ABSTRACT
The paper examined the role of secretaries in building the Nigerian Nation. There have been reports that with the Reformation Agenda of the Nigerian President organisations are restructuring and downsizing; this has purportedly wiped out tens of thousands of middle managers and often the secretaries who worked alongside them, and that the number of secretaries has declined by about one-fifth over the past decade. Yet of those who survived, most find themselves the first ones being asked to take on tasks once handled by displaced middle-managers. One reason given for the elimination of secretaries is the fact that software now let executives do for themselves much of what a secretary once did. Human aspects cannot be automated; and that is to say that invention of technologies would not displace the human; thus indicating that only those secretaries that are not forward-looking can be displaced. It is therefore recommended that secretaries need to be on top of any advancement in technology.

INTRODUCTION
As technology continues to affect the workplace, many job responsibilities of Secretaries continue to change. The secretarial field seems to be a continual advancement in technology. The traditional secretary’s role is evolving into an officesystems specialty. Today’s office systems specialist is expected to be proficient in the most current computer software applications, as well as, cutting-edge hardware technologies (Zurliene, 2003).
Role changes in the secretarial field can be largely attributed to company downsizing. Recently, secretaries have been taking over responsibilities of middle managers who have been eliminated because of company downsizing and restructuring. These newly added responsibilities sometimes require secretaries to do the job of two or more people. Due to rapidly changing technology, secretaries have also found themselves training co-workers and others on computer technologies. A study conducted by the Administrative Development Institute (1994) has shown that even though secretaries have been performing many additional tasks not traditionally performed by persons in these positions, they have not received much recognition for the newly added responsibilities. Few secretaries are receiving raises in salary for added duties.
These days employers seem less and less dependent upon their secretaries, especially since many of them have their laptops and can produce their own documents. Some computers have speech recognition soft wares, and so many people believe the secretary can be dispensed with. On the face of it, they look plausible reasons to do without the secretary. The basic philosophies of the society affect thinking of employers and employees (secretaries) and the decisions they have to take. A society that emphasizes the development of the individual secretaries will encourage the use of initiative and unfold their potentials. As individuals, secretaries come with their unique patterns of values, perceptions, skills and abilities and these affect their interpretation of their environment and their roles within the environment.
Citing Getzels, Ukeje, Akabogu and Ndu (1992) see administration as the hierarchy of subordinate and superordinate relationships which form the basis for allocation and integration of roles and facilities in order to achieve the goals or purpose of an organization. The organization comprises the institution, roles and expectations as well as individuals with their personalities and need dispositions which include needs of belonging, participation, recognition, etc. Within organizations roles are identified. Roles are the dynamic aspects of positions, officers and status (Linton 1936 in Ukeje, Akabogu and Ndu, 1992). Each role comes with it some responsibilities and obligations for the position or office holder, such as those of the secretary or secretarial assistant and the employer; these roles are interrelated and complementary. If
perception of one another’s roles is congruent, they understand and relate well. In such a case, they are likely to achieve organizational and national goals (Ukeje et al., 1992). This is dependent upon the ability of the employer to move with the subordinate. Administration, which is getting things done by others, involves relationship between the subordinate and the superior. The relationship between the employer and the secretary is important, thus helping the secretary carry out his or her role effectively for the overall betterment of their organization and by extension, the nation. This brings us to the question of who is a secretary, what are his/her functions, what are his roles in relation to the office administration and in the milieu of national building.

Who is a secretary?

International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) defines a secretary as ‘an assistant to an executive, possessing mastery of office skills and ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, displays initiative, exercises judgment, and makes decisions in the scope of his authority’. Adozoga and Massanawa (2003) see the secretary as ‘an important officer in any establishment, whose contribution and effectiveness will either enhance or diminish the efficiency of an organisation’ and aggregately the advancement of the nation. While Place, Hicks and Byers (1972) believe a secretary is ‘someone who without direct responsibility assists another with communications and public relations in business, professional and personal affairs’, Osiah (2011) sees the secretary as possessing the mastery of the dos and don’ts of his organization; and therefore is expected to have acquired the necessary knowledge of the operations of the establishment. The mastery of the office skills includes mastery of technology, top-notch interpersonal and communication skills, management of projects, creativity in solving problems, and most importantly, having the willingness to learn and grow, and accept challenges. The secretary as a master should be able to manage the office, and the executive.

What the Secretary Does

Some of the duties of a secretary include: preparation and mailing of impeccable correspondence, maintenance and supervision of error-free desk diary, the presentation to the employer in concise form as a neat package everything that may be needed for each interview, report or other item of work in his daily round; the organization of meetings, including the preparation of agenda, their distribution to those concerned, arranging of seating in meeting venues; taking minutes at meetings and follow-up of decisions. Other activities are organization of conferences or functions, arrangement of appropriate invitations to guests as well as their reception; booking of accommodations, arrangement of executive travels, and many other activities. The duties of the professional secretary also involve helping the management and other employees in carrying out their duties, not only responsible for his/her individual duties, but also for the efficient and effective delivery of quality services by the management and other staff (Ukeni and Awomukwu, Mbaezue, 2011).

Whitehead (1979) said that behind every executive, there is a first-class secretary who acts as the executive ‘alter ego’ or ‘other self’. The secretary is the power behind the throne in many situations. He went on to say that such a secretary has a vital part to play in the whole process of head office executive action. And since many people will never get to meet the executive, the secretary is the top executive particularly because the secretary screens callers, relieves them of their messages and burdens, and thus tactfully defends and frees the executive to go about his other businesses without disturbance, and thus becoming trusted aide. Furthermore, the secretary takes notes at departmental meetings and records decisions about any action to be taken. Sometimes, based on mere verbal instruction the secretary may initiate many actions of routine nature. Where precise wordings need to be used, a worthy secretary wrestles over appropriate words with the executive, particularly if the employer is weak on grammar and syntax (Whitehead, 1979).

Whitehead believes that as a group secretaries probably do more to promote the efficiency of the nation than any other single occupation, for ‘not a wheel turns until the head office memo arrives to start the machinery, and a call from the production manager’s secretary can shut down a plant in an emergency, in minutes. This follows that the work of the secretary is vital to the nation. No wonder secretaries seek to adopt titles such as ‘top secretary’, ‘personal secretary’, ‘private secretary’, ‘executive secretary’, ‘personal assistant’, ‘management aide’, etc, which reflect their greater responsibilities and higher skills.
Secretaries are engaged in PR work as well. They form part of the team together with the executives, each member contributing his/her skills in promoting and preserving the image of the organization and are part of management team. They also help in consumer relations, promotional, defensive and protocol activities. Secretaries help in activities preliminary to meetings, on meetings days, after meetings, taking minutes, follow-up decisions, hostess duties, and cover the executive in his absence. The secretary is handy in personnel function. We can go on and on, for in almost all fields of endeavor a secretary is employed; indeed, the secretary is ‘hyper-knowledgeable’. The secretary’s domain is an office, and so participates in all or almost all office activities.

The Secretary and Uses of the Computer

Computers have improved levels of productivity. Many of the old boring jobs can be done by a computer, which relieves workers; and has changed the way people work. Workers can work from the comfort of their own home; thus there are no travel costs or time wasted travelling to work. The traditional methods of receiving, collating, analyzing, disseminating and storing information have given way to the use of electronic tools and methods. Computer-based information for office work has taken top priority in the office of today. A 2003 study by the University of California revealed that the quantity of information created between 2000 and 2003 almost doubled, and that approximately 93 per cent of it was ‘born digital’ (Mbaezue and Okoye, 2011). They went on to say that the widespread acceptance of the computer has offered secretaries significant opportunities to build stronger, interactive relationships with customers and fellow employees for both internal and external purposes. Thus these facilities such as the internet and intranet, electronic bulletin boards, etc, can afford today’s secretary the kind of speed and inter-connectivity never dreamt of in the traditional office settings. Armed with these tools, sending circulars and memos, making travel arrangements and researching products prices on-line, keeping diary and ‘to-do’ lists are daily routine. The computers and other electronic facilities are after all just tools for the secretary’s operation and the secretary is not a slave to them. Thousands of secretaries now work the latest software or organize data and systems for an entire office.

Secretary’s Role in Nation building

Dajur et al (2010) see the office of a secretary as a unit where relevant records for the purpose of control, planning and efficient management of the organization are prepared, handled and preserved. It provides facilities for internal and external communication and coordinates activities of different departments of an organization. This means that it is the administrative centre of a business. According to Pillai and Bagaavathi (2005), such an office is to a business what the mainspring is to a watch; it is the nerve centre of an organisation, as it has so much importance as the brain in a human body. Dajur et al (2010) believe that the efficiency of a secretary’s office is judged by the degree of promptness in supplying accurate and correct information (for today’s greatest tool and need is information). To identify new markets, to design new products, to make decisions, to keep people informed and to keep abreast of knowledge requires information. Pillai and Bagaavathi (2005) and Whitehead (1978) stated that the functions of modern offices (where secretaries hold sway) comprise the basic and administrative and management functions. The basic ones include receipt and collection of information, process and arrangement of the information and, the supply of ready-made information to the authorities when required. The second function includes that of management, development of office systems and procedures, designing and control of forms, selection and purchase of office appliances, personnel functions, controlling of office costs, maintenance of records, planning schemes and policies, safeguarding assets and public relations. The key element in any organization is the secretary’s office. From such office instructions are issued which start activities. Once programmes have started streams of information flow into it on progress made, output achieved, problems developed, etc. These enable the head office to take action where necessary. Key Office Activities include Creating/Analyzing Information, Processing Information and Communicating Information. All or almost all of these are performed by the secretary. The secretary’s duty includes getting things done through people in order to attain the set out goals of the office. The secretary, therefore, is like a pivot on which every activity of the office revolves. He/she is the superintendent, supervisor, overseer or the manager of the office. He/she plans, organizes, directs and controls the affairs of the office with a view to achieving organisational
objectives. The secretary achieves these objectives through interacting with the workforce within the working environment and with the stake-holders within the social setting. Aspects of organization relationship consist of human relations, industrial relations and public relations. Every secretary is expected to possess modern skills in addition to the traditional skills. The modern skills include the skills to enhance manipulation of information and communication technology in order to enhance information flow. Changes in technology have affected the atmosphere tremendously. The office is no more limited to a physical space. Office can operate in a digital space requiring no physical structure. We now have e-commerce, e-business and several other e-configurations. Apart from the physical infrastructural development information technology infrastructural development has changed the face of today’s office information processing (Laudon and Laudon, 2006 in Dajur, Irorakpor, Leka, Muhammad and Okoro, 2010). The secretary uses his tools of trade to facilitate office administration; one of such tools is the computer.

Today’s secretary is referred to as an administrative or ‘virtual assistant’ and can be seen as a person whose work consists of supporting management including executives, using a variety of communication, project management and organizational skills (Wikipedia, 2011). An efficient secretary covers up for an inefficient executive just as the less efficient secretary can reduce the effectiveness of an efficient, firebrand executive (Nwosu, 1998 in Mbaezue and Okoye 2011). Many Nigerian executives have discovered that the formal or pre-service education has not prepared them to cope with their day-to-day tasks in using modern electronic office communication tools; thus that places the secretary on top and in the centre of communication. If the secretary is also ill-equipped to cope, the result will be deepened confusion and general administrative malady. Citing a research work, Mbaezue and Okoye said that in 2006, sixty billion e-mails were sent daily (Nigeria inclusive) and that electronic records were increasing by 80% annually. And these days with the existence of e-office, there is almost e-everything. This cannot be lost on today’s secretary who has no choice but to gear up to the challenges. Thus some of the electronic facilities such as the internet, intranet, etc can afford today’s secretary the kind of speed and inter-connectivity running 24/7, even in the absence of the executive. These have helped the secretary to become more reliable and dependable; increase his/her job satisfaction and sense of worth and increase the confidence the executive would have on him/her especially when the executive is near zero computer literate. Even where the boss is proficient, it will be a minus to the organization to have him key-in his work, make analysis, make travel arrangements, keep tap on the information that will aid his work. At a conference the author was asked a question: who is superior – the boss or the secretary? This was a test question, indeed. The answer given was also in question form. Who is more important – the person who through appointments bookings determines who the boss sees, where the boss goes; what he should do, or what he should not do; the time to spend at a particular situation, etc? The secretary worth the name manages the boss. For as Peter Drucker, the management expert once said: keep pricking the boss to do what he knows is necessary to do but is not willing to do, until he does it; and he will be grateful he did it.

Okeiyi (2011) cited Harrison (1977) to have said that the role of the professional secretary in the brochure of the European Association of Professional Secretaries is as one who has sufficient knowledge of the chief’s activities and the sphere of work to the extent that the chief will be able to have considerable amount delegated to the secretary. This makes him/her to make decision, give instructions and represent the chief on business occasions. Therefore, she concludes that the role of the secretary is significant and indispensable. Agreeing with this Lamle and Dajur (2011) said that the role of a secretary is to maintain efficiency throughout an organization as they originate correspondence, plan meetings, organize data using spreadsheet and database management. Secretaries also interact with customers/clients, vendors, the general public, supervise the office and other staff, train other workers, etc. The future is bright for computer-literate, well-educated, customer service-savvy secretary (Google Search, iaap, 2011; Wikipedia 2011). As the times change, the secretary’s role now include managerial duties such as organizing, supervising and training, since the new generation executives do more and more keying-in of their work. Therefore, the secretary provides a variety of secretarial, administrative and office support to assist an executive in completing tasks, thus maximizing organizational potentials (Lamle and Dajur, 2011).
Successful secretaries are flexible, loyal, confident and motivated (Onifade, 2009; Blakerley, 2010). The 21st century secretary is an active team-player, who adds value to his/her team (Ozwebhost, 2001). Lamle and Dajur (2011) further stated that secretaries have single-handedly redefined their role in the workplace: interpreting data, researching via the internet, spotting industrial trends, tracking international developments, displaying great proficiency across a multitude of technologies, first-class customer care skills and acting as agents of change; they can be found in almost all departmental functions including marketing, production, financial and people management; they answer questions on behalf of the executives.

It must be pointed out that many secretarial skills are encapsulated in the secretary’s business and personal attributes which include eligibility, versatility, cooperativeness, conscientiousness, loyalty, efficiency, resourcefulness, ability to plan his/her work and that of the employer, team spirit, courtesy, diplomacy, tactfulness, discretion, good human relations and good grooming. Cost-effectiveness is increased by punctuality, accuracy, neatness, speed of performance, thoroughness and economy of operation. It is clear these cannot be automated even in a computer age. No wonder some top executives studied said they still prefer the human touch (Joshua and Dajur, 1998). Joshua and Dajur cited Babatunde to have said that a secretary is a person who can think, act and anticipate the whims of the employer and increase the boss’ output phenomenally. Okoji (1998) contended that a modern day secretary is in fact an office omnibus, a ‘generalissimo, who can confidently be called an encyclopedia of office routines, a professor of office management and a consultant in office administration.

The contribution of secretaries to the nation building is invaluable. For instance, Justice OvieWisky (1978), the Chairman of Nigeria’s’ Draft Constitution was quoted by Galadima (1996) to have said that: The constitution Draft Committee owes its greatest debt to members of the secretarial staff without whose hard work, patience and forbearance, its work would have been made all the more difficult. The Constitution Committee wishes to express its profound gratitude to its able secretaries and energetic assistants, not only for efficient manner in which they looked after the welfare of the members but also for providing exceptional secretarial services; in particular the preparation of excellent records of proceedings and accurate reports of its discussions and conclusions.

Note the superlatives! Yet these secretaries would not have performed if they were inhibited. Some executives do feel it is a favour to give their secretaries free hand to take initiatives – but giving initiatives is all important. The secretary’s self-development depends a great deal upon the executives, but it depends more on the secretary’s ability to manage him and influence him into passing on some of the interesting work to him.

Invention of the computer is a healthy development, yet it is incapable of accommodating the human variables. Responsibilities like planning conferences, working with clients and instructing staff require tact and communication skills which cannot be automated. Since technology cannot substitute for personal and interpersonal skills, secretaries will continue to play key role in most organizations, in national building, and using technology, of course. No machine can use diplomacy to solve problems; no machine can yet match human flexibility over wider domains or tasks requiring much everyday knowledge and human relations (Mbaezue, 2011; Joshua, 2013). If the executive occupies a key role he must see that the objectives set in the Board Room are achieved in practice. He will look to the willing cooperation and assistance of the secretary in fulfilling the part of the plan allocated to him/her. It is for the executive to sit back and ponder general policy; the secretary will be more concerned with the real details. The office cannot really come to life until the secretary is in it. By watching the executive closely the secretary will find out where to pitch in and help. The secretary can gradually assume routine chores, and get the boss to induct him/her into more complex procedures. Within short while the secretary will have brought the partnership into existence. Before much longer the secretary will be indispensable, particularly when the secretary gets to know everyone in the organization on employer’s behalf and developing trust in them by unfailing courtesy and helpfulness, and developing a friendly liaison with key personnel such as departmental heads, administrative officers, and anyone else whose activities may affect the executive. The partnership role which has been developed comes into its own
when the chief is absent. The secretary will answer all his/her calls and will take action on his/her behalf. Senior staff who normally speak to him directly will be forced to speak to the secretary instead. This could have been a build-up upon the opening of mail, dealing with routine items and using discretion to take appropriate actions. The role of the secretary is better imagined as the future is bright for the secretary always on the move.

Secretarial programmes are now run in polytechnics, colleges of technology and universities. As a result, we now have graduate secretaries in various offices all over the country (Akanbi, 1998 in Dajur, 2000). Another major break-through is the fact that graduates of English are now finding switching to secretarialship most rewarding. This progress has contributed to the increasing recognition of secretarial role in Nigeria today. Joshua and Dajur in their study discovered that employers still need secretaries with shorthand skills. This seems to have been supported by the result of a study by Dartnell Corporation in USA, which found out that employers still required both middle and top-level secretaries. The requirement may be informed by the desire for human touch despite advancement in technology and the dream of a paperless office. IAAP (2010) stated that today, secretaries (also known as administrative assistants, office coordinators, executive assistants, office managers, and so on) are using computers, the Internet, and other advanced office technologies to perform vital "information management" functions in the modern world. Secretaries no longer "simply" type correspondence for "the boss." Now, they often write that correspondence. Trends identified by IAAP research include:

Administrative professionals are becoming researchers and interpreters, not just disseminators of information. Work teams are becoming more prevalent. Job descriptions are expanding and new titles are being created. Employers are paying more for specialized skills such as desktop publishing and database management. In addition, many companies are providing performance-based bonuses to outstanding administrative support professionals to help acknowledge their contributions (IAAP, 2010).

Conclusion

It is to be concluded that the role of a secretary in modern day Nigeria is no longer as it used to be although the basic functions have not changed; the role has undergone an evolution and the role is such that it is capable of contributing to the building of Nigeria. As a group secretaries contribute more than any group put together, particularly since they are found in every type of organization in the nation; but only those that move with the times can comfortably and conveniently fit in. Therefore, it is recommended that if a secretary aspires to reach the top and his/her educationallevel is not competitive, he/she should do something about it at once. It is possible to acquire further education from higher institutions of learning. To succeed in today’s talent-led workplace, secretaries need to show that they are winners; they need to be passionate and enthusiastic about everything they do and learn as much as they can about their organisations, industry, technology and the nation in general. More than that, they need to top the trends. They need to be one step ahead of the rest. They should ensure they are all-round multi-taskers with great communication and computer skills; trend-spotters if there is new technology; they should be the first to know. Organizations need to encourage their secretaries to attain higher capabilities by sponsoring those that show the desire, as well as encouraging secretaries to take initiatives and venture into novel ideas, areas and situations; for this may bring out their best.

REFERENCES


