64	-1.91	Not Significant
D Threats					
1	Interlopers	4.46	3.50	4.49	Significant
2	New technology	4.15	3.57	2.63	Significant
3	Economic Downturn	4.23	3.00	6.18	Significant
4	Government policy	4.69	3.85	5.19	Significant

From table 5, the results of the test of hypotheses are summarised categories of A – D representing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. In category A, there are no significant differences in the opinions of practitioners and educators on 4 strength factors including strong digital curriculum contents, diversification in curriculum contents, entrepreneurial course orientation and core office management skills orientation, but there is significant difference in comprehensive communication contents, tilting to the educators. Similarly, in category B, there are no significant difference in two factors – insufficient practical instructional facilities and insufficient enrolment, while in three factors the difference is significant which are lack of inclusiveness, inadequate teaching and technical human resources and lack of state-of-the art technologies: all in favour of the practitioners. In addition, for category C (opportunity), practitioners and educators express similar opinions on three including advancement in ICT, innovations and professionalism, while they differ in one which is diversification tilting to the practitioners. For category D (threats), there are significant difference in all the four factors – interlopers, new technology, economic downturn and government policy in favour of the practitioners.

The SWOT Construct

Table 6. SWOT Analysis of Secretarial Profession in Nigeria

Strengths		Weaknesses	
Strong digital curriculum contents		Lacks inclusiveness	
Diversification in curriculum contents		Insufficient practical instructional facilities	
Entrepreneurial course orientation		Inadequate teaching and technical human resources	
Comprehensive communication contents		Lacks state-of-the art in technologies	
Core office management skills orientation		Insufficient enrolment	
Opportunities		Threats	
Advancement in ICT		Interlopers	
Diversification		New technology	
Innovations		Economic Downturn	
Professionalisation		Government policy	

Source: Researcher (2021)

The secretarial professionals demonstrated consensus in identifying the SWOT factors for the profession. The difference observed was for the sake of emphasis. The practitioners were very vehement on threats facing the profession which include the activities of the interlopers, incursion of new technology, economic downturn, and lack of government policy framework for the professional practice. On the other hand, the educators emphasised more on the strength of the inclusion of communication contents in the curriculum, which is expected of educators to be better positioned to determine the appropriateness of curriculum.

The SWOT factors assented to in this study were critically thought out and buttressed by literature. For instance, Peril (2011) asserted that the fear of secretaries being replaced by technology has not happened since the early 1960s and that the secretaries of today have come to terms with the fact that technology is rather a facilitator of their jobs and has not succeeded in making the profession out modelled. The recent review of secretarial (OTM) curriculum and window of inclusion of local contents has provided a rich curriculum of secretaries in Nigeria, hence a veritable source of strengths. The graduates of the OTM programme have a sound pre-practice education and a future opportunity for the profession.

However, there is a caution - secretarial profession in Nigeria is under threat and unless some priority actions are taken, the expected future may be a mirage. There are many people who claim to be secretaries (interlopers) but are not, meddling with secretarial practice. Traditionally, there was confusion (conflict) between the role of typist, clerk-typist, junior stenographer and secretary (Cark, 1984). Secretaries by training can perform the role of the rest, whereas the other officers cannot perform some role of the secretaries though they sometimes meddle, and secretaries see this as interloping. This conflict still exists today even at a very high level. With manual typewriters and perhaps shorthand already out of the scene and the computer now has taken over, the computer operators' role, conflict with the secretary's role as well as officers on the executive officer's cadre in the Nigeria civil service. This conflict potentially is damaging to the future of secretarial profession as the chunk of their functions would be taken away by these 'ally' office workers.

A spill over effect of role conflict in the secretarial profession would be a proliferation of professional bodies which might not actually be streamlined with secretarial profession. In addition, if many professional bodies in the same profession ensued, the unhealthy competition is bound to occur, and could threaten healthy professional development. The threat of advancement in ICT is a phenomenon to watched. Continuous advancement in new technology

potentially renders the current skills become obsolete. This implies continuous training and retraining for a sustainable future for the secretarial profession.

CONCLUSION

Secretarial profession in Nigeria is formidable in terms of curriculum contents with inclusion of ICT courses, communication, and entrepreneurial orientation. The training in secretarial profession is broad and this gives the graduates the opportunity to face the future with confidence. The continuous change in technology is not likely going to impact negatively on the future of the profession, though caution must be taken to streamline professionalisation of the profession and regulatory framework for the practitioners. With regards to the construct (SWOT Analysis), discussion of findings and the conclusion, recommendations have been made to the stakeholders (Government, Institutions of Learning, Educators and Practitioners) as follows: 1) continuous review of the OTM curriculum for the minimum standards and local contents should be done in every three years and henceforth enough provision should be made to accommodate all citizens including the physically challenged, adequate instructional facilities and human resources for teaching and learning, 2) with industry linkages and public-private partnership in addition to government funding, state-of-the-art technologies should be provided for teaching and learning in OTM, 3) more advocacies should be embarked upon for enrolment drive of the youths (male and female) to OTM, 4) professional bodies should gear up to enforce standards of certification and practice for the profession. There should be a halt to the proliferation of professional bodies to ensure focus and healthy growth of the profession and to check the activities of the interlopers, 5) stakeholders should continue to leverage on the new technology to facilitate the practice, while innovations and economic diversification should be the hallmarks of the professionals in the profession, and 6) high level of lobbying should continue to be made on the governments to ensure immediate employment structural framework for the secretarial professionals. This should include status description, functions and remuneration.

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