



EXPLORING THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF SECRETARIAL PRACTICE: A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF THE SECRETARY

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Abstract

This study delves into the realm of secretarial ethics, examining both the challenges and opportunities inherent in ethical conduct for secretaries. Conducted within colleges of education in the north-western States of Nigeria, the research delves into the ethical dilemmas faced by secretaries and the potential benefits of upholding principles such as honor, integrity, and trustworthiness in their professional practice. Employing an interpretive qualitative approach, the study engaged six human resource managers directly involved with secretarial staff and six office technology and management (OTM) lecturers responsible for training future secretaries. Data analysis was facilitated using Nvivo 10 software to ensure rigor and accuracy. Given the sensitive nature of secretarial duties, which often involve handling confidential organizational information, the study underscores the indispensable role of ethical behavior in the secretary's profession. It concludes that maintaining ethical standards is paramount, particularly as secretaries are entrusted with safeguarding organizations' privileged decision-making processes. Finally, the study recommends recognizing and rewarding secretaries who demonstrate ethical conduct as a means to incentivize and perpetuate such behavior, serving as positive examples for their peers.

Keywords: Ethical practice, Challenges and Prospects, Unethical practice, Secretarial practice

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing desire among public and private sector employees to act ethically while carrying out organizational activities effectively and efficiently in order to achieve truthful and modest results (Peter, 2018). Organizations are now more concerned about the reputation of the employees they hire, whom they expect to be courteous and ethical. However, according to Master and Smith (2014), ethical concerns refer to a wide range of standards and procedures relating to employees' ethical behaviour. The ethical aspects of this paper were specifically related to the ethical conduct of secretaries. Four ethical considerations were chosen and discussed for

the purposes of this study; the selection of the four ethical considerations was done on purpose to keep the scope of discussion in this paper to a minimum. The four (4) ethical considerations discussed in this paper are: 1. Teamwork and collaboration, 2. Punctuality, 3. Confidential abilities, and 4. Dressing Team work and collaboration are essential in providing effective and efficient outcome of a given tasks. This is why corporate private and public organisations have recognized the growing values of teamwork and collaboration. Teamwork and collaboration provide benefits, according to Diane and Fred (2013), which include contributions to team meetings, facilitation of team member contributions, maintaining a positive team climate, and responding to conflicts. These qualities are also important since they will help members work together more effectively. This is because a team is formed when individuals work together to achieve a common purpose. It also entails collaborating and coordinating in order to complete defined tasks with clear goals (Mahlangu, Pitsoe, Victor & Isingoma, 2014). However, due to the nature of their work, secretaries require teamwork and collaboration abilities (O'Leary, Manojlovich, Johnson, Estrella, Hanrahan, Leykum, & Williams, 2020). Punctuality is an important aspect of secretarial ethics; the secretary is required to be on time and close the office when the working hours are complete. Coming to work on time and leaving when the office is closed is a vital quality that all employees, especially the secretary, should possess (Schrita and Mohamad, 2017). The secretary arrives at work before his or her boss and leaves only after the boss has left (Alam et al., 2025).

According to Usman (2020), the secretary's work is fully supportive of the boss; as a result, the secretary must be an excellent timekeeper who values time and adheres to established schedules. This attitude demonstrates professionalism in the secretary and allows him or her to accomplish work effectively and timely. However, when a secretary is unable to arrive on time and close on time, he or she risks losing goodwill as well as the expected professionalism demanded of him or her. A secretary is someone who is employed to handle official correspondence, receive visitors, and do a variety of office activities which involve interaction with people both inside and outside the organization (Onifade, 2009). This employee should be able to display ethical abilities that will allow him or her to carry out duties effectively and efficiently (Hossen & Pauzi, 2025). Because of their inability to work in teams and interact with coworkers, as well as their lack of punctuality, confidentiality, and adherence to the institution's dress code, some secretaries were not considered professional secretaries (Sequeira, Mendonca, Mandep, Kataria & Tiwari, 2014). Despite receiving college training and being taught the importance of working in teams, some secretaries lacked the ability to work in a teams and collaborate with colleagues. Here you'll find a secretary who refuses to collaborate with co-workers and when they are given tasks, they come up with excuses. Some secretaries fail to report to work on time and can close at any time during business hours. Two attributes that the secretary must possess are corporate dress and decency. This quality offers the secretary a pleasant and professional appearance, which appeals to company visitors. Dressing decently not only gives a positive first impression on visitors, but it also increases employee confidence and job satisfaction (Hossen & Pauzi, 2025). Some secretaries, unfortunately, do not dress adequately and do not follow their organization's dress code. A secretary might show up at work in a pair of slippers or jeans and a t-shirt. Employees should not wear this type of casual clothes during business hours (Rashed et al., 2025).

The term 'confidential secretary' refers to an individual trained to handle confidential matters when employed Victor, (2019). Therefore, the responsibilities of the secretary in both the private and public organisations have become comprehensive in the management and administration of secretarial functions (Okpokwasili, 2018). Therefore, the modern secretarial profession requires the ability of the secretary to preserve secrets as an important ethical criterion. This is an extremely vital ethical attribute for a secretary to have. Because even the word 'secretary' derives from the word 'secret,' a secretary is thought to be a custodian of secrets, which is why some organizations refer to secretaries as 'confidential secretaries.' That was to stress the secretary's role,

which includes dealing with, managing, and maintaining organizational confidentiality. Secretaries in other organizations, on the other hand, abuse their authority to protect workplace secrets by disclosing management decisions to unauthorized personnel. Some secretaries are now capable of photocopying official documents for interested parties. This culture of secretaries divulging government secrets is typical in Nigerian institutes of education in the north-western part of the country (Mohd Pauzi & Shahadat Hossen, 2025).

Research Methodology

Interpretive qualitative design was adopted, using semi-structured interview to collect data from six (6) human resource managers and six (6) office technology and management lecturers. The paper depends on open-ended interviews to gain a better understanding of experts (Karim, 2013). A wealth of information was acquired since experts were picked based on set of criteria. The following criteria were used to choose participants: Appropriate experience and extensive knowledge in the experts' disciplines. Years of experience in the subject area. Experience in dealing with graduate secretaries; and Willingness to participate in the research. Participants signed a permission form indicating their desire to participate. They were informed that their voices would be recorded and used solely for the purposes of this study, according to the consent form. Their genuine names would not be revealed, according to the form; instead, pseudonyms would be used to represent them. The participants were informed about why they were chosen to participate, the length of the interviews, the use of audio recording equipment to record their voices during the interviews, and how the information they provided would be treated with the utmost confidentiality (Becky, 2021). To make the data analysis process easier, thematic data analysis was utilized in conjunction with Nvivo 10. As is usual in qualitative research, the interview methodology was developed with ethical considerations in mind. Because the purpose of the study was to undertake an in-depth analysis of the study gap, the qualitative approach was chosen.

Data Collection Methodology

Karim (2013), recounted that in qualitative research there are standardized data collection techniques which include document review, interviews, focus group and observation. This paper employed semi-structured interviews to collect data. Semi structured interviews avails the study to obtain rich data from participants. This technique allows participants to give information which might not be asked by the researcher concerning the study, and that information is useful to the study. Semi-structured interviews also have an advantage of answering questions which are beyond 'yes' or 'no'. This advantage avails the study to obtain adequate information during data collection. Based on the research question of the study, an empirical saturation was attained. After conducting series of interviews, similar response was given which necessitate suspension of data collection. The rule in qualitative says, data collection should be suspended when new useful information is not coming from participants bringing the data collection process to saturation level (Elmusharaf, 2012).

Analysis of the Data

Thematic data analysis was adopted in this study though the use of pattern coding to establish themes. Nvivo 10 was employed to facilitate the data analysis process. The interview comments were transcribed verbatim after each session, this was done before commencement of the analysis. This process has ensured true presentations of participants' actual statements. Unwanted responses were filtered. Nvivo 10 inherent features aided the study in developing a hierarchical model which depicts coherent linkages of participants responses during data collections.

Results and Discussion

Ethics considerations are required in any profession, according to Ingham-Broomfield (2017), in order to increase professional development and serve as promoters of a particular profession. Secretarial work, like any other

profession, has its own set of ethical considerations that must be understood before a person can call themselves a professional secretary. This paper focused on four ethical norms that secretaries should follow. They include teamwork and collaboration, timeliness, secrecy, and dressing. Participants discussed these ethical considerations in depth, yielding some interesting outcomes. A participant was questioned about his impressions of his department secretaries' abilities and support for teamwork and collaboration among coworkers. The participant regretted the fact that secretaries frequently make excuses and only cooperate on a few occasions. According to the participant, the secretary's unwillingness to collaborate in teamwork is impeding the office's daily operations. Other participants stated their dissatisfaction with their secretaries' lack of enthusiasm for teamwork. Some secretaries, according to these participants, have a habit of not carrying out assignments given to them while working in teams. The secretaries would argue that working under the supervision of their immediate supervisor is their principal assignment. Participants reported that secretaries need to be better informed so that they can stop acting in this unjustified manner. The majority of participants experienced comparable incidents in their workplaces, and they recommended that colleges should teach OTM graduates about their duties when working in groups. The secretary's behaviour of not cooperating when it comes to team work contradicts Driskell, Salas and Driskell, (2018) were they opined that team work and collaboration is an art that all employees should endeavour to acquire. Another participant was reported as noting that their secretaries need to be re-oriented so that they would be more aware of their obligations when working in teams. Simulated everyday office routines, according to the participant, should be conducted so that secretaries can become familiar with regular office routines, which entail teamwork.

Punctuality is an important quality for all employees, but it is especially important in the secretarial field. This is because a professional secretary is required to arrive at work before his boss and leave after the boss has left for the day (Onifade, 2009). According to study conducted by Abdul-Kahar(2015), the majority of secretaries are late to work and routinely close before their bosses, participants drew attention on this incompetence. Participants suggested that, during training, secretaries should be taught the importance of arriving on time to the office and close as appropriate.

Another participant mentioned that their secretaries have not been able to make it to work on time. In some cases, the boss had to wait for the secretary to arrive before starting office work. This is because the secretaries work for the government; yet, such behavior would not be accepted in the private sector. The secretary is responsible for safeguarding the organization's confidential records and information. As a result, the secretary's ability to maintain strict secrecy is crucial. The operations of the organizations where the secretary works are always compromised when the secretary lacks this expertise. This is due to the danger of sensitive information being shared with those who do not have permission to know. Participants criticized this attitude and urged that it should be changed in order for the secretary to be able to properly manage the organization's information. Because of the nature of the secretary's job, all participants felt that knowledge of the secretary's ability to keep office secrets is necessary. This capacity should be fostered in secretaries during their undergraduate education, as well as during conferences, workshops, and other opportunities for training. Human resource managers, on the other hand, should work to create an awareness forum for their employees, where staff would be reminded of the importance of keeping office secrets secret, according to a participant.

Dressing properly and modestly increases one's personality while also improving one's professional image. Every organization has a dress code, and some professions, such as nursing, the army, and law enforcement, have their own set of standards that officers and men must adhere to. Similarly, the secretarial profession has a dress code that requires secretaries to dress professionally and present themselves well-dressed. Wearing clothes that is both complete and appropriate within the neighborhoods where businesses are located is referred to as

corporate dressing. As a result, the secretary should develop the practice of dressing well in order to facilitate the seamless execution of his or her key duties. According to the aforesaid response, secretaries of colleges of education in north-western Nigeria have no issues with their respective organizations' dress codes. This has made secretaries appear more respectable and alluring in their workplaces. This attitude has also made the secretaries to look more professional in terms of their mode of dressing.

Conclusion

Ethical considerations are vital part of all professions that must be observed in order for the employer to have confidence in the employee and vice versa. The ethical considerations of the secretarial profession are very important to the secretary hence, observing them will cause the secretary to be more professional and perform well in the areas of keeping organizational information and records confidential as well as requiring secretaries to follow due process in the discharge of their duties.

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