

## Professionalism in the Secretarial Profession

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to investigate the perception and extent of professionalism practiced by secretaries of Principal Officers in Government Tertiary Institutions in Edo State, Nigeria. Four research questions were drawn. The instrument used for data collection was the questionnaire. The result obtained showed that all the secretarial professionals are trained professional secretaries based on their qualifications with the exception of only one secretary who is not trained as a secretary. All respondents agreed with what constitutes professionalism. Result also revealed to a large extent the secretary's adherence to the ethics of the secretarial profession. The issue of viability of the professional body seems to be a major problem in the secretarial profession. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations were made. Thus, professionalism can only be achieved if the professional body is adequately empowered by law thereby making it obligatory for all those working as secretaries/Office Managers to be members of the professional body. Adequate enlightenment should be made of the positive impact of the secretarial professional body; getting the best from the professional secretaries through exposure to current skills required by secretaries in and outside Nigeria.*

### 1. Introduction

In the world of work today, secretaries or personal assistants or office managers as the case may be are expected to contribute significantly to the goals achievements of the organization by providing the necessary information and also promoting the image of the organization to the world. There are high expectations from the employers, colleagues, customers, visitors and others in the haulage of the duties and roles of the secretary/office managers. In most organizations people expect the secretarial professionals to communicate clearly, have good personal characteristic especially in terms of appearance, good social interactions, good disposition towards people, good personal conduct in terms of handling people with tactics and respect, have good interpersonal relationship, behave in a way that reflects high moral standards of personal probity, upholding codes of conducts and behaviour as expected of the profession as well as technical competence.

There are a number of set of regulations, standards, protocol, codes of conduct and ethics and trust policies providing parameters for safe and ethical practice of any profession. Some areas of professionalism are framed by law of which sanctions are placed on violators. Regulations serve as a baseline for professionalism.

### 2. Concept of Professionalism

The term professionalism means different things to different people. One view is that it may be fruitless to try and pin down one exact meaning like many words and concepts which have different dimensions and changes over time too. Being a professional, firstly, can be factual and thus associated with holding certain qualifications and or membership of a professional body and secondly be descriptive measuring the characteristics expected of a professional and thus includes ongoing professional development and ever-increasing levels of excellence in services giving by a professional. The first is regulatory in form, and the second is a self-improvement and an ambition-led approach on what is expected of a professional (<http://work.chron.com/concept-professionalism-151569>). Professionalism as a named entity is defined as 'the qualities or typical features of a profession or of professional's especially competence and skills' (Oxford English Dictionary). According to Webster's dictionary, professionalism is the conduct, aims and qualities that characterises or mark a profession or a professional. According to Neil Kokemuller (2013), professionalism conveys intangible meanings in the working world; it is usually attached to high performing employees in any line of work. According to Encarta Dictionaries, professionalism is conforming to professional standard which includes the skills, competence, or character expected of a member of a high trained profession. According to the students support services sponsored by TRIO, it states that professionalism is when a person conforms to the technical and/or ethical standards of his/her profession. It also stated that a professional is courteous, conscientious, and generally business like in his/her workplace. In the research report presented to the health care professionals council on professionalism by health care professionals, it stated that professionalism encompasses many and varied aspects of behaviour, communication and appearance as well as being perceived as a holistic concept encompassing all aspects of practice. Professionalism has a basis in individual characteristic and values but also largely defined by context. Its definition varies with a number of factors including organizational support, the workplaces, expectations of others, and the specifics of each service user/people encountered. This contextual professionalism is based on well-established or even innate personal qualities and values. There are regulations that provide basic guidance and signposting on what is appropriate and that is unacceptable but act as a baseline for professionalism.

In a nutshell, professionalism means different things to different people in different contexts. Professionalism can be presented in a holistic view, all-encompassing concept (everything you do), an overall way of being which comprises a range of attitudes and behaviour. It is everything from the time you get to your office to the time you get home specifically and explicitly, professionalism is competence: knowledge, skills, abilities and personal characteristic in doing or performing a job.

According to Lisa McQuerry (2013), the principles of professionalism are a standard of personal conduct by a professional in his business dealings. Guiding principle for acceptable and expected behaviour vary from industry to industry, that notwithstanding, the following are the general principles of professionalism:

**Appearance:** One of the critical entreaties to be a professional is building a reputation for professionalism and to meet the basic dress, groom and hygiene standards of your industry. Naturally, those blue collar workers who deal with dirt and grime on daily bases may not be affected in this regard. But officers such as the likes of secretaries are among professionals who are commonly judged by the way they look. Professional dress, well-groomed hair and a clean-cut image without excessive piercing and visible tattoos are among expectations of professionalism in many white collar jobs.

**Accountability:** Being responsible is a common concept of professionalism. This means accepting the duties of your position and the responsibility when they do not work out. Professionals are responsible for their actions and their work. They understand their roles and responsibilities and they are accountable for them. They discharge their duties properly in a timely manner. They are self-starters if, as sometimes happens, professionals make mistakes, fail to do something or do something in error, they accept responsibility for this action and hold themselves accountable. They do not dodge blame, offer excuses or dwell on their errors. They admit their mistakes, learn from them and move on to the next level.

**Competence:** Professionalism has to do with acquiring skills and work attitude. The core of being a professional is acquiring or showing or possessing the basic foundation of competence in your job. Professionals strive hard not to be left behind. Professionals understand that they cannot stand still. They know that if they continue to do the same thing the same way, they have been doing it; they soon will be overtaken by circumstances. Others will pass them by. They therefore put themselves on a track of continuous learning and growth.

**Respectful communication:** Being a professional generally connotes that colleagues and co-workers view you and perceive you as someone who is very respectful in both formal and informal conversation. Appropriate use of language, good verbal and non-verbal interaction skills, eye contact, friendly smile and genuine respect for workers as people are common traits of respectful communication.

**Integrity:** Demonstrating honesty, transparency in the way you conduct yourselves in your job are a foundation of professionalism. This includes being straight with people in your conversation, staying out of the company's gossip mill. Talking behind the backs of co-workers is not a good way to develop a professional reputation. Regardless of the size or nature of organization, every job can be performed in a professional manner. When you do your work using the professional approach, people take notice. People notice because professionals perform what often ordinary job are in an extra-ordinary way. Professionals add a little extra to everything. <http://m.wikihow.com/Be-an-organization's>.

### **3. Ethics of the Secretarial Profession**

The ethics of a secretary are moral principles relating to the job that one is bound by. These requirements are automatically taken on board when one accepts any position as a secretary and so one is expected to uphold them at all times, just like the catholic Priest uphold secrecy of the sacrament of reconciliation.

The following are the ethics of the secretarial profession as cited in [www.opsa.org.com](http://www.opsa.org.com)

**Confidentiality:** Always keep information private and confidential about the firm you work for and its clients. Never repeat sensitive information even if you are in a discussion where everyone is wondering what is happening and you know. Always be trustworthy.

**Loyalty:** Always be loyal to your boss and company. Never sell them out at any cost. However, having said this, your boss also has to prove to you he/she is worthy of your loyalty. Do not get caught up in the office gossip. If you display your loyalty you will receive the same in return

**Honesty:** Do not take the credit for something you did not do and do not let someone else enjoy the credit for something he/she did not do. Always be truthful. Trust me; you will be more credible with both your boss and fellow workers.

**Reliable:** Show you are reliable. Be punctual for work and meeting at all times and remember, always take the relevant documentation with you to the meetings. Ensure every task you are given is completed on time and to the best of your ability.

**Responsibility:** Prove you are responsible by setting priorities and carrying out tasks in a timely manner. Always meet deadlines when they are given. Your boss puts higher confidence in you. Write yourself a "to do" list even if its priority changes 10 times a day. Do not delegate if the job cannot be done as efficiently and accurately as you would have done it. If you delegate, always check that the project is on track time wise. Do not just forget about it because someone else is doing it.

**Work unsupervised:** Always keep your work up to date without supervision.

**Be Cooperative:** Always assist and share your expertise knowledge with your colleagues wherever it is possible. Always carry out duties happily. Also know when to say no (gently) and explain why you cannot do the task asked of you. Do not over load yourself.

**Flexibility:** Always prepare for change with the normal schedule of work. The best jobs are where you have a give and take arrangement. You do not know when you may require a change from your normal schedule.

Bribery: Do not be tempted to accept gifts or favour from internal and external clients just in case there is an underlying reason. Always follow the company's procedure and policies. Very rarely you will ever get something or nothing there is usually always a trade-off. You may end up paying the ultimate price which is your job.

#### **4. The Role of Professional Body in Achieving Professionalism**

The International Association of Administrative Professionals (redirected from Professional Secretaries International) was formed in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1942. At the time, the organization was known as the National Secretary Association. The name of the organization was changed in 1982 to "Professional Secretaries International" and in 1998 to the "International Association of Administrative Professionals". It is not a trade union for secretaries but a non-profit professionals networking and educational organization. Currently, there are 500 chapters with 22,000 members and affiliates all over the world (ACCAAPC.co.uk).

The mission of IAAP is "Enhancing the success of career-minded administrative professionals by providing opportunities for growth through educating community building and leadership development: recognising excellence and set standards and provide educational networking and professional development opportunities for those pursuing career in the office administration field. Membership was initially offered only to those who held the title "Secretary" and had worked in the position for a specified number of years but now its membership includes people with a diversity of office and administrative support job titles as well as various levels of experiences.

The professional body that is similar to the above mentioned association is 'The Nigeria Institute of Professional Secretaries' which was formed in 2003 with membership cutting across Nigeria. The Aims and Objectives of the Institute are

- To promote the science and encouragement of Secretarial Administration and business education in Nigeria and also to increase the knowledge relating to Secretarial and Business education and to promote dissemination.
- To promote the establishment and maintenance of standards of competence and conduct of those engaged and interested to engage in Secretarial Profession and to foster and maintain a high standard of Professionalism in the field of Secretarial Administration.
- To organize, hold lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences, Luncheons, dinners and in-service training to improve the professional standards of members and conduct examinations in Secretarial studies and award Diploma Certificates.
- To print and distribute Newsletters, Bulletins, and Magazines to members, to receive Articles from members for publications in our bulletins, journals, newsletters, etc.
- To serve as employment bureau for all members and liaise with employers of labour in respect of job opportunities for all members in general and to provide professional consultative advice for members and the public at large, establish a Library and Research Centre for the use of its members and the general public.

#### **5. Statement of the Problem**

The Secretarial profession is one of the oldest professions in the world. The role of the secretary is so vital to the development of an organization. There is hardly any organization where there is no need for the secretarial staff. The job of a secretary is of enormous importance and relevance to the survival of any organization. It is against this backdrop that the efficiency and effectiveness of the secretarial staff of any organization is of paramount interest hence the need to plough into professionalism in the secretarial profession. Are the secretarial workers truly professional in the haulage of their duties and responsibilities?

## 6. Purpose of the Study

This study is to explore professionalism within the secretarial professionals in Government tertiary institutions in Edo State. The specific objectives of this study are outlined below:

1. To ascertain the qualifications of secretaries to principal officers of tertiary institutions in Edo State.
2. To investigate the perception of secretarial professionals on what constitute professionalism.
3. To assess the level of professionalism among secretarial professionals in government tertiary institution in Edo State.
4. To ascertain the viability of the professional body of the secretarial professional among those professionals.

## 7. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the qualification of secretaries of principal officers of tertiary institutions in Edo State?
2. What is the perception of secretarial professionals on what constitute professionalism?
3. What is the level of professionalism of secretarial professional in government tertiary institutions in Edo State?
4. What is the viability of the secretarial professional bodies among secretarial professionals in Edo State?

## 8. Methodology

The descriptive survey research design was used for this study. The population constitutes all secretaries of principal officers in all the tertiary institutions in Edo State totalling 48 professional secretaries. The entire population was used for the study because of the manageable size.

A structured questionnaire was fashioned along the four-point scale used for data collection. Validation of the instrument was done by two experts from measurement and evaluation from the University of Benin. Data collection was done by the researchers. Item that received a mean score rating of 3.0 and above was accepted as adequate and a mean score rating of 2.9 below was rejected as inadequate.

## 9. Result

The results obtained were presented in the tables below:

**Research Question one:** What is the qualification of secretaries of principal officers of tertiary institutions in Edo State?

**Table 3.2.1: Mean score rating on qualifications of respondents**

S/N	Statement	4	3	2	1	X	Decision Rules
1	Level of qualifications 1. B.sc/HND in other field of study 2. Secondary school certificate 3. OND in Office Technology and Management 4. HND/B.sc in Office Technology and Management	45	2	-	1	3.8	Accepted/adequate

The table above shows that 47 of the secretaries to the principal officers in all the tertiary institutions in Edo State are adequately qualified and have the necessary training to be called a professional secretary. The mean score obtained in table 1 above is 3.8 which is an acceptable value.

**Research Question two:**What is the perception of secretarial professionals on what constitute professionalism in the secretarial profession?

**Table 3.3.1: Mean score on what constitute professionalism in the Secretarial Profession**

S/N	Statement	4 S/A	3 A	2 DA	1 SA	X	Decision Rate
1.	Adherence to codes/regulations/protocols	40	5	3	-	3.8	Accept
2.	Corporate appearance	35	10	2	1	3.6	“
3.	Appropriate behavior/attitudes/ communication	48	-	-	-	4	“
4.	Determinate by context	30	5	3	5	3.3	“
5.	Intellectual development over-time	48	-	-	-	4	“
6.	External perceptions	20	10	10	8	2.8	“
7.	Good attitude to visitors	48	-	-	-	4	“
8.	Membership of a professional body	25	20	3	-	3.5	“
9.	Self-respect	48	-	-	-	4	“
10.	Acceptance of responsibilities	48	-	-	-	4	“
11.	Maintaining accountability	25	10	3	10	3.1	“
12.	Punctuality	48	-	-	-	4	“
13.	Admitting and correcting mistakes	48	-	-	-	4	“
14.	Being fair and truthful	48	-	-	-	4	“
15.	Self confidence	48	-	-	-	4	“
16.	Confidentiality	48	-	-	-	4	“
17.	Qualification	45	3	-	-	3.9	“

Based on the responses obtained from respondents, the data obtained shows that the responses from the respondents in terms of their perception of what constitute professionalism were all accepted, though there was a little doubt on item No. 6 which is external perceptions with a mean point of 2.8.

**Research Question Three:** What is the level of professionalism of secretarial professionals in government tertiary institutions in Edo State.

**Table3.4.1: Mean score on level of professionalism among secretarial professionals**

S/N	Item	V. Good VA	Good A	Fairly Good IA	Bad VIA	X	Decision
1.	All the skills required to be successful at work?	1	5	35	7	2.0	Rejected
2.	Organization on self-training when need bee?	-	-	38	10	2.6	Accepted
3.	Communication with other workers?	38	10	-	-	3.8	Accepted
4.	Manager’s rating as a professional?	40	3	5	-	3.7	“
5.	Corporate dressing to work	48	-	-	-	4	“
6.	Have good rapport with your boss	10	15	20	3	2.6	“

7.	Telling the truth at all times	48	-	-	-	4	“
8.	Treat all people with targets	48	-	-	-	4	“
9.	Always meet up with targets	-	30	18	-	2.6	“
10.	Conduct personal business at work	-	-	-	48	0.	Rejected
11.	Very confidential with correspondences	48	-	-	-	4	Accepted
12.	Love your job or profession passionately	1	1	35	01	1.8	Rejected
13.	Very punctual to work	48	-	-	-	4	Accepted
14.	Maintaining accountability	7	35	3	3	2.2	Accepted
15.	Exhibiting willingness to work or take up assignments	48	-	-	-	4	Accepted

In the response to research question three on the issue of the level of professionalism of secretarial professionals, the result obtained shows that items 1, 10 and 12 were rejected. This shows that in terms of skills, the secretaries have rated themselves as deficient in secretarial skill possession which may be due to lack of knowledge and non-availability modern technological gadgets and this also may be due to lack of training. Item 10 recorded a mean score of 0 which means all respondents do not engage in activities that will disrupt their abilities to carry out their job effectively: Item 12 was also rejected due to a mean score of 1.8 this shows that these secretaries do not love their jobs which is detrimental to professionalism in the haulage of their duties.

**Research Question 4:** What is the viability of the secretarial professional bodies among secretarial professionals in Edo State?

**Table 3.5.1 Mean score rating of viability of professional body**

S/N	QUESTIONS	4	3	2	1	MEAN	DECISION RULE
1	How adequate is your knowledge of professional body of your profession? 1 Very inadequate 2 Inadequate 3 Adequate 4 Very adequate	1	3	35	9	1.9	Rejected
2.	How often do you participate in the activities of the secretarial profession body? 1 Not at all 1. Rarely 2. often 3. very often	2	5	30	11	1.0	Rejected
3.	Do you agree that there is a need to have a viable professional body of secretarial profession? 1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Agree 4. Strongly agree	-	-	10	38	3.9	Accepted
4	Do you agree to be a member of this body if given the necessary mandate by government? 1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Agree 4. Strongly agree	-	-	-	48	4.00	Accepted

In items 1 and 2 on the issue of professional body, from the result obtained, it shows lack of viability of the professional bodies in the secretarial profession which ought to regulate and control the activities of secretarial professionals.

## **10. Recommendations**

The following recommendations are therefore made to foster professionalism in the secretarial profession.

1. There is urgent need for a viable professional body to oversee the activities of secretarial professionals in Nigeria. This will go a long way to bring about professionalism in this profession; help regulate and serve as check and balances and bring about the benefits of having a professional body just as in other professions like in health, law, etc. With a viable professional body, all the lapses identified in this study can be resolved.
2. There should be awareness campaign by the National body of Professional secretaries (Nigeria Institute of Professional Secretaries) to educate or enlighten the public most especially employers of Labour of the need to identify with the professional body by liaising with the body in terms of employing of professional secretaries.
3. To enlighten and draw membership from trained secretaries and administrators through the various institutions of learning where secretaries are trained the need to associate with the national body in order to benefit from the activities and the promotion of advancement in knowledge and use of modern information technologies.
4. There should be collaboration between the international body and the national body of professional secretaries/Administrators in order to secure support and aids in the acquisition of modern technologies and the delivery of lectures by professionals outside this country.
5. Knowing the sensitive nature of the secretarial profession and considering the ethics of the profession, it imperative that graduates from the Universities and Polytechnics who studied Office Technology and Management be made to take oath of office just as it is done in some other field of study like Medical profession, Priesthood etc.

## **11. Conclusion**

There is a need to have self-examination on our roles as secretaries or administrators. The question is, can we see ourselves as applying professionalism in carrying out our jobs as professional secretaries? If not, what are you waiting for? All hands must be on deck to lift up our carriers to an enviable height. We can contribute our quarter to National development by applying our skills and potentials by virtue of the training we have acquired to boost the processing of information by the various organizations we work for. The role of a secretary as earlier stated is very sensitive to the smooth running of the business organization. A secretary should strive to possess all the skills and exhibit good moral conduct expected of a professional in the secretarial field. The role of the professional body is very paramount to achieving professionalism in the secretarial profession owing to the aims and objectives of setting up the body. Research has proven that professional bodies have great impact on the service delivery of their members in terms of the quality of job performance and moral conduct. Other professional bodies such as the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), COREL etc are formidable bodies that are well recognized and which serve as regulatory bodies with code of conduct of which appropriate sanctions are melted to those who violate any of the laws or involve in any misconduct. It is therefore hoped that the Nigeria Institute of Professional Secretaries attain such level or even much more.



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