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VALUATION OF THE SECRETARIAL PROFESSION IN THE CURRENT ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This research analyses the impact of tasks and competencies (personal and professional) on the valuation of the secretarial profession. The study is based on a questionnaire applied to 125 managers of Portuguese companies who perform their professional activity in a direct relationship with secretarial professionals. This research validates empirically the theoretical arguments that suggest that the importance attached to the tasks performed by secretaries has a positive impact on the valuation of the profession of secretaries, that personal and professional skills have a positive impact on the valuation of the secretarial profession and that professional skills have a positive impact on the valuation of the tasks performed by secretaries.

This study reinforces the theoretical argument that points to the growing importance of the performance of these professionals and the impact that this performance brings to organisational behaviour, and the growing importance of these professionals' professional and personal competencies. The present research may serve as an indicator for leaders and managers to adjust their human resources policies and strategies, namely with regard to the promotion of strategies to promote and develop the competencies of these professionals.

KEYWORDS: Secretariat, Profile, Personal Skills, Professional Skills, Tasks

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, secretarial professionals have become increasingly important for organisations, whether in the private or public sector (Moreira, Rodrigues, do Vale, & da Rosa, 2016). Traditionally, secretarial professionals limited their performance to routine and technical tasks, such as document filing, control, and organization of agenda and meetings and telephone answering (Lima & Soares, 2014). However, the advance of automation in offices has allowed the reduction of professionals in this area and brought new challenges to secretarial professionals. Thus,

currently, these professionals have to have more skills than those requested in previous decades (Garfield, 1986).

In this context of constant evolution, secretarial professionals must have an increasingly multifunctional profile, which results from the economic and social changes where organisations are inserted (Sabino & de Andrade Júnior, 2011).

In many cases, the secretarial professionals provide diversified dimensions and interconnect various realities, hierarchical or inter-relational levels, people, and knowledge (Kobernovicz, Santos, & Crotti, 2017; Nonato Júnior, 2009).

Having said that, secretarial professionals must keep up with the constant changes in their profession, resulting from the changing needs of companies. Thus, these professionals should have skills in several areas of knowledge, such as: Language of the organisation's nationality, complemented by at least one more foreign language; human relations; organisation of archives; writing techniques; economics; computing; financial mathematics; law; accounting; and administration (Martins, Terra, Maccari, & Vicente, 2010). At the personal level, secretarial professionals have to be increasingly dynamic, versatile, and have emotional balance, which is a characteristic that can distinguish them from other professionals in the same profession (Lima & Soares, 2014; Mello, 2011).

Thus, nowadays, it is required that the new profile of secretarial professionals is more demanding because they have to be increasingly well trained and prepared (Lobato, da Silva Aleluia, & da Costa, 2013). However, it is observed that there is still a lack of knowledge about the evolution of the activities that are currently performed by secretarial professionals (Kobernovicz et al., 2017). This lack of knowledge undermines several issues for the profession and leads to several stereotypes. Thus, it directly affects the identity of the secretarial professionals towards the companies and conclusively causes the remuneration of secretarial professionals to be lower, having more and more responsibility, regardless of having higher qualifications or not (Durante, Vaz, Bertoletti, dos Santos, & Chais, 2011).

In this context, there is a lack of understanding about the profession, which means that the value and potential of secretarial professionals are not properly recognised. This reinforces the idea that there is no need for professionals specifically trained in secretarial work. There is a perception that anyone with other training can develop the secretarial function, which does not correspond to reality (Kobernovicz et al., 2017). What further hinders secretarial professionals is the lack of a supervisory body for organisations (Lobato et al., 2013).

That said, the present study aims to assess the impact of tasks and skills (personal and professional) on the valuation of the secretarial and advisory profession.

This study seeks to contribute to the enrichment of research and deepen the literature on this topic. The article is structured as follows: the next section discusses the arguments that lead to the formulation of hypotheses; the third and fourth sections present the methods and results, respectively; and the final section discusses the main conclusions and considers the research limitations and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The secretarial profession was documented around 3,300 years B.C. The denomination was of scribes because they had some functions similar to the secretarial professionals. In addition, scribes had multiple knowledge at the time, such as languages, numerical reasoning, writing, operating tachygraphs, organising archives, and constant contact with several areas (Bond & Oliveira, 2009; Kobernovicz et al., 2017).

With the evolution of the organisations, the secretarial professionals had to increase their knowledge, as the activities nowadays are more complex and there have been constant

technological advances in the last 70 years. Thus, secretarial professionals have become advisors in different areas in partnership with the top management of the organisations. They also work strategically in the management of information for decision-making.

Currently, secretarial professionals must have a multifunctional profile (Durante & Fávero, 2009; Kobernovicz et al., 2017; Mesquita, Oliveira, & Sequeira, 2019). The secretarial profession has undergone three colossal transformations that have given new directions to the profession, as well as to its practice: 1) the Quality Era; 2) the Computer Era; 3) the Competency Era (Castelo, 2007).

In this context, secretarial professionals are increasingly directed to organizations' needs, which has required more trained professionals (Durante et al., 2011). Thus, secretarial professionals are trained to guide the interdisciplinary work and complex activities such as managerial functions, articulation and logical reasoning, leadership, management, and administrative advice (Gerardin, Monteiro, & Giani, 2011). However, secretarial professionals still face some obstacles regarding their denomination because the profession has numerous nomenclatures. More than 500 nomenclatures are known to designate secretarial professionals such as technician, secretary, manager, administrative assistant, bilingual executive, general assistant, receptionist, executive secretary, analyst, attendant, and advisor. This situation thus becomes detrimental to secretarial professionals, devaluing the profession (Kobernovicz et al., 2017).

Thus, searching for the identity of secretarial professionals and their function is a pertinent need to study and may clarify and be fundamental to secretarial knowledge and create foundations for the profession (Nonato Junior, 2009).

From this perspective, the secretarial professional must have specialised academic training appropriate to the market's needs. They should also work creatively, have good communication, interpersonal relationships, flexibility, provide quality advice to executives, and require them to be constantly updated (Rodrigues, Rosa, Silva Ferko, & Braid Melo, 2016). In Table 1, based on the contributions of Rodrigues et al. (2016), we can compare the different profiles of the secretarial professional, from an evolutionary perspective.

Past	Present	Future
Dispersed training, self-education.	Existence of specific training courses.	Professional maturity - code of ethics.
Lack of any requirement for enhancement.	Refresher courses and peculiar knowledge.	Constant improvement and continuous development.
Absence of policy for selection recruitment.	Requirement of qualification and definition of attributions and career plan.	Holistic vision and teamwork, professional awareness.
Bureaucratic organisations with isolated tasks.	Participatory organisations, defined tasks, quality work, creativity, and participation.	Enterprising organisations, global vision, flexible methodology, division of responsibility.
Secretary as a function.	Secretary as a profession.	Secretary with professional recognition and committed to results.

In the literature on the competencies of secretarial professionals, two instances are also identified: at the level of the organisations (organisational compet) and the level of the people (individual competencies) (Moreira et al., 2016). The concept of individual competence is the most widespread and well-known dimension, which has been the subject of more studies and is more heterogeneous. On the other hand, the notion of organizational competence and its study has been

less addressed by academics (Filenga, Moura, & Rama, 2010; Prahalad, 1993; Prahalad & Hamel, 1997; Ruas, 2005).

There is a need to align individual competencies with organisational competencies, which is not always easy about organisational competencies. Only in this way can it add social value to the individual and economic value to the organisations (Moreira et al., 2016; Pereira & Silva, 2011).

STRUCTURAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

As the main objective is to assess the impact of tasks and competencies (personal and professional) on the valuation of the secretarial profession, the theoretical model was constructed as shown in Figure 1. Each group of questions constitutes a latent variable. The relationships established between the latent variables were: the importance of tasks has a direct impact on the valuation of the secretarial profession; personal skills have a direct impact on the valuation of the secretarial profession, and professional skills have a direct impact on the importance of tasks and an indirect impact on the valuation of the secretarial profession.

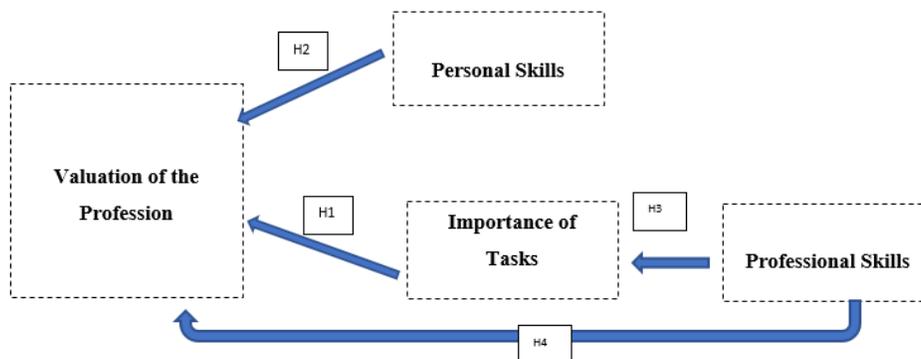


FIGURE 1
THEORETICAL MODEL

Considering the model shown in Figure 1, the following hypotheses were formulated (also represented in Figure 1):

H1: The importance attributed to the tasks performed by secretarial technicians has a positive impact on the valuation of the profession of these technicians.

H2: Personal skills have a positive impact on the valuation of the secretarial profession.

H3: Professional skills have a positive impact on the valuation of the tasks performed by secretarial staff.

H4: Professional skills have a positive impact on the valuation of the secretarial profession.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

The sample was collected through an online questionnaire applied in March 2021 to 125 managers/directors of companies associated with the Associação Empresarial da Região de Leiria (NERLEI), in Portugal. The motivations and purposes of the questionnaire were explained, and the confidentiality of the data collected was guaranteed. NERLEI currently has around 1200 associates, and this sample represents 10.4% of the companies that make up this association. This sample has the appropriate size (125 observations) for a confidence level of 90% and a sampling error of 7%, allowing the generalisation of the results obtained under these conditions. To validate the questionnaire, a pre-test was carried out on the answers of 25 companies. A Cronbach's Alpha was

calculated in the SPSS software for this sub-sample (0.983), demonstrating good internal consistency.

The questionnaire consists of five groups of questions concerning: (G1) valuation of the secretarial and advisory profession with eight questions; (G2) importance of the tasks for the exercise of the profession with 33 questions (G3) the personal skills of secretaries and advisors with 13 questions; (G4) the professional skills of secretaries and advisors with 13 questions and (G5) characteristics of the companies surveyed with three questions. A 5-point Likert scale measured G1 to G4, wherein G1 the scale was used from 1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree and in groups G2 to G4, the scale was used from 1 - not important to 5 - very important.

Regarding the profile of the companies in the sample, 84% of the managers/directors of the companies are women and 16% are men. The companies surveyed have an average seniority of 18.68 years, with the minimum seniority being one year and the maximum 65 years. 47.2% of the companies are from the industry sector, 19.2% are service companies, and 33.6% are trade sector companies.

Methodology

This study uses a quantitative methodology to test the relationships established between the latent variables included in the theoretical model and the hypotheses formulated. The method used is Partial Least Squares (PLS), having used Smart PLS 3.0 software (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016). According to Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, and Ringle (2019), it is a base covariance method and combines Ordinary Least Square regression estimation with factor analysis. It has as an assumption the non-normal distribution of the data (very common in this type of samples collected by questionnaires) and a good performance in capturing significant relationships between variables when the sample is small. Thus, the PLS method proved to be suitable for our sample. In the first step, the PLS algorithm was applied to the theoretical model.

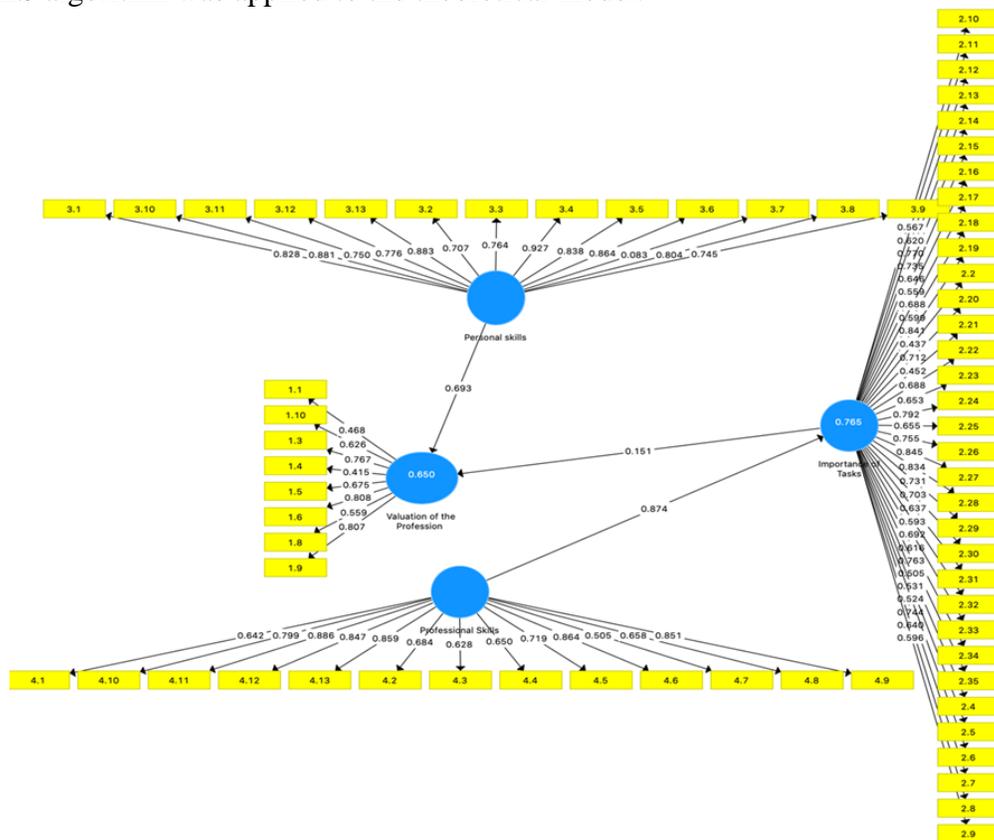


FIGURE 2 PLS MODEL

In the PLS model shown in Figure 2, the latent variables are represented in the circles, with Valuation of the Profession and Importance of Tasks being endogenous latent variables. The circles of endogenous variables contain the R Square (R^2) values that allow us to assess the predictive precision of the estimated model. According to Chin (1998), an R^2 of the latent variables of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19 are respectively described as substantial, moderate, or weak. Thus, the latent variable Valuation of the Profession has an R^2 of 0.650 (moderate) and the latent variable Importance of Tasks of 0.765 (substantial). We can conclude that the model has good predictive precision.

The rectangles contain the indicators of each latent variable and a total of 67 indicators as described above. Figure 2 also shows the links or structural paths between the latent variables and the indicators and indicates the impact of the variance of the indicators on the latent variables, which, according to Hair et al. (2019), should be at least 50%. In the PLS model obtained, this assumption is met, except for indicators 1.1. and 1.4 of the latent variable Valuation of the Profession and 2.21 of the latent variable Importance of Tasks, which were kept in the model since they are very close to the reference value.

Model Validation

Having already validated the model in terms of predictive precision, the next step focused on validating by reflective measures and discriminant validity measures. We presented the composite reliability, Cronbach's Alpha, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) in terms of reflective measures. According to Hair et al. (2019), the composite reliability and Cronbach's Alpha have a reference value of 0.70, and in the estimated PLS model, all values are above this reference value (minimum value of 0.807). The AVE has a reference value of 0.50, being that also in our study, each latent variable presents an AVE higher than the reference value (minimum value of 0.531). Thus, the PLS model has a good fit to data in terms of reflective measures. Discriminant validity is measured by the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Table 3), whereby the mean-variance extracted from the latent variable should be higher than the square correlations with the other latent variables in the model, as shown in our estimated PLS model.

Table 3				
DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY AND REFLECTIVE MEASURES				
	Importance of Tasks	Personal skills	Professional Skills	Valuation of the Profession
Cronbach's Alpha	0.959	0.940	0.931	0.807
Composite Reliability	0.962	0.951	0.941	0.852
AVE	0.542	0.616	0.558	0.531
Fornell-Lacker Criterion				
Importance of Tasks	0.765			
Personal skills	0.701	0.785		
Professional Skills	0.674	0.735	0.747	
Valuation of the Profession	0.637	0.699	0.697	0.756

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS HYPOTHESES

Once the PLS model had been estimated and validated, the next step focused on testing the relationships established between the latent variables, i.e., testing the hypotheses formulated, and

bootstrap analysis was carried out on Smart PLS (a non-parametric test that allows testing the statistical significance of various PLS results with 95% confidence).

Table 4 shows the results obtained from the application of bootstrap analysis, and it can be seen that all the relationships established between the latent variables are significant.

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
H1: Importance of Tasks -> Valuation of the Profession	0.151	0.154	0.090	1.674	0.095**
H2: Personal skills -> Valuation of the Profession	0.693	0.691	0.076	9.099	0.000*
H3: Professional Skills -> Importance of Tasks	0.874	0.878	0.020	44.260	0.000*
H4: Professional Skills -> Valuation of the Profession	0.132	0.135	0.079	1.672	0.095**
Note: *p=0.000; **p< 0.10. Source: authors' own calculations.					

We may thus conclude that the importance assigned to the tasks performed by secretarial technicians has a positive impact ($\beta = 0.151$) on the appraisal of these technicians' profession, confirming H1. These findings are in line with the contributions of Gerardin, Monteiro, & Giani (2011), Rodrigues, Rosa, Silva Ferko, & Braid Melo (2016), and Rodrigues et al. (2016).

Personal skills have a positive impact ($\beta = 0.693$) on the valuation of the secretarial profession, confirming H2. A change of 1% in personal skills has an impact of 69.3% on the valuation of the secretarial profession. Thus, we found correspondence in this study with the contributions of Moreira et al. (2016), Filenga, Moura, & Rama (2010), Prahalad (1993), Prahalad & Hamel (1997) and Ruas (2005).

The professional skills have a positive impact ($\beta = 0.874$) on the value of the tasks performed by the secretarial staff, confirming H3. A variation of 1% in the professional skills impacts 87.4% on the valuation of the tasks performed by secretarial and advisory staff. The same professional skills have an indirect positive impact ($\beta = 0.132$) on the valuation of the secretarial profession, confirming H4, which leads us to confirmation of the contributions of Moreira et al. (2016) and Pereira & Silva (2011).

CONCLUSIONS, RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The transformations that the global economic and social fabric has gone through have brought new conditions and new challenges to organisations, rebuilding the world of work and business. Generally speaking, the world of work, represented by the professional practices of so many professionals from such diversified sectors and areas of economic activity, has been undergoing profound changes in recent years. Focusing this study on the challenges that the secretarial profession faces, as it is an activity that is present in most organisational activities, we could see that the importance given to the tasks performed by secretarial staff has an increasingly positive impact on the valuation of the profession, that personal and professional skills have a positive impact on the valuation of the secretarial profession, and that the latter also has a positive impact on the valuation of the tasks performed by these professionals.

This study thus establishes contributions to theory and practice. It reinforces the theoretical argument that points to the growing importance of these professionals' performance and the impact

that this performance has on organisational behaviour, and to the growing importance of these professionals' professional and personal skills. From a perspective of practical contributions, this study may serve as an indicator for the organisational adjustment that leaders and managers may perform to promote and develop the competencies of these professionals. On the other hand, this research provides interesting results that may be applied in organisational contexts when considering the development of employees' skills for outstanding individual and collaborative performance.

We suggest that longitudinal studies should be used in the future, with the data concerning the dependent and independent variables being collected at distant points in time. Longitudinal studies with a larger group of individual and organisational variables under analysis may help understand the dynamics now under consideration in greater detail.

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