Post-Graduate Diploma in Training and Education

GRIFFITH COLLEGE DUBLIN

Research Methodology 2

Research Proposal

'Identifying Trends in Secretarial and Administration Training

and Employment Prospects in Cork'

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Introduction

In today's world the role of the secretary (including office administrators) is of paramount importance to the smooth functioning of all businesses and organisations. Computer skills are crucial especially in the areas of word processing, spreadsheets, databases, slideshow presentations and all-round expertise in general computer usage.

Most employers require prospective candidates to have the ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence). Even pubs, restaurants and fast-food outlets need people with basic computer proficiency to operate tills and computer terminals. Secondary schools usually put students through the ECDL in transition year, and although this is vital, it only gives them a general overview of various computer applications. To become a secretary or office administrator, a person must be able to type up letters and documents, understand mail-merge operations, confidently manage spreadsheet formulae, and understand fields and records in databases. This requires more than just the ECDL. A number of secretarial and office administration courses are run in second-level colleges and other training providers whether privately run or state-sponsored (such as FÁS, the government training authority).

Justification for Research

There are a number of questions that require answers. Does supply meet demand for secretarial positions? What are the trends in uptake of entrants into secretarial courses? Has the skill declined or increased? What research already exists into

demand for employees with good computer skills? How do existing training providers see the future? Are people teaching themselves using manuals and e-learning? Do employers provide training in secretarial skills, or is it still the responsibility of schools and colleges to run courses in word processing, spreadsheets etc?

These questions are important for today's economy, especially in Ireland. If we are to compete internationally we need office administrators and secretaries who are computer literate.

A pilot study is needed for Ireland as a whole, but in the first instance, sampling could be limited to a reasonably sized city such as Cork. There are a number of training providers in this city, some are small and are limited to Cork, and others are national with a branch or two in and around Cork City. There are enough prospective sources of data for research to create a comprehensive deductive study into this area, and as a pilot survey it could lead to a national research opportunity.

Literature Review

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"*.

Another article, although somewhat 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.

Methods and Methodology

Data obtained in research into this area will be both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data would include responses to questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data would involve number-crunching of statistics and numeric information. It is perceived that a mixed-method approach of research would be necessary to gather an informative research outcome (Creswell, 2003).

Research methods are ways of obtaining quantitative and qualitative data such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, and statistical analysis. Research methodology is the science behind various techniques involved in the research methods themselves, and using such ways of finding solutions to enhance the data output (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

Participants for research into secretarial courses and demand for office administration staff are available from a number of areas:

Schools and Colleges

Principals of schools and colleges in Cork City will be approached for an interview. It would also be necessary to include the relevant computer teacher and/or department head. In colleges this would usually involve the business faculty. A questionnaire would be designed to collate answers. The design of the questionnaire needs to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative responses, for example, how many students learning computer skills would be numeric data, but opinions on future

trends in the school or college will require qualitative methods. It is envisaged that at least a dozen educational institutions are approached in order to obtain a reasonable cross-section of respondents. Focus groups are an excellent method of gathering large amounts of data (Abrams, 2001). A focus group could be arranged to include the students themselves, so as to gather information on their expectations of future employment.

Training Providers

FÁS in Rossa Avenue, Cork would be a vital source of suitable information on computer and secretarial courses. This organisation has the responsibility of training students in skills necessary for today's economy. Not only would an interview be required from the departmental manager, but also from computer trainers. ECDL is taught at FÁS as well as advanced computer subjects in training programmes such as the Microsoft Office Specialist and FETAC.

Pitman's Training is another important provider, and an interview and questionnaire would reveal a substantial amount of information – provided of course that such an organisation is willing to supply this data. There may be issues of confidentiality to address. Training providers might not be willing to openly provide information on future courses and programmes because of competitiveness in the industry. Personal bias by the researcher must also be avoided in order to obtain accurate results (Bryman, 2004).

A database would be designed to gather and collate data from schools and training providers. Quantitative data would be best gathered into a spreadsheet. Qualitative data would need to be formulated into groups of responses. Using a coding method of content analysis would be useful for qualitative data (Berelson, 1952) (Strauss and Glaser, 1967). First approach to these respondents would be in the form of a telephone call or email. The best method would be direct contact, but limitations on time and distance might require the interview to be conducted over the telephone. A questionnaire would be an essential tool in either method.

Employment Agencies

Recruitment consultancies and agencies are in the frontline for employment opportunities. Any research into trends in secretarial courses would be incomplete without their opinions. Reed Employment and Hayes Recruitment are just two agencies whose help would be vital in this research proposal. A questionnaire completed in an interview would be the most suitable method for gathering data, although this would be tailored to the agencies themselves, and therefore somewhat different to the questionnaire for schools and training providers. It is expected that responses would indicate that there is a demand for computer programmers, and although this must be taken into account, the main data necessary for research would be more in the area of office administration and secretarial staff. Again confidentiality and competitive advantage may hinder the types of responses obtained.

State Departments

There are two government departments relevant to this research proposal. The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (www.entemp.ie) should be able to provide valuable information as to skills shortages or surpluses. Some statistical data maybe available in their reports although nothing specific appears in the area of secretarial recruitment. The Department of Education and Skills (www.education.ie) would also certainly be an interesting source of data as to the national curriculum with regard to computer and office administration course availability.

Although data from both these departments is national, they would have regional data for Cork. Telephone interviews would not be sufficient, and it would be necessary to make appointments to visit the relevant personnel. Questionnaires would be designed for these respondents, and tailor-made for each respective department. Confidentiality might not be such as issue as compared to private training providers, and therefore data acquired is likely to be extremely important and up-to-date. It would be interesting to find out how much co-operation and overlap there is between the two departments.

Apart from FÁS being the state-run training provider, the affiliated Local Employment Services would be a useful source of relevant information, and an interview with a job facilitator at the Cork branch would be arranged. Their counterpart in the Department of Social Welfare might also be a possibility. Both facilitators would have a sound knowledge of employment prospects and skills requirements in the Cork area.

Employers

Companies need people with computer skills, and employers and human resource managers are a vital source of feedback into this area. Cork has a number of prominent businesses, local, national and international. There is no shortage of businesses that could be approached in this city. Furthermore, this is the one group who needs employees with computer skills – at least this is what the research will hope to prove. The main problem will be finding the relevant people to talk to in this regard. Office managers tend to be busy people, so time considerations need to be taken into account.

Former Students

It is envisaged that past students of secretarial courses would be a useful source of data. They have gained experience in their prospective careers as to whether the skills they learnt have been useful and where additional training might be required. As part of their information technology module they were required to have an email address, and these have been kept either on feedback forms or from email exercises they undertook on the course. Some may have changed their email address since, but at least two-thirds would still be using the same address. An email group could be compiled and a blanket mail-merge campaign might generate a number of responses. If a hundred past students were contacted it is hoped that at least 20% would reply. It might not be necessary to interview these twenty students, but with a suitable questionnaire attached to the email, some valid answers could be obtained.

Data Sources

Apart from email addresses of past students, names and details of suitable candidates for survey can be obtained from telephone and online directories. The local library might also be able to supply lists of relevant contacts. Records would then be input into a database with name, job title, telephone, email, and research method to be used. It would be necessary to create the database with every possible aspect of response type incorporated, with the view to providing appropriate reports of the data collected. The Golden Pages directory would provide information on schools, colleges, and independent training providers. Online directories would also be a valuable source of contact details. Limitations such as accuracy and relevance must be considered with such secondary data (Duane, 1996).

Budget Considerations

Various costs would have to be factored into data collection. Although emails are a relatively inexpensive method of contacting potential respondents, the response rate would not be as high as canvassing via telephone. Since telephone calls can be expensive, especially during office hours when most of the research will be conducted, a budget of at least €200 would be necessary purely for telephone contact. Wherever possible, telephone interviews will be avoided if it is preferable to have face-to-face contact with respondents. Travel costs would then have to be considered, especially if journeys to Dublin are to be considered. Some postage costs would also

have to be calculated into the budget where this is the only way of getting responses from certain people.

As mentioned, questionnaires would have to be designed and tailor-made to specific groups (Joseph and Arthur, 2006). Questions asked of a college principal would be different to that of a recruitment consultant. This would take time to create the different types of survey and so the costs of time allocated by the researcher would be an important element of the budget. Merely for a pilot survey in the Cork area a budget of about €1000 is expected.

Schedule

The time period involved in collecting and collating data would extend over a period of a few months, just for the Cork region. It would take much longer if the research is to encapsulate national data. Creating a database of prospective respondents gathered from directories would take a number of weeks. Contacting these people might take much longer. Although schools do not have students during the summer months, the administrative staff are usually still working, and this might be a perfect time to contact school principals. Colleges may have summer courses running, but these months are possibly the best time to contact department heads. By September schools and colleges would be too busy to partake in any research.

In contrast, employment agencies, training providers, and government departments can be contacted at any time during the year, although August is not the best time due to holidays.

Ethical Issues

Some of the questions to be asked of survey respondents may be of a sensitive or confidential nature, and this must be carefully considered and respected. Training providers and employment agencies may withhold answers to some questions because they may not wish to divulge such data to competitors. Prior to each interview it must be stated that the respondents have a choice as to whether they wish their data published in the final report. This may be more relevant to qualitative data, as responses are far more personal. Quantitative data can be anonymous, although this must also be stated at the outset of any interview or questionnaire to be compiled.

A focus group of transition year students would be a useful source of information about expectations in future employment, but because these are young people around the age of 16, ethical considerations are also important. It is expected that another teacher would attend a focus group, and the questionnaire would have to meet their approval.

For past students, there may be one or two whose experience could warrant a case study. Again the ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity would need to be

considered, and it would be at the discretion of the respondent as to whether they wish

to have their name and details published in the final report.

Expected Outcomes

Although initially this would be research into secretarial courses in the Cork region,

the final report would provide useful information to agencies, schools and training

providers. Local newspapers may be interested in publishing the results. It is surely

of interest to see how demand meets supply in the area of office administration and

employment prospects for those wishing to pursue a career in this area.

The final research report is intended to give a snapshot of the hopes and expectations

of prospective secretarial students. It is hoped that any stigma of working as a

secretary or office administrator is diminished. For too long this vital area of business

organisation is without relevant research and data.

Conclusion

Although the research will at first be limited to Cork City, there are a number of

different groups that can be approached for data. Respecting ethical considerations is

vital, as is gathering relevant and useful information. Groundwork will consist of

gathering lists of people to contact. A comprehensive database will be created to

collate all the information and spreadsheets will be used to quantify data. Variations

in questionnaires need to be compiled. A budget will need to be drawn up and adhered to. Last but not least, a professional report will be compiled which outlines the results of the research, and it must be of interest to the various parties researched.

The work of a secretary and/or office administrator is important for business, and without suitably qualified people, business and industry will surely suffer. Maybe the final report will inspire school-leavers and young people to consider a career in this field. Hopefully many people will see the benefits of acquiring useful skills to gain secure and interesting employment. If it helps in any small way to improve Ireland's excellent reputation for overseas investment and economic growth, then it will surely be important research.

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