

## **Enhancing Secretarial Practice in Emerging Nigerian Offices through Phonetic Language Skills, Business Communication and Recording Competences**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on enhancing secretarial practice in emerging Nigerian offices through phonetic language skills, business communication and recording competences. Phonetic skills offer the modern office secretary benefits of increased vocabulary, reading, phonetics, spelling and many other language skills even in paperless/virtual offices currently advocated globally. Business office communication and recording competences are needed for secretarial duties in any office and they form major components of the secretarial profession and function. The secretary is now much more than a stenographer, receptionist or typist because an increasing number of executives expect their secretaries to function as administrative assistants who can relieve them of many routine and some specialized tasks. This secretary must therefore be equipped with handy secretarial practice skills and competences like ability and capacity in taking dictations whether directly, or from dictating machines, on the telephone, in meetings or for personal use and transcribing same speedily and accurately in an adequate/deliverable format on the computer. This paper discusses professional competences that enhance secretarial practice in the areas of confidentiality and safety of information; referencing and word processing; application of information and communication technologies (ICT) in routine activities; and efficient recording system for smooth storage and retrieval. It concludes that phonetic language skills, business communication and recording competencies are critical to effective and efficient secretarial practice in emerging offices in Nigeria and recommends that functional e-era offices need efficient secretaries – bi-lingual and multi-lingual - with these competences to meet with global best practices.

### **Introduction**

It was in an apartment in Portia's house in Belmont, Vernice. There ensued this interaction between Portia and Nerissa

Portia: By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world.

Nerissa: You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are. And yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much, as they that starve with nothing. ....It is no mean happiness, therefore to be seated in the mean: superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.

Portia: Good sentences, and well pronounced

Nerissa: They would be better, if well followed. (Geddes & Grosset, 2013)

This scene/communication in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* gives a picture of the state of secretarial practice in emerging offices in Nigeria. Today's offices – offices in transition – need Secretaries with appropriate knowledge, skills and ethical values as tools for effective and useful participation in the affairs of their immediate society and beyond which hinge mainly on effective business communication employing phonetic language skills and recording competences.

Oduma (2010) describes professional business competences as those essential work traits or characteristics which need to be acquired by recipients of business education – Secretaries - in order to enable them function effectively or perform a given function or series of related activities in modern business organisations. Nwosu, (2004) and other Business Educators see professional competences as aptitude, capability, dexterity, expertise, skills, talents and knowledge required by an

individual to perform a particular function or activity or practice in a given discipline or field of study. These are also true of phonetic language (Shorthand) competences, a language skill that is phonetically based. Shorthand is a brief, rapid method of writing that is used principally in recording spoken words most commonly by substituting characters or abbreviations for the conventional letters and words and also form major professional acquisitions for a Secretary in an emerging office.

Ezezue (2007) defines communication as the transfer of information, ideas, emotional feelings or views from one person to another in an understandable way through the use of meaningful words, signs, letters, and symbols for the purpose of entertainment or influencing the behaviour of another person. This definition is not far from the essence of business and office communication. Office and business communication span all kinds of communication – verbal; written; non-verbal; kinesics; and proxemics. The Secretary's ability to obtain information from the appropriate file and reference sources are extremely helpful to the emerging office and the executive and such information may be acquired manually, mechanically or electronically. The Secretary in carrying out her complex official duties heightened by the introduction of ICT in modern offices handles important business communication and recording functions. Her shorthand phonetic language skills which include taking dictations at high speeds and transcribing same with much accuracy, information and word processing skills and records keeping -filing, storage, retrieval, referencing - competences could enhance secretarial practice and function.

Nte (2003) opines that computer technology has greatly affected the job of a secretary because of the shift from the traditional manual office to intense automation in all spheres of office practice even in the area of shorthand phonetic language skill and the social media. The rapid and continual technological developments, especially in office equipment have great effect on the changing role of secretaries. Rather than eliminating secretaries from the office, technological developments have freed them from many time consuming, routine tasks so that they may be better employed in the more specialized areas of office work. For example, a secretary may now retrieve information from a computerized file without having to leave the workstation. Computers now expedite the processing of written communications and accounting procedures and highly sophisticated telecommunications equipment and gadgets and the electronic-mail systems facilitate rapid transmission of both oral and written communications.

The Social media is a broad category of applications that promotes social interaction through web-based and mobile technologies. Its initial use focused primarily on sharing personal information, but presently these applications have become significant tools in offices and business organisations to market products, enhance communication with customers and attract new clients and callers.

NBEA (2012), states that social media is an important business communication tool as online communities provide a unique opportunity for companies and organisations to create brand awareness that evolves a social media audiences creating content that is shared globally. The expanded market place that has resulted from this affects both large and small offices, companies and organisations and they abound in African and Nigeria. For Secretaries to be competitive in today's global economy, they need to improve their skills and competences using the social media tools effectively in and out of the workplace. Some of the most common social media are the facebook, whatsapp, Internal Relay Chat (IRC), and the computer mediated communications (CMC). In the age of digital recording devise and audio reproduction, secretaries using this devices to record speech is not only much more accurate, it also allows the listeners more time to take note of other important factors such as speakers mannerisms and body language. These are important devices that enhance shorthand skills and make communication very easy.

Many forms of shorthand exist and typical shorthand system provides symbols or abbreviations for words and common phrases which can allow someone well-trained in the system to write as quickly as people speak. Abbreviation methods are alphabet-based and use different abbreviating approaches. In emerging offices in Nigeria, the computers, internet, web designs and products and electronic media has made great impact that even the use of cell phones for many

official matters including SMS brevity, coding and storage/retrieval competence has enhanced secretarial practice.

This paper will discuss this topic under the following headings – Phonetic language – a shorthand skill for business success; The emerging Office Secretary; Secretarial skills and competences; Business Communication and recording functions of the secretary in an emerging office; Enhancing secretarial practice in emerging offices in Nigeria through phonetic language skills, business communication and recording competences; conclusions and recommendations.

### **Phonetic language – a shorthand skill for business success**

Language is the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other. It is therefore a means of communication among people. Shorthand is a phonetic language made up of 24 consonants, 12 vowels and 6 diphthongs characteristic of any language writing or speech. The consonants are represented by strokes, curves and hooks while the vowels are represented with dots and dashes which when placed at different positions connote different tones and meanings. Shorthand is concerned with the art of taking down spoken sounds at a speed relatively higher than longhand, where characters are substituted for conventional letters and words. This skill is associated principally with the job of a secretary for effective and efficient office operations.

Shorthand is a brief, rapid method of writing that is used principally in recording spoken words most commonly by substituting characters or abbreviations for the conventional letters and words. Pitman (2001.iii) states that millions have used this system as a means of earning a livelihood and today, throughout the world, wherever accurate and immediately legible recording of spoken English is required, in Parliament and Congresses, in the Courts of Justice, and in offices of every size and sort, there is Pitman Shorthand doing what no machine can so effectively produce, the whole speech and nothing but the speech (with whatever helpful notes the intelligent Secretary/recorder may choose to append to the speech), in a form that can be read like a book as soon as it is written or ten years afterward.

The first commercially used phonetic system of shorthand was invented by Sir Isaac Pitman whose shorthand system manual was first published in 1837. As stated by Uzor and Ike (2013) from 1837 till date Pitman shorthand is the most prevalent system in the English speaking world apart from United States of America where Gregg system is most widely used. John Robert Gregg produced his light-line-phonograph in 1888 in the United States. The invention of the typewriter magnified the essence of shorthand writing and shorthand skills became an important tool in business communication as well as in the long established uses of reporting, recording and personal writing. Till date shorthand remains a skill that helps the secretary handle all forms of communication matters in the office and keeping of secret and essential records safely.

In Nigeria the early British Officers needed skilled hands in book-keeping, shorthand and typewriting to work with them in the position of clerks, typists, accounts clerks and stenographers. Their training was on an informal note and later within private commercial colleges/schools who gave vocational training that were completely different from what obtained in the grammar schools. It was the products of these private commercial schools that were gainfully employed as secretaries, book-keepers, account's clerks with the influx of British private companies to Nigeria.

### **The emerging office secretary in Nigeria**

The Professional Secretary International aptly defined the secretary as an executive assistant who possesses a mastery of office skills, who demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, who exercises initiative and judgment and who makes decisions within the scope assigned authority. Shorthand phonetic language skills promote saleable skills acquisition and employment generation possibilities that enhance secretarial practice.

Secretarial training at all levels provide exposure in the following areas:-

1. Develop knowledge regarding the content of office, its roles and functions. Every individual both young and old should have proper knowledge and understanding of the concepts of office, its role and function.
2. Developing the ability to deal with office environment and responsibilities which helps in establishing and maintaining satisfying office knowledge and understudy relationships with colleagues, callers/visitors, community and relevant others in everyday routine office life.
3. Developing life skills to cope with maintenance and security of diverse office materials and equipment. It develops the knowledge, skills and values necessary for business and public life, participation in the social life of the community particularly in the maintenance of office communication, records and equipment.
4. Promoting understanding and coping with changes in office automation and changes in the society. It helps a Secretary understand and cope with the challenges in the quality and functional life of office communication, records management, equipment care and improved productivity.
5. Developing physiological processes of one's own body by creates awareness regarding proper skills in effective communication, records keeping, security of information, reading of equipment/materials, leaflets, guidelines and routine maintenance, repairs, refurbishment and replacement and recycling possibilities.
6. Creating responsible and useful citizens who can contribute meaningfully to the effectiveness of the office thereby developing a meaningful society.
7. Developing consciousness of the role of office in promoting entrepreneurship, patriotism and responsibility towards oneself, the community, nation and humanity which is very crucial for secretarial practice in emerging offices in Nigeria.

Previously many secretaries were engaged with duties and responsibilities and not much authority was attached. In the modern office environment today, the current impact of business and the resulting pressures affecting managers at all levels have caused them to rethink the secretarial function and to delegate more responsibilities and more authority to their secretaries. Lindsell-Roberts (1993:2) presented some of the additional responsibilities expected of administrative secretaries to include:

- Preparing rough drafts of executive communications
- Editing and signing executive correspondent
- Composing speeches, memoranda and reports for the executive
- Composing articles for publications
- Editing copy prepared by others
- Consulting references sources to obtain information needed by the executive
- Abstracting information from various sources for the executives use
- Setting up meeting and conferences and reminding executives of the task delegated to them at these meetings
- Chairing and participating actively in meetings
- Supervising and training employees
- Recommending or selecting office equipment systems and supplies for purchases.

### **Secretarial Skills and Competences**

Competences refer to knowledge, skills and/or abilities required for satisfactory performance of a specified task. Geddes and Grosset, (2006) defines competence as capacity or legal power; suitability. They also defined skill as expertness; a developed aptitude or ability; expertise and dexterity. The Secretary's professional business competences includes such skills like taking shorthand dictations at high speeds and transcribing/processing the dictations accurately on the computer. These are needed skills, capabilities, dexterities and knowledge by secretaries to enable them achieve effectiveness in

the discharge their communication and records management functions. Onoh (2015) describes specific shorthand phonetic language skills and competences are:-

- Taking dictations in shorthand and transcribing same
- Adequate Management of records
- Preparing of official reports
- Taking minutes of meetings
- Knowledge of law, practice and procedure of meetings
- Good command of English language
- Writing meaningfully and constructively
- Listening ability and attentiveness
- Intelligent perception;
- Understanding body languages - non-verbal communication
- Making intelligent interpretations
- Making intelligent selection of communication channels
- Competences in proofreading and editing of official documents and mails
- Knowledge of office staff training and orientation methods
- Designing of office forms and formats
- Preparing, interpreting and using accounting information
- Soft skill competences include use of typing tutor packages
- Use of Microsoft packages; internet power point database desktop publishing packages and other office technologies.

Shorthand as stated by Uzor and Ike (2013) is concerned with the art of taking down spoken sounds at a speed relatively higher than longhand for business communication, records keeping as well as reporting and personal writing.

### **Communications and Recording Functions of a Secretary in an Emerging Office**

Because of the complex relationships between corporations and government as well as by the global reach of modern business, the secretary needs to be able to acquire, handle, store, retrieve and understand varied types of information as rapidly and efficiently possible. The Secretary's ability to obtain information from the appropriate file and reference sources can be extremely helpful to the executive. Such information may be acquired manually, mechanically, or electronically. Even in the era of automation, secretaries still use manual techniques for recording data on certain business forms and communication such as purchase orders, cost tickets, expense accounts, and credit memorandums. Letters are not only important conduits of information but are also a vital information medium, as they assist in keeping designated persons abreast of past, present and future management actions.

Today's business offices are flooded with varied business technologies which demand specialized soft skill competences. Office Communication and Office Records Management operate around these three – A. The office environment. B. Office material and equipment. C. Office maintenance, security and safety.

The office has been generally described as a place or room where clerical activities are carried out. The secretary is a major officer in any office, traditional or modern. The duties of effective communication and records management are vested in the hands of a competent secretary.

Her knowledge of Office environment, office maintenance and security of office materials and equipment inculcates the values and culture for solving office communication, Records keeping and equipment maintenance problems. The social, emotional and physical environment of the office are dependent on the proficient Secretary whose language knowledge competences; value and skills make for independent thinking, appreciation of dignity of labour and continuing education. This

competences help the Secretary take wise decisions understanding the organization structure; proper routing of mails and information; creating and improvising designs for adequate recording and safety; maintain office infrastructure, equipment and materials; building a culture of discipline, checks and balancing, cleanliness, recycling and waste management. These functions form the basis for a smooth running of any office large or small.

### **Enhancing secretarial practice through effective communication competences in emerging offices**

Facility with language has always been a basic requirement not only for transcribing and composing letters, memorandums and reports but also for oral communication in the office. The Secretary's ability to handle telephone calls with ease, give clear instructions to other employees, give accurate messages to the employer, and meet customers and clients graciously is still prized by every manager, employer and organization. To enhance effective communication in secretarial practice in today's office, the secretary would employ the following ways:

- a) Communication: Improving office communication skills by increasing opportunities to compose content and review other workers communication
- b) Editing and proofreading skills. This task is the bane of most materials today as errors are made at random and even meanings and syntax are changed completely because of lack of editing and proofreading. Effective communication is lost and the image of the organization is put at naught.
- c) Establishing Priorities: Enhancing their knowledge of marketing strategies designed to create, promote, and evaluate product and/or service brand awareness and customer interaction – the shorthand passages, drills for dictations are all tailored to promote real office situations and gives a ready guide.
- d) Global and multinational business goals and challenges can be handled as Secretary's can creating their own professional brand to expand networking capacity and enhance employment options through employment-related communication and networking opportunities
- e) Preparing secretaries to be effective, responsible and ethical communicators in all environments especially in social media environments in this e-era. This leads to identifying areas that need improvement in the office.
- f) Communicating, retrieval and processing of information by providing opportunity and responsibility in promoting and integrating appropriate use of new office and social media for best practices in Customer relations. This will lead to improved productivity, and effective performance in a global economy. (Encyclopedia Americana, 1981)

The handling of data is called information processing. In the office, data may be accurately and rapidly obtained through mechanical and electronic means with the aid of word processors, computers, transcribing machines and microphone units. These devices can facilitate many tasks, including preparing payment records, copying personnel records, transcribing dictated letters and storing and retrieving and updating information.

### **Enhancing secretarial practice through effective recording competences**

Recording has attracted increasing attention in recent years as a result of growing sophistication of administrative practices in the increasing complexity of organisations, courted with the enormous expansion of the quantity of information (Ike 2015). Cloete (1998), posits that records keeping or management is one of the auxiliary activities that are performed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency with which the other functions are performed or to make the performances of other functions possible.

North West Territories (2003) in Ike (2015) states that records management exists with sole aim of systematically controlling the creation, maintenance, use and disposal of records for the purpose of formulating policies, procedures and standards in handling records.

The emerging office secretarial practice in the area of recording competences can be enhanced as follows:

Development of classification systems and retention schedules'. She can conveniently provide confidential codes in shorthand outlines for security and reference.

- g) Creation, usage and keeping track of record in the office
- h) Finding ways to store records as cheaply and efficiently as possible and protection to the organization.
- i) Increased knowledge about emerging social media and other technologies that affect business communication, marketing, information sharing and recording,
- j) Integrating appropriate media and social media tools into the office and business environment to support effectiveness and efficiency thereby accommodating much space for the quantum of records of all sorts and data for official purposes.

### **Summary and conclusion**

Secretaries in Nigeria today are faced with the perplexing capabilities of the computer and its application to all spheres of office operations. Communication, recording and retrieving information remains a major secretarial practice influenced by the computer in any office.

In Pitman shorthand which is the main shorthand skill for most Nigerian Secretaries speed and facility of writing and safety of reading are achieved by following a coherent and comprehensive scheme and this skill makes the secretary take dictations written with the shorthand signs and characters. This art promote confidentiality, speed and accuracy and makes for easy future references. Stress is reduced as this device and skill save time and labour for the Secretary and also involves no extra penmanship. Shorthand skills and competences is fundamental to effective use of the social media for communication and recording purposes in the office and when the Secretary need to diarize, keep appointments, handle itinerary and do basic research, shorthand notes, the social media and other ICT technologies enhance her duties and thus help her achieve effectiveness. Nerissa politely advised her madam Portia ..... Superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer. Competences make Secretaries live longer.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that phonetic language skills should still receive adequate attention in the curricular especially as it is a very important skill used in courtroom scenarios where recording devices are not permitted.

Shorthand skills is recommended for Journalists, mass communicators and reporters as there is always that dreaded chance of a technical fault with voice recorders, words appearing muffled or undecipherable, jeopardizing the quality and accuracy of a recorded story or report.

In emerging offices in Nigeria, the use of mobile phones, internets and the social media has made significant influence and therefore it is recommended that the use of short messages applicable to our text messages (SMS) could be used for difficult of clumsy and difficult shorthand outlines.

Computers and sophisticated telecommunications equipment and electronic-mail systems facilitate the rapid transmission of both oral and written communication, recording and retrieval functions and should be provided to enhance secretarial practice.

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The need for Nigerian business people to use the language effectively will obviously contribute to success rates in their various interactions with business people from across the globe. Nigerian English, Intercultural Communication, Intelligibility, Business Discourse, Varieties.

1. Introduction. One of the implications of the phenomenal global spread of the English language is the emergence of diverse languages, phonetic features such as stress misplacement, sound substitution, the tendency to match pronunciation with orthography as well as the tendency to ignore the intonational aspects of BE. It is important to note that the phonetic issues are crucial because they produce accents which are immediately noticeable to many non-Nigerians. Business English Language Practice aims to support the other books in the series by developing grammar and vocabulary skills. It is split into two sections - Grammar and Vocabulary - each containing 12 units, which focus on the key areas covered in the rest of the series. The Grammar section covers meaning, plus use and form.

Step 3. Work through the units in the order you feel most appropriate to your needs and interests. We hope you enjoy using this book.

Susan Lowe and Louise Pile Authors

Vocabulary Companies and offices

1 KP Recruitment hasn't been in business for very long. It is a company. Production and processes

1.5 Eduardo earns more money if he works the night shift. They open space for increasing intercultural awareness, developing communication and collaborative skills, and enhancing information communication technologies. The paper not only gives a selection of motivational practices in teaching intercultural awareness and a foreign language through virtual exchanges but also brings insights into key concepts of intercultural communicative competence and a brief overview of the history of virtual exchange in education.

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