

SECRETARIES AND THE 21ST CENTURY DIGITAL SKILLS FOR DECENT WORK IN A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

¹OCHOLI, J. Monday,

Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnic,
Department of Office Technology and Management
Bauchi, Bauchi State.
mondayocholi24@gmail.com (07035000662)

Abstract

The development of technology has signalled a future workforce that is more knowledgeable, versatile and productive. Employers of labour are currently on the lookout for secretaries with digital skills that could participate in knowledge economy. This paper is a literature review on secretaries' and the 21st Century Digital skills for decent work in a knowledge economy. The paper defined the concepts of secretaries' 21st Century digital skills, knowledge economy, and decent work. More so, the paper clearly explained the importance of 21st Century digital skills to secretaries in a knowledge economy and ways of improving secretaries' digital skills. It was therefore concluded that if the 21st century digital skills acquisition are embedded in education and training of secretaries, it will enable them to secure decent work in the digital economy, whether as technology specialists, leaders of digitally-enabled businesses or workers in digitally-enabled jobs across the economy. It was recommended that the curriculum used for the training of secretaries should be reviewed.

Keywords: Secretary, 21st Century Digital Skills, Decent work and Knowledge Economy

Introduction

Digital skill is one of the goldmines and sources of prosperity in the 21st century. Digitalization dominates all aspects of our lives with a profound impact on workers, businesses, economies and societies. 21st century digital skill is the ability to understand media, search for information and be able to use a variety of digital tools and applications to communicate with others. Ndubuisi, Ezeani, and Ile (2022) described digital skills as the abilities of using digital technologies to transform existing conventional and non-digital business processes and services to create new ones in order to meet developing market and customer expectations. 21st century digital skills in this context is a set of skills needed to effectively and efficiently use new technologies to perform official and personal tasks in the digital environment. This means, digital skills are any skills related to being digitally literate.

Digital skills have made working from anywhere a new normal and are also enhancing efficiency, effectiveness and improvement of business quality. According to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) (2020), digital skills are necessary for all occupations, from primary occupations to managerial positions and even employees and applicants seeking to participate in the labour market. It is an insurance for jobseekers against the rising need in the workplace. Digital skill will offer secretaries access to massive information, opportunity to manage, integrate and evaluate information. Corporate Finance Institute (CFI) (2022) believed that the rapid expansion of knowledge and the increasing reliance on computerization, big data analytics and automation were changing the economy of the developed world to one that is more dependent on intellectual capital, skills, and less dependent on the production process. Organisations globally are embarking on digitalisation of their services and this is making the general public agitated for being left out of it. It is not the development of old jobs that makes digital skills critical for secretaries in the modern workplace, but the creation of entirely new jobs. Despite the importance of digital skills, secretaries are still plagued with skill gap, which, if not nib in the bud, may snow-ball into complete exclusion of secretaries from digital economy and extinction of the profession from global trends.

A secretary is an office worker, who combines the competencies of stenographer, clerical officer, receptionist and more, that need a variety of other skills, talents and attitude. Ocholi, Aina and Ezeani (2022) claimed that a secretary is an office manager and administrative officer, who coordinates and

manages both the human and material resources of an organisation. Secretarial education is an efficient, effective, productive and functional education which leads to self-employment, self-reliance, paid occupation and consequently, self-actualization. Ezech, Ezeahurukwe and Ameh, (2021)) noted that government in alliance with UNESCO reviewed the secretarial education curriculum and renamed the course as Office Technology and Management (OTM) in order to keep pace with modern realities and technology revolution. Ocholi, et al. (2022) stated that secretarial education is one of the specialized programmes offered in the Department of Vocational and Technical Education, Business Education or School of Business Studies in Nigerian tertiary institutions that lays emphasis on the possession of necessary practical skills to operate office machines and to serve as supporting staff to the management in any organisation. The OTM curriculum was designed to produce graduates with secretarial and office skills for employment in various fields of endeavour that can manage the electronic driven office successfully.

Unfortunately, higher educational institutions are often criticized for not preparing OTM graduates, who are actually future secretaries with diverse skills in line with the contexts and trends in the knowledge economy. The facts show that there is digital skill chink between those acquired by the graduates and those needed in the knowledge economy (Ezech et al, 2021). This inadequacy of knowledge and skills possession by OTM graduates in formal schools, is due to lack of workable technology, functional internet facilities and laboratories. International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021) adduced that the case was probably more in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) fields where prolonged under investment in digital technologies and related skills development had slowed down the digitalization process. This trend could lead to digital bankruptcy in the secretarial profession, thus, a potential harbinger of digital exclusion of these professionals from the knowledge economy. Globalization and technological advances have birthed knowledge economy, and as such, secretarial trainers should help these officers to possess the right skills for such economy, rather than basking in the euphoria of high levels of education alone.

Knowledge economy is a system of consumption and production that is intellectual capital based. IGI Global (2022) posited that knowledge economy was coined to describe a shift from traditional economies to the use of knowledge for production. The underlying idea unifying this strand of work is the centrality of theoretical knowledge as the basis of innovation. Thus, knowledge economy is major enabler of growth, wealth creation and employment that is directly hub on production, distribution and utilization of knowledge and information. ILO (2021) believed that digital skills acquisition leads to decent work, productivity and sustainability that can advance the value and output of labour, empowers the lives of workers and enriches societies. Decent work is a term that denotes occupation that contributes to the social and economic stability of workers. In this context, decent work is defined as productive work for secretaries in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity, fair and safe working conditions.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, according to International Partnership (n.a), 1.4 billion people work in vulnerable or informal occupation characterized by bad conditions, low productivity rates, low incomes with high turnovers in order to survive. Therefore, in such climes workers are underemployed, and would therefore like to combine several jobs in order to make ends meet. Similarly, ITU (2020) revealed that 53 per cent of the population is offline because many people do not use the Internet as a result of the cost of data packages, cost of devices, lack of education and skills, rare social protection and precarious employment. This suggests that in spite of the vast growth in the numbers of Internet usages, many people are still unable to reap the many benefits of today's knowledge economy.

Globalization is increasingly going digital. Qureshi (2020) believed that digital technologies hold considerable potential to lift the route of productivity and economic growth, and to create new and better jobs to replace old ones. This explains that, we are now on the verge of another profound shift, where tasks are becoming automatable through Artificial Intelligence, people are being substituted by robots, traditional professions are vanishing, and new ones are born, while virtual worlds are augmenting the real world. The pace of change is quick, and jobs themselves are also fastly changing. Digital technologies are driving transformative change and the newest innovations in artificial intelligence and related expansions are enlarging the frontiers of the digital transformation, thereby making the future to arrive faster than anticipated. However, secretaries with digital skills will increase their presence, employability and earnings. ILO (2021) affirmed that millions of jobs are at risk of massively being reclassified, rebalanced and replaced with automation and digitalization, especially repetitive, manual, and routine tasks,

while the demand for non-routine tasks, cognitive skills such as problem-solving, and interpersonal and other core skills will be on the increase. The introduction of technology into the boardroom as a provider of reports and data, has helped secretary to overcome the challenges of mundane and time-consuming tasks to become a better partner to their board.

McKinsey in Greetly Digital Receptionist (2019) acceded that certain tasks requiring emotional connection with people and creativity that cannot be easily automated will still be handled by human beings. This means that secretaries who are performing tasks that are yet to be automated will become more pivotal. Qureshi (2020) noted that automation and digital advances are changing labour demand from middle level skills to more sophisticated analytical, technical, and managerial skills. Decision making is a critical skill for leaders in the digital age. Thus, improving the digital skills of secretaries will help them to leverage on the benefits of the digital economy. According to Ocholi et al (2022), building competence in areas that machines will be unlikely to tackle effectively is the possible best recipe for success. Therefore, the secretaries' worry about automation should be the yardstick for acquiring digital skills so that they can be released from dangerous, predictable and routine tasks in order to pursue safer, more creative and interesting tasks, as well as leisure activities. ITU (2020) believed that digital skills have the potential to create new career opportunities whereas digital illiteracy will exclude a sizeable population from adapting to new technologies, thereby limiting their potential participation in the digital economy.

What is 21st Century Digital Skill?

The 21st Century digital skill goes far beyond the technology itself, and general descriptions may not be appropriate when applied to some specific environments. Digital competencies are not only concerned with skills, but also focused on cognitive, social and emotional aspects of working and technical living in a digital environment. Salesforce Inc. (2022) defined digital skills as the needed skills to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information, from basic online searching and emailing to specialist programming and development. Prensky in SkillsYouNeed.com (2022) asserted that digital literacy is a language, which one can only speak according to the quality of digital skills he or she acquires. Therefore, a secretary who has acquired digital skills will be able to develop, communicate, collaborate, and share digital content, and solve problem anywhere in the world.

The 21st century digital skill primarily focuses on computers alone, but the arrival of the internet and use of social media, has occasioned the shift in some of its focus to mobile devices. ITU (2020) categorized digital skills into technical, social, creative, information management, critical thinking, ethical awareness, cultural awareness, self-direction and lifelong learning. Olaniyi (2022) mentioned that digital skills are not replacing traditional types of literacy but are helping to build upon and expand the skills that shape the foundation of traditional forms of literacy. CFI (2022) claimed that modern economy is for workers who know how to answer emails, access a company's files on Google Drive, tweak a website's code, create and work with financial models, and the ability to innovate. In other word, digital skill is a survival skill for secretaries in the digital era.

Ocholi et al (2022) stated that there are a huge variety of skills that can be considered as digital skills, such as skills to send emails securely, use email attachments, and post on social media; handle information and content, use search engines, understand that not all online content is reliable, access content across devices and on the cloud; set up accounts online, fill in online forms; find solutions to problems using tutorials/chat and improve productivity; and keep passwords secure, take precautions against viruses among others. This portends that digital skills are skills to manage businesses on social media, ability to use Facebook and Twitter to upload, etc.

Knowledge Economy Defined

Society and the economy are being transmuted from physical-based labour force to knowledge-based. The knowledge economy is centred on how digital technologies are transforming the way people think, act and work. This signifies that a knowledge economy is an economy in which the knowledge workers are the central input element. IGI Global (2022) described knowledge economy as a system of consumption and production that is anchored on technology and knowledge, which are intellectual capital

that focus on the importance of human capital in the 21st century economy. The knowledge-based economy is an expression coined to describe trends in advanced economies towards massive dependence on knowledge, information and high skill levels by the business and public sectors.

The economic progress rests on knowledge and the utilization of knowledge. The notions of knowledge economy and knowledge worker are based on the view that information and knowledge are at the centre of economic growth and development. The ability to produce and use information effectively is a critical source of skills for many individuals, especially secretaries. The economy here, is based on practical application of knowledge and information to generate tangible and intangible values, consequently making knowledge the key economic asset that drives long-run economic performance. Thus, economic progress and expansion has always depended on new ideas and innovation, making knowledge as important as capital (physical and financial) and natural resources as a source of economic growth.

CFI (2022) stated that the main features of this new economy are education, skills, information and technology infrastructure, research, and the innovation system. The system values a skilled labour force, and skilled workers to fill major job positions. With these four pillars, the secretaries will thrive in the knowledge economy, because they will be able to create, share and use knowledge, the internet to facilitate effective communication, dissemination and processing of information; tap into the growing stock of global knowledge, assimilate and adapt it to local needs, and create new knowledge. IGI Global (2022) noted that the economic mode of production is centred on information, skills, know-how, training and education as opposed to capital or labour. It promotes futuristic approach to intellectual production that is central to logic knowledge and technology rather than the consumption of goods that is money dependent. Thus, knowledge is the ultimate means to improve the efficiency of production and distribution processes, enhance the quality and quantity of products, and enrich the choice of products and services for consumers and producers.

Hayes (2021) claimed that the main feature of a knowledge-based economy is the increasing reliance on highly-skilled workers whose skills are not exclusively related to science and technology, but on the control, management and co-ordination of tasks. The modern economy comprises of service industries and jobs that require thinking and analysis of data. This component of the economy relies greatly on intellectual capabilities instead of natural resources or physical contributions, which the secretary is expected to imbibe.

What is Decent Work?

Decent work is an occupation that respects the physical and mental integrity of the worker in the exercise of his/her employment. International Partnership (n.a) noted that decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives, involving opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. York University Staff Association (2021) asserted that decent work creates a cultural move towards an equitable and stable workforce, empowering workers' ability to financially boost their quality of life. Decent work is therefore, concerned with the availability of employment in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity. According to International Partnership (n.a), it is a multidimensional concept introduced by the International Labour Office (ILO) in 1999 with four key components: employment creation, social security, rights at the workplace, and social dialogue. Social justice values are entrenched in decent work, striving for equity and equality beyond the workplace. It is simply adequate opportunities for work, remuneration (in cash and in kind), safety at work, income security and healthy working conditions.

International Partnership (n.a) maintained that the four pillars of the decent work agenda have become integral elements of the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It revealed that UN World Summit in 2005 and the Goal20 2014 declared employment creation and decent work as their priority objective of development strategies to support fair globalization, while the European Consensus on Development in 2017, dedicated its 8th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG8) to ensuring full, productive, and decent employment, universally (everywhere in the world) and inclusively (leaving no one behind). Thus, decent work applies to workers in the formal economy, unregulated wage workers, the self-

employed and home workers. This shows that promoting employment and ensuring decent work for secretarial professionals will tremendously impact their standard of living, productivity, and social cohesion.

Importance of 21st Century Digital Skills to Secretaries in a Knowledge Economy

The use of office machines has increased tremendously in contemporary offices due to the fact that tasks have become more varied and complicated and carrying them out manually will result in the wastage of time and reduction of efficiency on the part of the secretary.

Communication has evolved beyond mobile devices and personal computers. Greetly Digital Receptionist (2019) posited that the dawn of virtual reality (VR) would make conference calls more interactive in 2030. Thus, digital skills will help secretaries to present detailed graphs and PowerPoint presentations, send messages through tablets, voice assistants, smart-watches, receive notifications, track activity, set alarms, and even call and text directly through wearable devices.

One of the most promising potential outcomes of wearable technology in higher education is productivity. Buhr (2019) maintained that the use and adoption of modern educational technologies are imperative to improve students' performance and to prepare them to face the serious challenges in the future. These tools would help the users to automatically send information via text, e-mail, and social networks on behalf of the user based on voice commands, gestures, and other indicators, which would help secretaries and employers communicate with one another, keep track of updates, and a well-organized notification.

Digitization is creating new career opportunities for secretaries through the gig labour market but digital illiteracy will exclude secretaries from adapting to new technologies, thereby limiting their potential participation in the digital economy. According to ITU (2020), the digitization of markets has led to labour scarcity, increased demand for high-skilled workers and reduced demand for low-skilled workers due to the automation of routine jobs. The new technologies hold great promise of creating new avenues and opportunities for a more prosperous future (Qureshi, 2022). Voice software is already proving to be effective in its implementation and few years to come, the computer will be keyboardless, shrink in size and wearable. With digital skills, people can use voice translation technologies to nearly communicate instantaneously with people of different languages.

The 21st Century digital skills are crucial to finding or keeping jobs and also to closing the digital divide. The future of humans at work is threatened because adaptive continuous intelligent systems may take over decision-making in the future. The way in which office workers make decisions has changed because the capability to use algorithms is helping secretaries to make competent and informed decisions in mere seconds. According to Greetly Digital Receptionist (2019), just inputting details of a problem into a program would give employees an efficient way of solving problems and enabling them to get back to their tasks, hence, benefiting from their time and effort. Thus, secretaries can have a fountain of knowledge online at their fingertips by a click of the mouse to address myriad of official issues.

In the past, a secretary could spend valuable time registering a guest by looking into the client's contact information, calling and/or emailing the host and even retyping a handwritten visitor log into a database. Greetly Digital Receptionist (2019) assumed that digital skills will help people to use digital visitor sign-in applications to automate all those tasks. If work is less drudgery, it actually becomes more fulfilling for secretaries to spend less time answering repetitive emails and completing boring tasks, and use more time connecting with their coworkers.

Possessing foundational skills, such as reading, writing, and numeracy skills, is one of the necessary conditions for acquiring digital skills and embracing changing technological opportunities. These are the skills that make further learning possible. The role of early learning, primary and secondary education in providing these skills will remain paramount (ILO, 2021). The importance of digital skills are businesses building stronger customer relationships; having a competitive edge over competitors; providing new strategies and approaches to working; improving productivity and effectiveness, career boosts for those embracing the flexibility of freelance work, enhancing personal and professional skills that gives more options for getting a job (Ocholi et al, 2022).

Improving Secretaries' 21st Century digital skills

Soft Skills. Digital skills are not enough to adapt to the changing labour markets demands because they will not make it possible for anyone to reap the full benefits of digitalization. What is increasingly sought by businesses is a combination of such skills as well as soft skills. Olaniyi (2022) asserted that jobs and digital skills are no longer optional but critical and as such need to be complemented with transversal soft skills. Soft skills are ability to communicate effectively in both online and offline media. So, there is an increasing demand to strengthen those unique human skills that cannot be easily replaced by machines, computers and robots such as critical thinking, and creativity. Soft skills will aid secretaries to communicate effectively, listen actively, think critically, reason logically and interpret clearly.

Hayes (2021) observed that no single knowledge worker can generate ground breaking innovations alone: higher education, technical training, communication and teamwork are obvious, and essential to surviving in a knowledge-based workplace. Such skills will support the lifelong learning of individuals and their ability to adapt to workplaces and future disruption, consequently, succeeding in a digital economy. ILO (2021) noted that an effective combination of basic, soft core work and hard technical skills is the prerequisite for a successful transition from school to productive decent work and transitions between jobs. That is why adapting to what the TVET and tertiary education has to offer, and ensuring the responsiveness of skills development systems will be just as important as incorporating digital skills into all levels of training.

Training. The knowledge economy is seen to demand meta-cognitive skills that are both broad and highly transferable, such as problem-solving and the ability to learn. ILO (2021) averred that skilling, reskilling and upskilling throughout all stages of life is the precondition and an accelerator for people to access decent work opportunities and smooth transitions into labour markets and within labour markets. A business is only as successful as its employees, and that goes for any industry. One thing that can help a secretary to survive the numerous changes in the world is the ability to gather and use knowledge, remain constantly updated with new knowledge. These skills if acquired, will help secretaries to spot opportunities, easily adapt and survive in any condition. Secretaries are therefore encouraged to continuously upgrade and broaden their skills, through formal education, lifelong learning as well as workplace and less formal surroundings learning. With the fast-changing demand for skills, upskilling, reskilling, and lifelong learning, the availability and quality of continuing education should be greatly scaled up. Qureshi (2022) posited that the key to winning the race with technology is not to compete against machines but to cope with machines. This can be done if the secretaries can harness the potential of technology-enabled solutions such as online learning tools.

The skills needed for the future are not just about science and technology. Ocholi et al (2022) summed observations of different scholars on various ways secretaries can develop their digital skills as taking free online courses, self-paced learning, early exposure inside and outside the classroom, effort to use technology for the job, making it a point of duty to browse the World Wide Web daily in order to improve efficiency, integrating digital technologies into the job or personal endeavours, improving methods of communicating with others online, teaching others digital skills among others. Little actions of these nature according to them, will go a long way to improving the level of digital abilities over time. This portends that the more a secretary makes an effort to imbibe digital technologies and the Internet into his/her life, the faster his/her skills improve. In the same vein, ILO (2021) mentioned that there will also be an increasing demand for the knowledge of foreign languages, especially English. This is because English is the main language of digital technologies and also the language that enables greatest access to digitally-based learning and work opportunities posted through digital platforms and digital value chains.

Education Policy. Ideally, the industries expect institutions to teach the adapted digital skills before graduates enter the workforce. Education and training are central to preparing the workforce and society to benefit from exponential technologies. So, ITU (2020) believed that training institutions need to structure curriculum designs while identifying required skills in the coursework and defining the teaching and learning methods, as well as working in coordination with employers regarding their expectations of job skills so as to link industrial skills to curricula.

Employers have a role to play as curriculum advisers and advocates for better work preparation in schools by aligning skill training initiatives with real work opportunities through the creation of demand-driven training to employment programme. Organizations also may turn themselves into learning avenues

by aligning their plans for digitally upskilling of their workforce to their business objectives. Therefore, there is need for educational systems to provide a pedagogical model based on competencies while incorporating digital reskilling and upskilling in the technical, managerial, personal and social fields for secretarial professionals, who are digital citizens, digital workers or digital makers in order to reduce the lacuna between educational programmes and labour markets demands.

The ultimate success of a Business Education curriculum is not only measured in students' academic performance but through the results of that academic performance in the work-place. Poth (2019) advocated that educators ought to know what the job market looks like, what skills the students need, and how they can be helped to develop those skills. Thus, schools need to design learning experiences that will prepare learners to become leaders, designers, problem solvers and innovators.

Technology is a new tool that sharpens the global economy and equips individuals with long life learning. Teachers and tutors are the backbone of the delivery of learning. It is their digital capabilities that are the key enablers of transmitting knowledge online. In this era of digitalization, according to Emeasoba, Akudolu and Agbo (2022), lecturers must be digitally competent in order to meet up with global standard by shifting from traditional teaching, learning and research methods to a more digital approach, which involves the use of technology and digital skills. Therefore, there is a need to restructure traditional pedagogy and curricula based on critical analysis of the use of ICT tools, while teachers and trainers of secretaries themselves should be constantly trained in order to leverage on the new technologies by modernizing their teaching methods and interaction with learners.

Conclusion

The knowledge economy is fuelled by innovation, research, and rapid technological advancement that is characterized by highly skilled employees whose jobs require special knowledge or skills. Technology which heralds acquisition of digital skills has made it highly imperative for secretaries to improve their digital professional capacities. Therefore, if digital skills acquisition is embedded in education and training of secretaries, it will enable them to secure decent work in the digital economy, whether as technology specialists, leaders of digitally-enabled businesses or workers in digitally-enabled jobs across the economy.

Recommendation

1. The curriculum used for the training of secretaries should be reviewed to incorporate digital and soft skills for all of education system.
2. Training institutions should be properly funded to enable them procure and install modern technology equipment for effective training and proper acquisition of social media application skills.
3. Organizations should organize training in form of workshops, conferences, symposia, on-the-job, etc. that will enable them train secretaries on software application and maintenance, digital infrastructure, workforce development to realign policies and institutions to the digital economy in order to respond to changes in skills requirements triggered by automation and digitization.

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