

# Modern Records Management<sup>1</sup>

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SINCE record making and record keeping are indispensable tools of management, and recorded experience is one of our greatest national assets, management, the archivist, the analyst, and the historian have a vital stake in the fact that modern record making is in a dangerous flood stage.

*Management* is primarily concerned with the high cost of mass record making and record keeping which increases overhead and, in private enterprise, raises the break-even point and decreases profits. Records in great volume are less accessible and less practical to use. The management of records in such volume is in itself a problem.

*Archivists* and curators of manuscripts are confronted with a volume of modern records far exceeding any actual and projected capacity of their storage areas. A policy of highly limited accessions is forced upon them. The volume of records which are accessioned is such as to require the development of wholly new types of finding media supplanting the classical inventories and calendars of former generations of archivists.

*Historians* and analysts are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of modern records as materials for research and investigation. Heretofore, access to records was only incidental to a research project. In modern times, finding and mastering the required records is a project in itself. Management, particularly in private enterprise, is at best reluctant to make its records available for research. It is wholly disinclined to establish a project of record searching and assembling to assist the investigator.

## CURRENT TRENDS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF MODERN RECORDS

The four essential elements in the management of records have not changed in modern times. They are still: (1) The day to day

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function of record making and record filing; (2) records of value must be preserved; (3) records preserved must have the physical facilities and finding media to provide access to them; and (4) the experience contained in records must be drawn upon and put to work.

But the day to day function of record making and record keeping has undergone a technological revolution resulting in a mass production of records. Records of value can now be preserved only by aggressive, planned destruction of the vast majority of duplicated or transitory records; the records preserved require large scale, specialized storage facilities and new techniques, including mechanization in the preparation of finding media; and there is both a new premium and a greatly increased difficulty in turning to our national advantage the experience embodied in the essential core of modern records.

The traditional solution of records depositories, whether public archives, business and institutional records centers, or historical societies, no longer in themselves suffice. The financial means and physical capacity of such depositories are hopelessly inadequate as a single device to cope with the volume of modern records.

The solution of modern problems in records management must therefore be in and by the operating agencies of management. Any solution must capitalize on: (1) management's engineering in the mechanization, specialization, and duplication of record making and record keeping; (2) the archivist's modern science in selective records preservation, planning, equipping, and administering large scale and specialized facilities for the maintenance of and access to records, and the development of new techniques in finding media; and (3) the historian's science in organizing, evaluating, and interpreting recorded experience.

The extraordinary effectiveness of dovetailing management's engineering and the archivist's and the historian's science into a concentrated attack on the mass and costs of modern records in an operating agency is dramatically illustrated by our own Navy's records management program. Experienced management engineers, trained archivists, and qualified historians have pooled their talents since 1941 to give the Navy: (1) a most conservatively estimated savings of close to \$25,000,000 in record making and record keeping; (2) a reduction of the Navy's records to a small, manageable, and accessible percentage of the total; and (3) an invaluable body of experience by putting to work the resulting usable records

through the nucleus of a new development which might best be described as a Management Reference Service.

The Navy's experience has been freely drawn upon by the Army, the Maritime Commission, the Atomic Energy Commission, and other Federal agencies, as well as by Westinghouse in industry, with proportionately excellent results. But these records management programs are only the exceptions which prove the extraordinary effectiveness of such programs and the urgent need for their widespread application to private enterprise, institutions, and state and local governments.

For want of some medium to bring together more rapidly and more effectively the engineering of management and the science of the archivist, the historian, and the analyst, there are significant trends in each of the essential elements in records management.

### RECORD MAKING AND RECORD KEEPING

Management on its own and from material pressures from within is undertaking increasing measures to apply a form of birth control to unnecessary record making. Staff and consulting methods analysts and management engineers are widely engaged in effecting economies through the studied elimination of (a) unnecessary record making and (b) the unnecessary filing of papers which must be created or received in the regular course of business.

In the last decade intensive specialization in records management has extended to controls on record making and record keeping. Records engineers, influenced to varying degrees by the objectives of the archivist and the historian have been highly successful in making such controls pay off with startling economies to management.

It is not enough that the archivist, the historian, and the analyst give their unsolicited *nihil obstat* to these attacks on unnecessary record making. It can be readily conceded that a record which need not be created for the purposes of management cannot legitimately be expected by the archivist, the historian or the analyst. There is little danger on this score, therefore, but there is a substantial loss in the degree of potential gain because there is not available to management the valuable help and guidance the archivist and the historian have to give. Proof of this are the practical examples cited.

### SELECTIVE RECORDS PRESERVATION

Management is also undertaking widespread measures to destroy or schedule the earliest possible destruction of records which

must accumulate in the regular course of business. Experience of the last fifteen years has proved that duplicated or transitory records run as high as ninety-five percent of the total in public agencies and as high as ninety-eight percent of the total in private enterprise.

Management, the archivist, the historian, and the analyst all have an urgent interest in reducing masses of records to the small and manageable percentage of the total which comprises our essential recorded experience. Such a reduction is essential to economical management of modern records, to ready access to the experience recorded therein, and to the pressing requirement that we draw more extensively on that experience.

But aggressive and widespread destruction of records is a comparatively recent development and presents a critical problem. Any destruction of records must provide maximum insurance that the essential core of recorded experience in the fraction of modern records is preserved. Such insurance is adequate in the Federal Government and some state governments. No such insurance is provided for in many state governments. No provision whatever exists to protect, preserve, and use the essential records of American private enterprise.

The National Life Office Management Association in the early nineteen thirties was one of the first management societies or trade associations to assign an increasingly prominent role to some kind of selective records preservation in the programs of their annual meetings and in the work projects of their research groups. Similar societies and associations have followed suit almost without exception. Two of the latest are the study attempted by the National Office Management Association and the study completed by the American Bankers Association.

Professional societies quickly recognized the need for selective records preservation and the dangers of aggressive records destruction. Committees and study groups were assigned to the problem by the Society of American Archivists, the American Historical Association, and the Economic History Association. The Business Historical Society published an excellent pamphlet on the subject in 1936. Volunteer groups, such as the New York Committee on Business Records, have contributed to the limit of their restricted time and facilities. These efforts have not succeeded, however, in pooling with the requirements of management the professional archivist's criteria and techniques for selective records preservation and the historian's science in the identification, evaluation, and interpretation of recorded experience. Management must be pre-

vailed upon to utilize the archivist's experienced counsel and the historian's expert training. Some means or vehicle to promote and provide such counsel and training must be devised.

### RECORDS MANAGEMENT CENTERS

Records overflow, once relegated to marginal office space, cellars, attics or out buildings, now is in such volume as to require and to justify sizable, specialized facilities. Planning, constructing, equipping, and administering such facilities for records storage involve substantial costs but return tangible savings many times greater than costs. Properly planned and located records storage areas equal only fifteen to twenty-five percent of the cost of office space, marginal or otherwise. Suitable records storage equipment yields two and one half to three times the capacity of equipment required for current records. Assembled records mean savings up to seventy-five percent in the cost of personnel for reference.

If records storage centers are records management centers in the full sense of the phrase, economies and benefits are multiplied. The archivist's criteria and techniques for selective records preservation combined with a tight inventory control annually eliminates as high as one third of the total records stored in the center. The centers thus serve as giant sieves, sifting out the duplicated and transitory records as fast as they have fulfilled their usefulness. The archivist worthy of the name promptly develops appropriate finding media to the resulting core of records and anticipates the requirements of management, the analyst, and the historian by insuring that the experience recorded in such records is or can be readily withdrawn.

A network of such centers has been developed by the Navy since 1941. An even larger network was later established by the Army. Other Federal agencies followed suit. In industry the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Westinghouse, and the Denver, Rio Grande and Western Railroad have established records management centers in the full sense of the phrase. The Archives of Standard Brands is also noteworthy.

These centers are extraordinarily effective in making substantial savings. But if the counsel of the professional archivist and historian are not injected into their management there is no insurance that the essential core of records will be preserved, made available, and the experience recorded therein put to work. For lack of such insurance, such centers can be and are a new threat to the preservation of our recorded experience.

Some agency or means must be devised to provide expert training and experienced counsel in the planning and administration of records management centers and sponsoring the establishment of many more such centers. The lack of such means is depriving the management of state and local governments, private enterprise, and institutions of both a very substantial savings and a vastly more effective body of records.

#### PUTTING OUR RECORDED EXPERIENCE TO WORK

Evidence is mounting of a new appreciation of the importance of turning to our advantage the invaluable experience recorded in the essential body of modern records. This is a healthy, mature, and reassuring sign. An overriding example is the impressive Records of the War Administration Project. This project, established by the Federal Government early in the War at the request of President Roosevelt, attempted to capture our essential experience in the conduct of World War II. The extent to which it was successful is already indicated by the valuable studies now being published. It is regrettable that this project was limited to the war period and that some agency, such as the National Archives, does not make its way clear to carry on the program.

A comparable and a continuing project for American private enterprise would be invaluable. Such a worthwhile goal, moreover, is attainable. Proof of this is the encouraging results already obtained by the New York Committee on Business Records and the Lexington Group of historians. But the membership of both of these groups is voluntary and necessarily part time. A full time sponsoring agency with comparatively little funds is needed. Such a project is so large that of necessity, like the Records of the War Administration Project, the operating agencies, in this case industry, must be and can be prevailed upon to bear the great bulk of the cost.

A vice president of the SKF Company recently argued most convincingly in the *Journal of Accountancy* that recorded experience is a corporate asset — as much of a corporate asset as plant, equipment, and inventory. Wesley Mitchell, Chairman of the Board of the Mutual Life Insurance Company, wrote in 1946:

Any business enterprise . . . can make a genuine contribution to the history of its times if it will let some competent writer use its records candidly. . . . American historians have paid scant attention to business enterprise . . . (and) the basic explanation lies in the secrecy in which business men long shrouded

what they thought of as their private affairs. . . . A historian who appreciated the role played by business and wished to make it clear was baffled. . . . So the nation that entrusted its welfare most unreservedly to business enterprises has known little about the conduct of these agencies. . . . A combination of developments is now making secretiveness old fashioned — partly pressures from without, partly consciousness within that good business means good service and that the people served are entitled to know how affairs are managed. . . . Business men must win public confidence because of their integrity, efficiency and fairmindedness. . . . The first desideratum is to practice these virtues; the second is to make the practice known.

The clincher to Mr. Mitchell's argument is the fact that the Mutual Life Insurance Company sought the services of a professional historian, put its records at his disposal, and gave him a free hand in using them as his judgment dictated. Similar studies, completed and in process, are only forerunners of the great volume of experience we must draw upon and put to work in the management and analysis of private enterprise as the constituent element in the American form of capitalism.

A new awareness of the value of recorded experience on the part of business and industry is being turned to advantage by public relations consultants and professional writers. Accomplished in selling their services, such consultants and writers produce many more company anniversary volumes and puff stories than professional historians produce in the way of scientific company or industry histories.

In this the public relations consultants, writers, management, and professional historians all lose. Such consultants and writers have little stomach for the research, amateur or otherwise, incident to an anniversary publication or company history. Management receives nothing remotely approximating the scientific and objective work obtainable from a professional historian. The professional historian in turn receives nothing he can contribute to the stream of American history and our reservoir of national experience.

It is possible and desirable, however, for the public relations consultant, the writer, management, and the historian each to gain. Each must be prevailed upon to have basic research undertaken by a professional historian who is a scientist in organizing, evaluating and interpreting experience. Management thus puts to work one of its assets. The consultant and writer has a vastly more able job of research from which he can easily prepare puff stories, institutional advertising, and popular articles. The experience is added by the historian to the stream of American history.



Such teamwork, producing a superior product, has already been reviewed to a limited extent with business leaders and public relations executives; to that extent the reaction has been uniformly favorable. It remains for some agency to bring the three together as one phase of a larger effort to draw widely on our national experience. Meanwhile, we have the salutary effects of the Economic History Association, the Business Historical Society, and the Business History Foundation. The response is encouraging and augurs well for the results obtainable from the concentrated efforts of a full time agency rendering tangible services in each of the elements in modern records management.

#### MODERN REQUIREMENTS IN RECORDS MANAGEMENT

These trends point up the fact that the records engineering of management and the science of the archivist and the historian must be brought into single focus. Furthermore, this single focus must be achieved within and at the expense of the operating agencies of management. Such a program is much too large in scope to be supported solely by an educational or philanthropic institution with any degree of the effectiveness required.

That this is possible, despite the past isolation of the scholarly archivist and historian from the pressures, the pace and the complexities of operating agencies of management, is proved by recent outstanding instances of effectively merging these interests. In addition, the increasing number of cases wherein management has solicited the expert assistance and experienced counsel of the archivist and the historian is significant. The same is true of the successes registered by the archivist and the historian, acting individually or in groups and on a voluntary and part time basis, in putting their objectives across to management.

Such cases, however, are the exceptions which prove what can and should be done rather than an answer to more than a fraction of the problem. They do indicate that a full time institution serving management, the archivist, and the historian is the key that fits the lock. The content of a program for a full time institution to meet the modern requirements of records management consists of education, expert assistance, and facilities.

#### EDUCATION

The first requirement is a broad program of education and information directed not only at management and management's records personnel, but also at the archivist and the historian. Management little appreciates the full function and potential contribu-



tion of the archivist and the historian. The archivist and the historian as a rule are, in turn, baffled by management and records engineering and wary of the important contributions they can make thereto. Selected mediums of promotion and education and a clearing house can close this breach.

Qualified personnel with specialized skills in records management and with an understanding of the objectives and requirements of management, of the archivist and of the historian must be provided. The nucleus of such personnel is available in the several hundred who have demonstrated their competence in the records management programs already referred to in government and industry. It is noteworthy that these several hundred specialists converted their previous training or experience to the requirements of records management in a reasonable period of time. Their previous training or experience for the most part was in the fields of public or business administration, archival science or history.

Additional qualified personnel can be provided by (a) prevailing on a reasonable number of universities and business schools to present well planned and ably directed courses in records management and promoting attendance to such courses; (b) offering qualified personnel to government and industry to conduct in-service and on-the-job training in records management; and (c) developing a large group of young records management specialists by apprenticeship to experienced personnel serving in a consulting capacity to government and industry. Such training by its nature should be or should rapidly become self-sustaining. In addition to personnel with special skills in records engineering, more archivists and historians can be developed to serve management through: (1) Formal educational channels; and (2) internship with experienced seniors.

#### EXPERT ASSISTANCE AND EXPERIENCED COUNSEL

The expert assistance and experienced counsel that management requires and that can be supplied include: (1) Records engineers expert in the application of controls to the mechanization, specialization and duplication in record making and record keeping; (2) archivists experienced in criteria and techniques of selective records preservation, in planning, equipping, and administering large scale records storage facilities, and in the development of new forms of finding media; and (3) historians competent in identifying, organizing, and interpreting recorded experience.

Private enterprise, government, and institutions annually pay out millions of dollars to consulting management engineers and

office equipment companies for assistance and counsel in records management. The fees paid to one company alone is very close to one million dollars each year. This in itself is proof of management's pressing need for help.

The management engineering firms and office equipment companies have for the most part an excellent reputation for quality service. They also have had outstanding success in selling their services. Their strength, however, is in the day to day function of record making and record keeping. Their weakness is in criteria and techniques for selective records preservation and in the identification, organization, and utilization of the essential core of recorded experience in a body of records.

Similarly, public relations consultants and writers are successfully selling management increasing numbers of company or organization "histories" and anniversary writings. These publications fall far short of the potential gain, were the basic research completed by a social scientist.

The provision of a balanced service in records management in the full sense must supplement, guide, and where feasible, participate in the work of these management engineering firms, office equipment companies, public relations consultants and writers. Their selling power, financial resources, or prestige defy outright competition. Moreover, most of these interests have regularly responded to programs which improve or enrich their own services, benefit their clients, or contribute to our national well being.

There is both a demand and an avenue of supply, therefore, for expert assistance and experienced counsel in the full concept of records management. There are several hundred specialists including records engineers, archivists, and historians now qualified. A panel of over one hundred who are available has been compiled. Key panel members have already committed themselves to part time service with pay on leave of absence from their present assignments or to full time service as required. Apprenticeship to such specialists and an educational program would assure an ample body of additional trained personnel. Such expert assistance and experienced counsel by its nature and because of the scope required must achieve a self-sustaining status within a reasonable period of time.

### FACILITIES

Records management centers for storing, servicing, analysing, and weeding records are a major requirement. Such centers are needed at two levels; at a government, company, and institutional

level, and at a general purpose level. A government, whether state or local, a large company, or a substantial institution will unquestionably profit from the establishment of its own records management center or centers of appropriate size, in a suitable location and under qualified supervision.

A great many companies and institutions, because of their location, size, or character, require a general purpose records management center in their locality in which they can deposit their records for storage, servicing, analysis, and weeding. Such general purpose centers must be wholly self-supporting from charges for services rendered. By the character of these centers, charges for services rendered would be less than actual costs would be, were it practical or desirable for a company or institution to establish comparable facilities. In the operating agencies of management, an increasing number of organizations must be prevailed upon to add one or more permanent staff members qualified to cope with current requirements in records management.

A key requirement of modern records management is a new institution to undertake an educational program, to provide experienced counsel and expert assistance, and to encourage and assist in the establishment of records management centers. Such an institution should conform to the objectives and requirements of management, of the archivist, and of the social scientist. Its policy making body and directing authority, therefore, should represent and serve in the common interests of these three groups. It should serve as a source and a clearing house for qualified personnel and for technical data on records management, archival science, and historical research in the operating agencies of management.

The services of this kind of an institution are of such character that costs, therefore, can and should be borne by management which profits most tangibly therefrom. Only initial financial support from the foundation is a requirement. Ultimately, and three years seems a reasonable estimate, the institution should be wholly self-supporting.

Of necessity the institution must render its services on a non-profit basis. Otherwise there would be an irresistible pull toward those of its services which appeal most obviously or most strongly to management and as a result return the most revenue. This would be the records engineering services stripped of the interests and objectives of the archivist and the historian. Moreover, the standards of the archivist and the historian would be exposed to irresistible pressures in the reach for a better profit position.

## CONCLUSION

Records management's modern requirements of education, experienced counsel, and facilities are not, and apparently cannot be met, by existing organizations. The National Records Management Council, located at 100 Washington Square East, New York City 3, is administered on a non-profit, educational, and service basis, and has a highly practical program with an extraordinary potential of achievement. This potential is limited only by management's capacity to sustain services which yield large economies in records management and a more usable body of records. At the same time, management, scholarship, and our people are assured for the first time of an effective means for increasing and insuring the preservation of our recorded experience and for organizing, evaluating, and interpreting that experience. This is a basic contribution.

The National Records Management Council launched a somewhat restricted program in December, 1947. At that time, the writer resigned from Remington Rand, Inc., to undertake the full time direction of the Council's activities. The Council's most important project to date was the direction of a "task force" reviewing records management in the Federal Government, and recommending improvements and economies. This "task force" was one of twenty-three established by former President Hoover's Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government. The writer directed this project. An associate member of the council, Mr. J. P. Brennan, is serving as consultant to the United States Atomic Energy Commission for the management and disposition of records of contractors to the commission, including such companies as duPont, General Electric, and Stone & Webster. Mr. Brennan is also consultant on the application and use of micro-filming in the program of the Commission. There has been an active interest and a most encouraging response from such companies and institutions as the Westinghouse Electric Corporation, the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, E. I. duPont de Nemours, the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, New York University, American University, and the American Association of Medical Social Workers.