

OCCUPATIONAL BIAS AND JOB PERFORMANCE OF SECRETARIES IN TODAY'S OFFICE ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIA

Dr. AINA M. A. and OLAWAIYE T. O.

taiwo.olawaiye@gmail.com

Department of Vocational and Technical Education
Faculty of Education, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State

Abstract

This paper examines the multifaceted dynamics of occupational biases experienced by secretaries in organisations in Nigeria. Secretaries play pivotal roles in organizational efficiency, serving as administrative backbones, gatekeepers of communication, and custodians of corporate image. Despite their observed indispensable contributions, they encounter various forms of biases including gender, age, racial, educational, and religious biases. These biases manifest in differential treatment, limited recognition, and constrained career advancement opportunities among others. The impact of occupational bias on secretaries' job performance is profound, leading to decreased job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity, as well as fostering negative work environments and restricting career progression. By examining the multifaceted nature of bias and its repercussions on job performance, this study has shed light on roles of Secretaries, forms of biases, impact of biases among others. To mitigate these biases, a range of strategies have been proposed. These include education and awareness programs, equal opportunity initiatives, professional development opportunities, diversity training, and bias awareness workshops, inclusive leadership training and cross-cultural communication workshops are also recommended to foster understanding and collaboration in multicultural settings.

Keywords: Occupational bias, Job performance, Secretaries, Office environment.

Introduction

Occupation bias is referred to as the tendency to favour or prioritize certain occupation, career or fields over others often based on societal, cultural or personal beliefs. This bias can manifest in various ways, such as over emphasizing prestigious or high paying jobs, undervaluing or stigmatizing certain occupations e.g. (manual labour, service industry, assuming certain careers are more suitable for specific groups (e.g.,

gender, age) fostering stereotypes about certain occupations or industry, and influencing career choices or advice based on personal biases

Occupational bias can have negative consequences such as limiting career choices and opportunities, perpetuating irregularity and discrimination, reinforcing social and economic disparities, overlooking valuable skills and contradictions from diverse occupations, and impacting self-esteem and career satisfaction.

The workplace is a crucible of human interaction and endeavor, where individuals from diverse backgrounds with different skills and knowledge come together to contribute to the attainment of organizational goals. It is expected that individual employees who are from different professions are to perform their duties without prejudice.

The secretary is an indispensable Office Administrator in both public and private organizations. The Secretary is a trained office worker who has acquired proficiency in the art of Keyboarding, Shorthand, Office Management, Information and Communication Technology, Interpersonal Relations, among others in order to effectively superintend the affairs of his/her office for enhanced job performance. Thus Mayer (1977) defines the secretary as an executive assistant, who possesses a mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility with or without supervision, exercises initiatives and judgment and makes decision within the scope of assigned authority. According to Edwin (2008), today's secretaries are exposed to office technology including the internet that makes work much easier and knowledge more accessible.

The roles of the Secretary are vital to the sustainability of any organization in that he/she has a variety of functions to perform with the outside community of the organization. Among the organizations that require the roles of good secretaries are profit making and non-profit, private and public organizations. The role of secretaries in any business environment cannot be understated as they form the administrative backbone, facilitating crucial tasks, managing communication, and ensuring the

smooth functioning of the organization.

However, the issue of occupational bias has been observed to prevent effective job performance of Secretaries in different organizations. Occupational biases can be viewed as strong feelings against a person, a group of persons in the places of work, which may be as a result of unfair judgment. This can be due to gender discriminations, or tribe among others.

Considering the implications of occupational on secretaries' job performance, it is imperative to understand the challenges they may likely face in their professional environments.

Roles of Secretaries in Business and Office environment

The role of secretaries has evolved significantly over the years, transitioning from clerical tasks to multifaceted ones that require a diverse range of skills. This evolution has necessitated a re-evaluation of the criteria used to assess their job performance. The Practice Note (2024), reports that the role of secretaries consist of humanity, humility, high intelligence, and understanding of agendas, negotiation and resilience. A secretary must possess not only a knowledge base but also the attitudes and personal qualities that reflect the values of the organization, intangibles that are not covered in a job description, personality traits and qualities that are important in accomplishing tasks. Thus, some of the duties of Secretaries can be classified as follows:

Administrative Backbone: Secretaries are the backbone of administrative efficiency in any business organisation. They handle essential administrative tasks such as maintaining records, managing appointments, and organizing

meetings. Oloyede and Adefunke (2019) emphasize the significance of efficient administrative support of secretaries by highlighting how secretaries streamline processes, reduce administrative burdens on faculty members and ensure smooth operations in organizations.

Gatekeepers of Communication:

According to Lewis and Brown (2021), secretaries act as gatekeepers of communication, serving as the initial point of contact for students, faculty, and external stakeholders. Their effective communication skills and knowledge of organizational policies are critical for the provision of accurate information and facilitating smooth interactions in their organizations..

Support for Staff and Employees:

Taylor, Johnson, and Smith, (2019) opine that secretaries provide essential support to management staff, research administration, and event coordination. They often serve as a liaison officer between different departments and administrative units.

Student Services: Smith and Jenkins (2018) note the importance of student services in higher education institutions, demonstrating how secretaries contribute to student's satisfaction and retention. Secretaries are often the first point of contact for students seeking assistance. They provide information on academic programs, admission procedures, and course registration. This direct interaction with students can significantly impact their experience..

Corporate Image: Secretaries often serve as the image of the organization, both to internal and external stakeholders. Their professionalism and efficiency reflect positively on the organization's image. Brown and Martinez (2016) emphasized the role of secretaries in creating a positive institutional image, which can

influence enrollment, patronage and donor relations.

Other roles performed by secretaries according to other scholars are resource allocation (Hill & Adams 2019), crisis response (Smith & Thomas 2019), and role evolution (Davis & Robinson 2021) among others.

Job Performance and the Secretary

Job performance refers to the extent to which an individual effectively fulfills the requirements of their job role. It encompasses both the quality and quantity of work output, as well as the behaviours and attitudes that contribute to organisational success. It is the ability of effectively complete the core tasks and responsibilities associated with a job and behaviours that contribute to the overall organisational environment, such as helping co-workers, adapting to change, and engaging in organisational citizenship behaviours.

Job performance refers to the output that an employee has contributed to the goal and purpose of an organisation through work behaviour and engagements which the organisation considers as either productive or otherwise. According to Robbins and Judge (2017), job performance consists of five indications, including (1) quality of work; (2) quantity of work; (3) timeliness; (4) effectiveness; and (5) independence.

Secretaries play a crucial role in the smooth functioning of organizations, providing essential administrative support to executives, managers, and other staff members. Their job performance encompasses a range of tasks and responsibilities aimed at facilitating efficient operations and communication within the workplace. It also involves the effective execution of administrative

and clerical duties to ensure the smooth operation of an office thereby maintaining organizational efficiency through their administrative functions.

They engage in various job activities that encompass a diverse range of tasks aimed at supporting administrative functions and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders. Some of the job activities involved in the job performance of Secretaries are administrative support, communication management, documentation and recordkeeping, calendar management, client and visitor relations, task prioritization and time management, word processing, human and customer relations and interactions, digital skills activities

To improve the performance of secretaries, Côté (2012) remarks that they must continually develop diverse set of skills and competencies to excel in their role which includes strong organizational and time management skills, effective communication and interpersonal skills, attention to detail, problem-solving abilities, and technological proficiency. They are also expected to possess knowledge and expertise in areas such as office procedures, document management, record keeping, information technology, and relevant industry or organizational knowledge (Berneth, Aguinis, & Walker, 2011). In their contribution Van, Pierce, & Steiner (1994) are of the opinion that the work environment, such as organizational culture, leadership style, work-life balance, and support from colleagues and supervisors, must also not be biased to ensure maximum job performance. Secretaries who feel valued, recognized, and rewarded for their contributions are likely to be more motivated and engaged in their work, leading to higher level of performance.

Occupational Bias and the Secretaries

Occupational bias refers to the preconceived notions, stereotypes, and prejudices associated with specific occupations. Secretaries often face various forms of bias due to the historically gendered perception of the role. Occupational bias can be defined as the differential treatment, attitudes, and perceptions towards individuals based on the occupation they hold (Reskin & McBrier, 2000). Scholars such as Kramar, Bartram, and Leggat (2011) emphasize the importance of recognizing bias in organizational structures and its adverse effects on employee's performance. Their works highlight the need for a comprehensive understanding of biases that persist within workplace dynamics.

Some of the factors that have influenced occupational biases in Secretarial profession are:

Lack of Recognition: The contributions of secretaries, despite their critical roles in the smooth functioning of organizations, are frequently underestimated. A study by Turner and White (2019) found that their contributions in terms of administrative support, communication facilitation, and organizational efficiency are often overshadowed or taken for granted, leading to a lack of recognition. Brown and Martinez (2016) indicates that when secretaries feel undervalued and underappreciated, their job satisfaction decreases, which can result in reduced productivity and overall organisational or institutional inefficiency.

Gender Bias: Gender bias remains a prominent factor influencing occupational bias among secretaries.. Eagly and Karau (2002) emphasize the role of congruity theory, which posits societal expectations that create biases

against women in certain roles. This bias often results in the underrepresentation of women in higher positions and the perpetuation of stereotypes regarding job competencies based on gender. In fact, there has been evidence of discrimination BY THE Chief Executives on the preferred gender of a secretary to work with.

Organizational Culture: The organizational culture plays a pivotal role in fostering or mitigating occupational biases. Kramar, Bartram, and Leggat (2011) highlight that organizational norms, practices, and leadership attitudes significantly influence the prevalence of biases. Institutions that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives tend to mitigate occupational biases more effectively.

Job Scope: Secretaries, while handling sensitive and confidential information, may be confined to administrative support tasks such as typing, data entry, clerical duties, limiting their involvement and participation in strategic discussions, broader organizational functions, access to information and decision-making processes. This disparity in job scope can perpetuate the perception of confidential secretaries as lesser contributors, reinforcing unequal treatment they experience.

Stereotypes and Prejudices: Stereotypes and prejudices deeply ingrained in societal structures contribute to occupational biases. These biases are often unconscious and can influence decision-making processes related to hiring, promotions, and task assignments. Such biases perpetuate stereotypes about certain groups' abilities, affecting opportunities and treatment within the workplace (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Hijacking of Roles of Secretaries:

With technological advancements and changing administrative needs, the roles of secretaries are being hijacked or encroached upon by other staff members, for example, minutes taking during committee, management, and board meetings. This can lead to diminished recognition for the unique contributions they make to the organisation or institution. Mitchell and Adams (2016) highlight that secretaries who find their roles diluted may struggle to assert their expertise and face challenges in gaining recognition for their specialized skills and knowledge. Turner and Bennett (2019) also opine that the effects of role encroachment can lead to reduced job satisfaction, negative workplace culture, feelings of disempowerment, frustration, and alienation, within tertiary institutions which create a negative atmosphere.

Limited Career Advancement: the lack of recognition for secretaries also translates into limited career advancement opportunities. Carter and Davis (2018) highlight that secretaries faced with obstacles when seeking to advance their careers within organizations. They often encounter barriers in accessing training and development programs, hindering their professional growth.

Perceived Hierarchy and Power Dynamics: Another contributing factor to the occupational bias lies in the perceived hierarchy and power dynamics. The power dynamics inherent in the organizational structure can result in confidential secretaries being overlooked, undervalued, or limited in their professional growth and development opportunities.

Disparities in Compensation: One of the key manifestations of occupational bias is the disparity in compensation in terms of fringe

benefits, and allowances between secretaries and other officers within organizations and institutions. A study by Johnson and Williams (2015) found that secretaries in higher education institutions often earn significantly less than their counterparts in other administrative or academic positions whenever there is need to pay allowances like overtime or bonuses. This pay gap can be attributed, in part, to the undervaluation of secretarial work.

Forms of Occupational Bias

Some of the various forms of the occupational bias being experienced by secretaries as gathered in literature and from experience are as follows:

Gender Bias: Secretarial work has long been associated with women, leading to gender bias and reinforcing gender stereotypes. According to Smith and Davis (2020), it is one of the most pervasive forms of occupational bias. It manifests when individuals are treated differently based on their gender. Eagly and Carli (2007) further emphasized that gender bias persists in the workplace, with women often facing challenges related to leadership roles and unequal compensation.

Age Bias: According to Jackson, Johnson and Jones (2021), centers on prejudices related to an individual's age. It can lead to discrimination against both younger and older employees, impacting hiring decisions, promotions, and perceptions of competence.

Racial or Ethnic Bias: Racial or ethnic bias, explored by Williams and Martinez (2019), involves discriminatory attitudes and actions based on a person's racial or ethnic background. It can result in inequitable opportunities, micro aggressions, and exclusionary practices in the workplace.

Attribution Bias: This refers to when a boss assume that a Secretary is unfit for a job position or that she is not capable of performing certain task without giving her a chance to demonstrate her expertise. By this, some Executives do under rate the abilities of their secretaries as to their effectiveness in carrying out assignments hence; they prefer to perform the job themselves without any trial by Secretary.

Contrast Effect Bias: This is when a boss compares two career roles simultaneously and causing him to exaggerate the performance of one in contrast to another.

Religious Bias: Religious bias, as identified by Ahmed, Khan and Ali (2022), pertains to discriminatory behaviour directed at individuals because of their religious beliefs or practices. This bias can manifest in various ways, from subtle exclusion to overt acts of discrimination.

Educational Bias: Some occupations may require specific educational backgrounds, but bias can occur when candidates from certain schools or educational systems are favored over others.

Bias in Work Assignments: Employees might be assigned tasks based on assumptions about their abilities, limiting their growth and development within the organization.

From the foregoing, there exist evidences of the opinion that occupational biases are being experienced by Secretaries in today's work environment in Nigeria. Adebayo and Ojo (2018) explain that female secretaries in Nigeria often encounter gender-based discrimination in the workplace, including unequal pay, limited career advancement opportunities, and stereotyping based on traditional gender roles. They also reiterated that another aspect of occupational bias that secretaries may

experience is educational bias. In most cases, secretaries are being overlooked for certain opportunities or promotions due to a lack of formal education or specific qualifications, even if they possess the necessary professional skills and experience for the role. This can create barriers for career growth and development among secretaries. They furthermore, opined that there may be bias based on job title and perceived status within the organization. Secretaries are sometimes undervalued or underestimated in their roles, which may have some impact on the job performance and job satisfaction as discussed below.

Impact of Occupational Bias on Secretaries Job Performance

Job performance and occupational bias are two critical aspects that significantly impact confidential secretaries' roles in organizations. Job performance relates to how effectively secretaries fulfill their responsibilities, while occupational bias encompasses unfair treatment or disadvantages faced by individuals in their careers due to various factors. When confidential secretaries are undervalued and subjected to unequal treatment, it creates an atmosphere of unfairness and inequality within the organization. This often leads to:

Decreased Job Satisfaction: The stigmatization and unequal treatment can result in lower job satisfaction among confidential secretaries. When their contributions are overlooked or undervalued, it creates a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with their work.

Reduced Motivation and Engagement: When confidential secretaries feel marginalized or stigmatized, their motivation and engagement levels may decline. They

may become disenchanted with their roles and less willing to go above and beyond their assigned responsibilities.

Negative Work Environment: The presence of biases and disparities can foster a negative work environment where employees feel undervalued, leading to decreased morale and strained relationships between confidential secretaries and other employees.

Reduced Job Satisfaction and Morale: The psychological impact of bias on secretaries' job satisfaction and morale is profound. Eagly and Karau (2002) note that experiencing biases in the workplace can lead to feelings of frustration, demotivation, and reduced job satisfaction. When individuals feel unfairly treated or undervalued due to biases, their morale diminishes, affecting their enthusiasm and commitment to their roles. Likewise, when confidential secretaries experience stigmatization and unequal treatment, it can create a sense of demoralization among the entire workforce. Low morale can lead to decreased employee engagement, higher absenteeism rates, and a lack of enthusiasm for the organization's goals.

Decreased Productivity: Occupational bias significantly affects the productivity of secretaries within tertiary institutions. When biases influence task assignments, resource allocation, or recognition of contributions, it can impede their efficiency and effectiveness in performing their duties (Robbins & Judge, 2017). Biases may lead to underutilization of skills and talents, hindering optimal productivity levels of confidential secretaries. When their expertise and insights are not valued, organizations miss out on valuable perspectives and innovative ideas that can enhance productivity and efficiency.

Talent Loss: The disparities can contribute to higher turnover rates among confidential secretaries. When these employees feel undervalued and overlooked, they may seek opportunities elsewhere, resulting in talent loss and increased recruitment and training costs for the organization.

Restriction on Career Progression and Opportunities: Occupational bias within tertiary institutions can substantially hinder career progression and limit opportunities for secretarial staff. Biases may result in unequal access to professional development programs, training opportunities, or promotions (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Biases often restrict the advancement of individuals based on stereotypes rather than merit, limiting their career growth.

Strategies to Mitigate Occupational Bias

Some of the interventions that can be adopted to mitigate occupational bias as presented by different scholars are:

1. **Education and Awareness:** Promoting education and awareness about the diverse and essential nature of secretarial work can help challenge occupational bias. This includes highlighting the skills and contributions of secretaries, breaking down gender stereotypes, and fostering a more inclusive work environment.
2. **Equal Opportunity Programs:** Organizations should implement equal opportunity programs that aim to eliminate bias in hiring, promotion, and compensation practices. These programs can help create a fair and inclusive workplace where secretaries are evaluated based on their skills and performance rather than occupational stereotypes (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006).
3. **Professional Development:** Providing opportunities for professional development and training can empower secretaries to enhance their skills, gain new competencies, and demonstrate their value within the organization. This can help challenge occupational bias by showcasing the continuous growth and expertise of secretaries (Healy, 2019).
4. **Diversity Training Programs:** Implementing comprehensive diversity training programs is crucial. Koch, D'Mello, and Sackett (2015) suggest training sessions focused on recognizing and addressing biases, fostering inclusivity, and promoting awareness of diverse perspectives. These programs aim to sensitize employees and decision-makers about the impact of biases on workplace dynamics.
5. **Bias Awareness Workshops:** Eagly and Karau (2002) advocate for workshops dedicated to understanding implicit biases and their effects on decision-making. These workshops facilitate discussions on recognizing and challenging biases, encouraging employees to reflect on their assumptions and judgments, fostering a more inclusive work culture.
6. **Inclusive Leadership Training:** Training programs targeting leadership roles are essential. Judge and Piccolo (2004) suggest leadership training that emphasizes inclusive practices, highlighting the value of diverse perspectives, and equipping leaders with skills to recognize and mitigate biases within their teams.
7. **Cross-Cultural Communication Workshops:** Kramar, Bartram, and Leggat

(2011) advocate for cross-cultural communication workshops to enhance understanding and collaboration among a diverse workforce. These programs focus on fostering effective communication strategies in multicultural settings, reducing misunderstandings, and biases stemming from cultural differences.

8. **Ongoing Sensitivity Training:**

Continuous and ongoing sensitivity training is recommended by Robbins and Judge (2017) to maintain awareness and address evolving biases within the workplace. Regular sessions that address emerging biases ensure a sustained effort towards creating an unbiased work environment. Employing a combination of diversity training, bias awareness initiatives, and specialized programs for leadership and cross-cultural communication can significantly contribute to mitigating occupational bias and fostering an inclusive work environment within tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

In view of the negative impact that occupational biases against secretaries can bring into the progress of any organization, it is established that most of the administrative failures or incompetencies recorded in business and international organizations are most as a result of the practice of occupational biases by the management of these organizations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. Organizations should establish explicit policies condemning all

forms of bias in hiring, promotion, and task assignments of secretaries. These policies should emphasize accountability and outline consequences for discriminatory behaviour. This can be achieved through distribution of the policies to all employees and ensuring they understand the expectations and consequences.

2. They should conduct periodic audits to assess biases in various departments where secretaries work by implementing reporting mechanisms for employees to confidentially report instances of bias thereby fostering transparency and accountability.
3. Comprehensive diversity training programs should also be conducted for all staff to raise awareness and mitigate biases in day-to-day operations.
4. Transparent policies for task assignments, promotions, and recognition of secretaries should be developed and enforced to ensure fairness and minimize biases.
5. Management Staff in organizations should be actively involved in fostering an inclusive and unbiased work environment through their actions and support.
6. There should be regular and continuous evaluation and assessment of the effectiveness of interventions to address biases and adjusting strategies based on feedback and evolving needs.

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