

Post-Graduate Diploma in Training and Education



GRIFFITH COLLEGE DUBLIN

Research Methodology I

Literature Review

*'Identifying Trends in Secretarial and Administration Training
and Employment Prospects in Ireland'*

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Introduction

From personal experience of teaching various courses in the last ten years, particularly on secretarial and office administration courses, it seems evident that there has been a decline in both the types of courses offered and also the number of students enrolling in this discipline. For example, the course entitled ‘Diploma in Administration and Office Skills’ used to have almost 100 students per year divided between four classes. Today there is only one course annually with just three students.

Why has there been such a decline in secretarial course uptake? Surely the secretary and other office administration staff are in demand in various business organisations? Is the decline due to economic conditions or are people more familiar with computer applications and office protocols that they can teach themselves, either by home study or online? It is logical to assume that any future improvement in the stability of the economy would result in greater employment in the office sector.

The purpose of my research will be to evaluate trends in secretarial courses, with a view to forecasting the supply and demand for suitably qualified graduates. Particularly with regard to Ireland (and also the U.K.) there seems to be very limited research in this area. Three groups need to be examined: employers, training providers, and students (either past, present or future).

Research can be quantitative or qualitative, or a mixture of both. It is envisaged that both would be required to evaluate trends in secretarial courses. Quantitative methods

involve numbers and statistics essentially. As mentioned, there is limited quantitative data available in this field of research. Figures could be derived from educational institutions, as to the uptake on secretarial courses – and how much they have declined over the past decade. Training providers (including colleges, schools, and independent companies) could provide much quantitative data, although the latter may be reluctant to release such information. Sources could be primary data i.e. direct from the providers themselves, or secondary data from articles or reviews in educational publications (where such data exists).

Quantitative research uses the positivist paradigm which is a scientific way of carrying out research – this would apply to data collection of facts and figures on secretarial courses. Qualitative research in contrast applies the constructivist approach – in this context it would relate to interviews of students, training providers and employers.

Qualitative data, which can be obtained from interviews and focus groups, would also be extremely important to ascertain trends in attitudes of employers, providers and students. Questionnaires would be compiled for each of these sectors, and each would have to be tailored specifically to each area in order to obtain useful and relevant data.

Definition of Secretarial Courses

The role of the secretary (from here on including ‘office administrators’) is crucial in the day-to-day business environment, whether they are typing documents, organising meetings, or acting as a personal assistant to their manager. Numerous skills are required: word processing, spreadsheets, databases, audio transcription, organisational skills, and dealing with communications. Many sources outline the duties of the secretary, and one is chosen here to clearly define the responsibilities (Mitchell, J, 1997). The secretary needs to be competent in a wide range of abilities.

International Research

A comprehensive quantitative survey was undertaken by the International Association of Administrative Professionals in the United States in 2005 (IAAP, 2005). Although this was prior to the economic crisis of 2008, much of the data collated still applies today. Prominent results in the relevant area of research stated that training was predominantly required in popular computer software applications as well as relatively new technology such as web conferencing. One key finding was that administrative professionals need to keep up with changing technology.

The IAAP survey did envisage the future of the office by creating the concept of ‘Office of the Future: 2020’ (IAAP, 2006). They created the acronym ‘ACTION’ – Analysis, Collaboration, Technical aptitude, Intuition, Ongoing education, and

Negotiation. This will be important to refer to in future research, especially in relation to an Irish perspective.

Another useful report emanated from HighBeam Business recently (HighBeam, 2013). This was primarily an industry report using quantitative and qualitative data gathered from business and secretarial schools in the United States. One aim of future research would be to compile a similar directory of Irish training providers, albeit easier to read than the Highbeam Business Report.

A comprehensive compendium of various authors' views on the secretarial profession was gathered in 'Computer Chips and Paper Clips: Technology and Women's Employment' (National Research Council, 1987). Once again, although compiled over 25 years ago, much of the data and observations are still relevant today. One notable quote is that; *"For the educational system to be responsive to the needs of adults, particularly women, preparing for new office and business technologies, it must look beyond its traditional role of education of youth toward its emerging role in training adults"* (National Research Council, Shore Fraser, B, pg. 387, 1987). She emphasises the need for industry and education to work together.

Another author from the same publication, Mary C. Murphree, asks pertinent questions such as *'what are the changes for secretaries?'* and *'what jobs for women office workers will continue to exist?'* (National Research Council, Murphree, M.C. pg. 130, 1987). These are vital questions that should be researched from an Irish perspective in today's changing economy.

It should be noted here that a secretary is not necessarily always female. There are men who excel at the profession also. Some female managers prefer to have a male secretary – perhaps a sign of gender equality in the 21st century. Steedman (1997) tabulated percentages of men and women in secretarial occupations in seven countries with some surprising results; for example Switzerland employed 19% of secretaries who were male. It would be interesting to see how the ratio has changed, if at all, in 2013. From personal experience, secretarial courses would have about 8% male students.

Steedman (1997) concluded that most secretaries are well-qualified (regardless of gender) but there were notable deficiencies in the UK and the USA. Such quantitative data for today's Ireland would be an integral portion of future research. Her study in 'Trends in Secretarial Occupations' is an excellent reference guide apart from the fact that some of it is out-of-date. As to the future (from 1997), Steedman states *"Secretaries will be expected to master the new communication and information sources and to be proactive in devising innovative and cost-effective ways of using them"*.

In Nigeria, a relevant article was published by S.S. Ambor (2011), who concluded that the curriculum in third-level institutions was inadequate and should be redesigned. Perhaps this not only applies to Nigeria? His article is concise and forward-thinking, and something similar appears missing in Ireland.

Another article, although again out-of-date (Stein, 1971), was 'Pre-Employment Secretarial Training: One Company's Perspective'. However it still remains pertinent

to the relationship between education and employment. Such qualitative data would be important to future research if it was modernised.

European Research

An important research publication in the field of secretarial training was ‘A New Deal for Secretaries’ (La Valle et al, 1996). The authors outline the changing secretarial role and identify new secretarial skills as ‘support workers’, ‘team workers’ and ‘independent workers’. The modern day secretary or office professional needs to be proficient in all three categories. With regard to training, the report concludes that there was little evidence of improvements in training. *“Secretaries have little control over their professional development. Opportunities for development depend very much on their managers’ attitudes; if they want to use you simply as a typist, they will”* (La Valle et al, 1996).

From an industry perspective there are few publications which address the need to incorporate secretarial training in education. David Bach, for example, in ‘We Need to Rethink...Everything’ (2012), briefly emphasises the need for third level institutions to embrace new technologies. He states that more business schools are embracing online and blended programs but must be aware of competition from free content providers (Bach, D, 2012). He neglects to mention secretarial skills.

The CBI (The Confederation of British Industries) conducted a survey in conjunction with Harvey Nash (a global professional recruitment consultancy) in late 2011 (CBI,

2011). Amongst its conclusions, it noted that temporary positions (such as secretarial) have not done well in recent years, but in contrast SME's (small to medium enterprises) are hoping to expand quickly. Unfortunately the survey provides limited information on how to address this discrepancy, and places little emphasis on up-skilling employees with secretarial skills. However such trade publications such as this are important areas of research that must not be overlooked with regard to future secretarial employment prospects.

Irish Research

Sadly there is a lack of research into secretarial training in Ireland. Surely this is an area which is important if Ireland hopes to escape the economic doldrums it now finds itself in.

Growth in the economy of Ireland is not limited to the country itself, but to the ability to trade internationally. Secretarial and office administration personnel are crucial in this regard. Without suitably qualified secretarial staff, businesses are sadly lacking in an international context. 'Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally' by Forfás in Ireland (2012) is a key document with regard to Ireland's future. The report outlines several areas which need to be addressed. Skills are lacking in the areas of marketing and sales, foreign languages, logistical and distribution skills, and customer service and support areas. Although all these areas are extremely important, the report fails to address the need for secretarial skills. There is however an emphasis on ICT (information communication technology) as an important sector within the Irish

economy. It is certainly true that Ireland excels in the areas of computer software and hardware, and there is much potential with regard to ‘cloud computing’. Nevertheless, basic computer skills are deficient with many employees today, and secretarial skills are even more limited. This is certainly an area that would benefit from further research.

Key Proposals and Methods

Research into secretarial training in Ireland is sadly lacking, and therefore new and pertinent data should be obtained. Is there a future for secretarial staff in Ireland? How are people to be trained for these positions? Do schools and colleges provide sufficient computer courses? Do these include an element of secretarial skills, such as touch-typing, audio transcription, event and meeting organisation, and management support? Is shorthand a defunct skill now with the advent of voice recorders?

Employers must be involved. Quantitative data may be obtained from trends in staff recruitment in the form of employment records. Qualitative data can be acquired by interviews with human resource managers. It is vital to ascertain that industry has a place for newly qualified secretarial staff. It is proposed that a sample of at least 30 companies, both large and small, should be contacted for research in this area.

Training providers need to be researched. It is necessary to establish how designs in course curricula have changed over the past decade, and in what direction the training industry is heading. This includes schools, colleges, and private companies. Some

training providers have scaled back their courses and a few have disappeared. The question needs to be asked, why? There are a number of ways this information can be researched. A directory of secretarial and office administration training providers needs to be compiled. A survey into development courses was undertaken in 2011 by Jacinta Greene and Mike Gibney of University College Dublin (UCD, 2011). This was a comprehensive compendium of course availability throughout Ireland. A similar review needs to be taken of secretarial training courses.

Past, present and potential students need to be researched. This should be limited to those people who have an interest in secretarial/administration careers. Interviews would be organised to obtain qualitative data, and questionnaires will be designed to collect quantitative data. Past students can provide valuable information on their experience as secretarial staff in the workplace; present students can give an idea of their expectations in this field; and future students (where they can be found) would provide much insight into the skills that are required of them. Careers advisers at secondary schools would be an informative source of information in this regard.

Apart from surveys and interviews with participants in the above mentioned categories, focus groups could also be considered (especially with secondary school students). Case studies could also be obtained from secretarial staff who have been in the profession for a number of years.

Initial contact with all participants would be from lists and directories of employers, training providers and schools. These can be obtained simply through search engines, and perhaps government departments of trade and education. Even a telephone

directory is a good start. Some may be contacted through telephone calls and others through email. It would not be impossible to contact some of my past students.

Conclusion

Secretarial skills are important in today's Ireland. When the economy improves, business will develop, and the demand for secretarial and office staff will surely increase. However it is necessary to carry out research to test this hypothesis. It will be interesting to see if supply will meet demand. Existing research in this area is limited, and although some of it is relevant, most of it is out-of-date.

A mini-survey could be undertaken initially for the Cork/Munster area, with a view to expanding it nationwide. What may be good for Cork may not be the same for Dublin. Demographics are certainly important in secretarial training, and this will become evident in the conclusions of the research.

Directories must be obtained, a questionnaire formulated, and people contacted. The final report may be unique to Ireland – there is no such survey specific to the secretarial profession available at the moment which gives recent and relevant data.

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