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

James Omatule Oborah

Department of Office Technology and Management, The Federal Polytechnic, Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria,

jooborah@fepoda.edu.ng

Abstract:

About the pessimistic and optimistic divides on the future of the 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 the secretarial profession in Nigeria. The online survey was conducted on secretarial educators and practitioners, and the data was analyzed 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, technological advancement, innovations, and professionalization are opportunities for a sustainable future, although there are threats of interlopers, economic downturn, new technology, and government policy. Stakeholders should brace up to mitigate these threats' negative impact by continuously reviewing curriculum, providing state-of-the-art technology, and updating government policy on secretarial professional practice in Nigeria.

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

INTRODUCTION

Secretarial is one of the oldest and most dynamic professions globally. 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, and modern computers facilitating the smooth functions of the secretaries (International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP), 1998 and Pril, 2011).

The secretarial profession's capacity to 'absorb shucks' of change occasioned by technology and business requirements 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 States 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 work on their own (Jacobs, 2015). Similarly, in Nigeria recently, under the guise of casualization and fallout of automation, many secretarial staff of financial institutions lost their jobs (Adetayo, 2021). It sends signals that, with time, secretaries could be replaced with technology and that the profession would no longer be required in employment.

However, from an optimistic standpoint, the secretarial profession has come to stay. Commenting on the widely circulated concerns that the introduction of computerized 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 instead a facilitator of their jobs and has not succeeded in making the profession out modeled. Hence, by leveraging the capabilities of technologies and updates, the secretarial profession will still stand tall in the future, though this calls for strategic envisioning by the stakeholders. This paper provides a critical strategic framework to sustain the future of the secretarial profession in Nigeria. The framework modeled 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 Middle English, it was secretary, and in Middle Latin,

it was secretaries, while in France, from the 13th to the 16th century, the word "secretarial" meant a confidant. It also became an administrative term, "someone who transcribes or arranges for another." From the early days of the profession, secretaries were required to assist a superior such as the king, clergy, and chief executives of organizations. They were entrusted with confidential matters of the principal.

As the business expanded and technology advanced, the scope of secretarial practice broadened. Secretaries were required to work in a wide range of organizations just as the profession became more and more organized. The significant development of the secretarial profession was marked by establishing a professional body in the USA. A professional body known as the National Secretarial Association was formed in 1942. It conducted the first professional examinations in 1951 and marked Secretary's Day in 1952.to honor hardworking secretarial professionals in the office. To cater to 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 Europe, mainly the UK. The Pitman House in London was instrumental in training secretarial professionals, and the profession in the UK was modeled on the specialist framework. The secretaries with specialization in the medical, legal, and parliament are addressed as medical secretaries, legal secretaries, 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. Initially, this school was only for male students. However, as industrial expansion and World War I 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 the 1950s, over 1.5 million UK women worked as secretaries, and the profession had become female-dominated since then.

Today, the secretarial profession has been firmly established worldwide, and Nigeria has fully embraced it since its independence in the 1960s. The definitions of the secretary concept, 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 a secretary as an administrative professional who plays an integral role in business and other organizational environments, maintains and organizes office tasks, implements

procedures, and carries 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, can 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 organization behaviors.

In the current context, the secretary has assumed a very versatile status, which generally ranges from information processing and management to materials and human relations management. The 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 effectively carry out 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 the 18th century. Secretarial practices continued after the independence in 1960. However, they were firmly established in the 1980s and 90s with their 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 and establishment of professional bodies- gave much impetus to the growth of the profession in Nigeria and the optimism that the profession has come to stay and that there could be a future in Nigeria.

Secretaries' training has been duly recognized in the Nigerian educational system, especially at the sub-professional level. Some exploratory secretarial training occurs in Nigeria's junior and senior secondary school levels. It is by introducing business studies that contain rudiments of office practice and keyboarding that are key to the take-off in secretarial training (FRN, 2013). Secretarial training is in full swing at the tertiary level (Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, and Universities). The secretarial training curriculum is enriched with general, liberal, and ICT-based (Olukkems & Boluwaji, 2014; Ukata, 2019). With the latest reviews of the secretarial curriculum, now with a nomenclature of Office Technology and Management (OTM) (Aina, 2019), there is an adequate inclusion of ICT courses regarding the national minimum and the local contents. For example, at the Federal Polytechnic, Idah, and the Department of Office Technology and Management, in addition to the national minimum standards, Electronic Records Management and Keyboarding are offered in both National and Higher National Diploma programs in the curriculum. Other polytechnics and tertiary institutions are enriching the OTM curriculum as time and the environment demands it. At the professional levels, the CICSRN and NIPS are at the vanguard of ensuring that all secretarial staff in Nigeria are professionally certified (CICSRN. 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 of the aspired profession. Therefore, the author proposes SWOT Analysis as a strategic framework for the future secretarial profession in Nigeria. SWOT was developed by management experts at Harvard Business School in the 1950s as a tool for strategic management decisions (Friesener, 2017). It has been made famous by the university and has been universally acknowledged as a strategic management planning and decision-making tool that can be applied to any issue involving education (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 the secretarial profession could be achieved, consequently, based on the results of the construct – the observed strengths.

It has been hinted that there are divides on the future of the secretarial profession, particularly in Nigeria – the pessimistic and optimistic sides. Taking sides with the optimistic divide, the researcher addressed a construct of a strategic framework for the future of the secretarial profession. Therefore, the study's primary purpose was to construct a strategic framework for sustaining the future of the 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 the secretarial profession?' The hypothesis raised was: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of secretarial educators and practitioners on SWOT factors for the secretarial profession in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopts survey research designs, using an online survey method of data collection to generate data for the study. The target population is all secretarial professionals in Nigeria consisting of secretarial educators (those involved in teaching and training secretaries) and practitioners involved in practicing the secretarial profession in the industry. By purposive sampling technique online survey was targeted at the secretarial educators and practitioners registered on social media (Facebook et al., etc). The instrument was self-constructed, eliciting opinions on SWOT for the secretarial profession. It is a Likert-type instrument with a 5-point rating scale with a response mode of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.' The questionnaire items relate to the critically thought-out assertions in the 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 analyzed using descriptive and inferential (test) statistical tools.

The decision rule was based on a cut-off of 3.50 (the 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 greater than or equal to 3.50, the item is in the affirmative, and with a mean score that is less than the cut-off, the item is 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 hypothesis 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 a two-tailed distribution with a degree of freedom 106. The researcher makes decisions based on the difference between the t' calculated and the critical value of t.' The hypothesis regarding an item of the 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.

REALUTS 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 five listed items are strength factors of the current secretarial profession in Nigeria. These include strong digital curriculum content, diversification in curriculum content, entrepreneurial course orientation, comprehensive communication content, 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 the current secretarial profession has five areas for improvement. These include a lack of inclusiveness, insufficient practical instructional

facilities, and inadequate teaching and technical human resources. Others include a need for more 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	Professionalization	4.48	.92	Opportunity

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

Table 4. Threats in the 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 the secretarial profession, as shown in Table 4, include the activities of interlopers, the incursion of new technology, the 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
2	Diversification	4.54	4.14	2.43	Significant
3	Innovations	4.54	4.57	-0.20	Not Significant

4	Professionalization	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 test results of hypotheses are summarised in 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. However, comprehensive communication content is significantly different among educators. Similarly, in category B, there are no significant differences 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 favor 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 differences in all four factors – interlopers, new technology, economic downturn, and government policy favoring the practitioners.

The SWOT Construct

Table 6. SWOT Analysis of the 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
Professionalization	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 vehement on threats facing the profession, including the interlopers' activities, the incursion of new technology, the economic downturn, and the lack of government policy framework for professional practice. On the other hand, the educators emphasized the strength of the inclusion of communication content in the curriculum, which is expected of educators to be better positioned to determine the appropriateness of the 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 instead a facilitator of their jobs and has not succeeded in making the profession out modeled. The recent review of the secretarial (OTM) curriculum and window of inclusion of local content has provided a rich curriculum of secretaries in Nigeria, hence a veritable source of strengths. The graduates of the OTM program have a sound pre-practice education and future opportunities in the profession.

However, there is a caution - the secretarial profession in Nigeria is under threat, and unless some priority actions are taken, the expected future may be a mirage. Many claim to be secretaries (interlopers) but are not meddling with secretarial practice. Traditionally, there needed to be more clarity (conflict) between the roles 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. However, 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 taken over, the computer operators' role conflicts with the secretary's role as well as officers on the executive officer's cadre in the Nigeria civil service. This conflict damages the future of the secretarial profession as these 'ally' office workers would take a chunk of their functions away.

A spillover effect of role conflict in the secretarial profession would be a proliferation of professional bodies that might need to be streamlined with the secretarial profession. In addition, if many professional bodies in the same profession ensue, 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 obsolete. It implies continuous training and retraining for a sustainable future for the secretarial profession.

CONCLUSION

The secretarial profession in Nigeria is formidable in terms of curriculum contents, including ICT courses, communication, and entrepreneurial orientation. The training in the secretarial profession is broad and allows the graduates to face the future confidently. Continuous technology change is not likely to negatively impact the profession's future. However, caution must be taken to streamline the professionalization of the profession and regulatory framework for the practitioners. With regards to the construct (SWOT Analysis), discussion of findings, and 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 the new technology to facilitate the practice. At the same time, innovations and economic diversification should be the hallmarks of the professionals in the profession, and 6) a high level of lobbying should continue to be made on the governments to ensure immediate employment structural framework for the secretarial professionals. It should include a status description, functions, and remuneration.

REFERENCES

Adetayo, O. (2021). There is no career path and no raise for Nigeria's contract workers. https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/7/1/no-career-path-no-raise-for-nigerias-contract-bank-workers.

Aina, M. A. (2019). Training of office technology and management education students for job demands and self-employment in Ekiti state, Nigeria. Journal of Advances in Social Sciences and Humanities, 5(6), 564 - 705

Brook Street.com (2021). The life of a secretary from 1946 to today. https://www.brookstreet.co.uk/blog/2019/04/the-life-of-a-secretary-from-1946-to-today.

Chartered Institute of Certified Secretaries and Reporters of Nigeria (CICSRN). (2021). About us. https://www.cicsrng.org/.

Clark, C. (1984). What it means to be a secretary as perceived by first-year information specialist students: the changing work the changing curriculum (Dissertation). https://opus.uleth.ca/bitstream/handle/10133/1123/Clark_Carolyn.pdf.

Evan, K. (2021). A look back at the secretary profession. https://www.jobs.net/Article/CB-93-Talent-Network-Hospitality-A-Look-Back-at-the-Secretary-Profession/

Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1998). National policy on education (3rd edition). NERDC, Lagos.

Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2013). National policy on education (6th edition). NERDC, Lagos.

Friesner, T. (2017). History of SWOT Analysis. http://www.marketingteacher.com/history-of-swot-analysis.

Indeed. (2021). Secretary job description: Top duties and qualifications. https://www.indeed.com/hire/job-description/secretary.

International Association Administrative Professionals (IAAP)(1998). History of the secretarial profession. http://backlundn.faculty.mjc.edu/313/history-of-sec.pdf.

Jacobs, E. (2015, July 1). The case of vanishing secretary. https://www.ft.com/content/9420a7b0-d159-11e4-98a4-00144feab7de.

Morrison, M. (2021). SWOT Analysis for schools and education. https://rapidbi.com/swot-analysis-for-schools-and-education/.

Nigeria Institute of Professional Secretaries (NIPS). (2021). Nigeria institute of professional secretaries. https://nipsecretaries.org/.

Olukemi, J. O. & Boluwaji, O. J. (2014). Challenges of curriculum development in office technology and management in tertiary institutions.

Peril, L. (2011). Do secretaries have a future? https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/27/opinion/27peril.html.

Ukata, P. F. (2019). Criticisms of Nigeria office technology and management curriculum review and implementation issues and strategies: a study of Rivers State Polytechnics. International Journal of Vocational and Technical Education Research, 5(6), 29 – 59.

Zwart, R. C., Korthagen, F. A. J & Atterma-Noordewier, S. (2014). A strength-based approach to teacher professional development. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263737664_A_strength-based_approach_to_teacher_professional_development/link/547ddf360cf285ad5b08adc9/download.