Planning a Records Management Survey

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THE "management survey" is the principal tool used by the management engineer to plan and improve procedures, organizational structures, and those other factors that are essential to the operation of a private business or a Government agency. The survey may be defined as a systematic exploration of those areas having the greatest need or opportunity for improvement. The purpose of the survey is to identify problems, determine their causes, and devise remedies.

I have purposely included the phrase "opportunity for improvement" as well as "need" for improvement. The management analyst will frequently uncover a need, but no prospect of effecting the needed improvement. The improvement may require a substantial outlay, there may be serious personality obstacles, or there may not be time enough within the limits of the survey to devise a solution and convince all concerned of the solution's practicability and advantages. In short, the management analyst must be realistic and develop a keen sense for distinguishing between improvements that will be accepted and those that have little if any chance of being adopted or at best will have to be deferred to some later date.

The work of the survey may be divided into the following phases:

1. Planning and preparation for the survey
2. Fact-gathering
3. Organizing and analyzing the facts
4. Developing and testing proposals
5. Selling and installing the recommendations
6. Following up on installed recommendations

When planning the survey, determination of the proper scope and level is the first consideration. Scope and level can be established only by top management working closely with the survey planners.

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The scope of the survey is of course limited by the amount top management is willing to pay in terms of regular employees assigned or outside consultants engaged. There is no easy way to conduct a really objective and analytical survey. "Walk-through" surveys are always unproductive. The extent of the survey necessary may be judged by what I like to call the "symptoms of need." The following are only a few of a long list of common symptoms:

1. No legislation, policy, or central authority controlling the retirement and disposal of records
2. Chronic demand for more personnel, space, and equipment for records
3. Uncontrolled and continuous procurement of equipment and supplies for filing, duplicating, or microfilming records
4. Lack of facilities for the low-cost storage of inactive records
5. Uncontrolled forms, reports, and issuances
6. Lack of written procedures or charts covering major records operations
7. Chronic inability to locate records when needed

The time required to complete a survey will of course depend upon the scope of the undertaking. Though it may not be possible to estimate precisely the time requirements for the survey, the expert planner will set time guidelines to ensure that all important areas are at least inspected for possible problems. Additional time may have to be added to study the "trouble" areas fully.

It is very difficult to determine the final cost of the survey. A basic cost figure may be established by setting predetermined time and personnel limits; such practice, however, may preclude "running down" some of the important leads developed during the survey. Some leeway or latitude is desirable when placing a price tag on the survey.

In pinpointing the survey's objectives, the planners will be faced with a number of questions. Is the survey team to solve problems for the operating departments or to teach the operating departments to solve their own problems? Will the survey team prepare a complete inventory of records and records disposal schedules? Will the survey team draft legislation, if necessary, and install or supervise the installation of new procedures?

Within the limitations of personnel and time established, the planner should include in his survey only those items which, if they have to be cut short, would still provide a usable unit of work accomplished.

When considering the need for taking inventories of accumulated records and preparing detailed records retention schedules, it should be realized that such activities are time consuming and may not be practical within the limits of the survey. Inventories of records in some instances may be useless except to forecast how much space will be required for the storage of inactive records. Schedules of records essential to the performance of any function or program often can be prepared without knowing the size, form, or quantities of the records on hand. There may also be some priceless old documents moldering away in some basement storage vault. These, however, will be found and recovered when the continuing program is established. The "pay dirt" for the survey team is more likely to be in the field of current record procedures and reporting systems. A records management survey which is confined only to identification of old records and the preparation of record schedules will yield very meager returns.

Once the scope and time limits have been determined, the question of who should conduct the survey arises. There are three choices: the use of internal organizational personnel, the use of outside management consultants, and a combination of internal and external personnel.

With internal personnel the need for special budgetary requests or appropriations is eliminated. These people also understand the organization, and spend no unproductive time in familiarizing themselves with policies, methods, and personalities. They know or can easily determine what is done and who does it. These are the advantages of an internal group over outside consultants.

Before deciding to do the job with internal personnel, however, the following questions should be explored. Is there an existing management group within the organization? Are the specialists competent in this field of inquiry? Will their work schedules permit the taking on of an additional survey? Suppose all the answers are "yes," there are still other important considerations to reckon with. We must think of the difficulties that arise from the pressures of personalities and of personal loyalties that are likely to influence the survey analysts' judgements. There is also the problem of the local people being very close to the job and hence perhaps overlooking basic changes that would be beneficial. It may be that they lack influence or prestige and as a result will be unable to sell their program.

Internal groups may make some enemies among the operational staffs, too, because of previous positions that they have taken on staffing, methods, procedures, and general organizational problems. Unless they are extremely diplomatic, they may have outlived their usefulness to an organization.

The outside consultant's value lies in his objectivity. He may see defects in a procedure that would be invisible to a person accustomed to the old established way of doing business. Competent consultants usually have no axes to grind. They are interested in doing the assigned job efficiently, expeditiously, and economically. They usually work for the highest level of management and are in a position to command greater respect and get a better hearing for their recommendations. Management, having hired the specialized firm that it has confidence in, will respect the findings. Once the job is completed there is no further need to maintain extra people on the payroll, as is often the case when individual analysts are employed for an inservice operation.

There are also disadvantages to hiring outside consultants, the most important of which is the need for extra appropriations. The out-of-pocket expense appears greater at first glance. Consultants must invariably spend some time acquainting themselves with the internal structure. Agency staff members are almost always suspicious of oustide consultants, and unless they are properly handled this can cause a morale problem.

This brings us to the third choice, a combination of internal and consultant personnel. Some of the members of the survey team should be regular employees of the operating departments or of the organization's own management staff. This approach assures continuity of action, proper followthrough, and general speedup of the survey.

The final step in planning the survey is to prepare a written statement of the survey's objective and the plan for its conduct. After approval by top management, copies of the statement should be sent to all interested staff and operating components of the organization. The statement should be supplemented by meetings at which members of the survey team may be introduced to department heads and their immediate assistants. Whenever possible, at least one employee of the department being surveyed should participate in the survey. He will be needed to install the new procedures resulting from the survey. At every opportunity the survey team should promote the idea that the organization under survey has the basic responsibility for solving its own problems.

Our survey team is now ready for the factfinding phase of the survey. What facts are we going to gather, and by what methods are we going to gather them?

One of the first things we do is to look at the annual budgets. We can usually identify some major items as essentially problems in records management. We consult with the department heads, the purchasing agent, the treasurer, the comptroller, or other top officials whose knowledge or contacts cut across organizational lines.

We soon learn in this business to go after bear and not waste our limited time and energy in chasing rabbits. When we are trying to convince top management that an active records management program merits continued high-level support, we cannot dilute our efforts by trying to improve everything.

The management engineer in the broader fields of administrative management, as well as in the specialized fields of records management, has a fairly well recognized methodology. He gathers facts by examination of existing records and procedures, interviews with operating people, questionnaires, and personal observation.

There are limitations to all these methods. Existing records are frequently inadequate. Interviews are useful because they tend to uncover the informal or actual procedure, rather than the formal procedure. Questionnaires are helpful where the scope of the survey prohibits personal contacts. None of these three methods can take the place of the hard work involved in making personal observation of the operations. Personal observation will reveal cluttered file drawers, people walking about a great deal, supervisors' desks piled high with work, and other symptoms of need for improved records practices. Examination of the forms used and workers' desk audits are other useful types of the personal observation technique.

The average survey involves a combination of the various methods of gathering facts. In our work we must constantly resist the temptation to track down details to the point where conclusions cannot be reached within the time limits of the survey.

Limitation of space will not permit me to discuss in detail the various methods of organizing and analyzing the facts gathered by the survey team. I shall also have to pass over the developing and testing of proposals.

We now come to the important phase of selling and installing the recommendations. I have seen a number of excellent survey reports on records management in Federal and local governments, but I cannot avoid the general impression that they are too unattractively presented and rely too heavily on statutory authority to sell the program. If you have seen one of these reports you have a feeling you have seen them all. Word is piled upon word until no one could realistically hope that any top executive could read the report. No attention is given to compelling covers, to striking graphic presentations, nor to any of the other devices that prompt decisive action. These reports, furthermore, give the impression that no sales effort is necessary. In government, too much reliance is placed on legislation that requires department heads to conduct "active, continuing programs for the efficient and economical management of records." Neither efficiency nor economy can be guaranteed by legislation.

In our work with private industries, we have no acts of Congress to sell our recommendations. We must somehow find at least one major improvement that will produce savings enough to offset the entire cost of a records management program for some years to come. This calls for superior talent and long hours of tedious detailed procedural charting to present the before-and-after picture in simple terms that the top executive can quickly grasp. Sometimes it means the uncovering of a costly, long-accepted standard practice which on close examination proves to be entirely unnecessary.

Survey recommendations, if at all possible, should be translated into monetary savings. Since the success of a survey is almost always measured in terms of dollar savings, the reports should fully document such savings. Top management is more apt to go along with the recommendations if substantial economies can be effected.

We usually deal with overworked executives who have no time to read lengthy reports. If such a man receives a bulky report he will pass it along to some subordinate to prepare a summary. By that time the opportunity for broad, sweeping changes has usually passed.

I have come to the conclusion that formal written analyses and presentation of a vast amount of facts are usually a waste of time. The same can be said of long, formal, written reports. The danger of a formal report is that, unless a proposed change is adopted at once, it will not be adopted after the survey is completed. We all know of many good, well-written reports that are now gathering dust. We also have little patience with the methods expert who drops his recommendations in somebody's lap and then vanishes.

As a solution to these problems, we have adopted a form of report which we call a "preview." This is a brief description of the proposed change, not over two pages long, and usually accompanied with before-and-after procedure charts. This preview, discussing the changes proposed and the probable advantages, is presented to the top management and operating personnel. If it is accepted, the survey team analysts "fill in the holes" in the proposal and work out the necessary details from their voluminous notes. Preliminary tests of the new procedure are made before the survey comes to an end. The survey team and the operating personnel "work out the kinks." The operating people seem to like this method because they share in the development of the proposal. More often than not, the proposal could not have been made to work because of the minor details that the survey team could not reasonably be expected to foresee. If the proposal is not accepted for trial, no lengthy writeup is attempted.

To those of you who have had experience writing a recommendation, complete with all the details and arguments that present an objection-proof case, the advantages of this procedure are obvious. By our "preview" methods, the survey team does not have to dot every *i* and cross every *t*. Time is not consumed waiting for the operating people to write a long rebuttal. Top management's time is not wasted sitting in judgment on the merits of the two points of view. I do not suppose that our "preview" report is entirely unique. We feel, however, that it differs in some important respects from most presentation devices. We go to considerable pains to present the proposal in graphic form so that top management and operators can easily visualize the objectives. We then work with the operating personnel in implementing the recommendation.

Apart from the techniques and survey approach I want to add a word of caution about objectivity and need for top-level support. Not uncommonly the fundamental causes of the records problem rest at the highest level of the organization. Anyone who has tried to get a mayor, county commissioner, or top executive to take time out to look at a basement vault full of old records will know what I am talking about. In a local government agency there may be outmoded laws directing the dogcatcher to keep a record of all dogs caught, and he interprets this law as legal prohibition against the destruction of obsolete records. In a private business, an attorney may remember an unusual case that hinged on some old record and shudder at the thought of destroying any scrap of paper.

In such cases, a survey of a government agency must include the drafting of legislation or ordinances authorizing the disposal of records after they have outlived their usefulness. A survey of records of a private business, under such circumstances, may have to convince top management that a policy on records retention can be evolved that will meet all reasonably foreseeable eventualities.

The survey may also have to establish beyond any shadow of doubt that modern records management deserves, and is not likely to succeed without, continuing interest and support at the highest levels.

Don't misunderstand me. I do not claim that waste in the management of records is chargeable alone to lawyers and top management officers. There is no question that big files beget big staffs and that file room supervisors in government and private business do not usually welcome proposals to reduce the size of their record holdings. When questioned about the need for all the inactive records, files personnel can always recite unusual, humorous, or dramatic instances involving some older record. It is human nature to come to the defense of one's vested interests. Such resistance to change at lower levels, however, can be overcome much sooner and at less cost if top-management support is clearly indicated. In some cases, I have felt that the high cost of a records management survey was recovered at the moment we convinced top management that something — in fact, many things — could be done about the records problem.

In closing let me summarize the major concepts of a records survey. The purpose of the survey is to convince top management of the value of a continuing records management program. We do not try to complete all the elements of a well-rounded program for the client; we try to teach the client's staff how to solve problems for themselves. If competent personnel does not appear to be available within the client's existing organization, we try to help him select such personnel. Wherever possible, we prefer to have the client's personnel participate in the survey. We also would rather carry through to completion a few successful proposals than start a number of projects and leave them to gather dust in a formal report.

CALENDAR OF WASHINGTON PAPERS AVAILABLE

The Library of Congress has some 600 copies of the *Calendar of Washington's Correspondence With the Continental Congress* (1 vol., pub. 1906) and of his correspondence as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army with his officers (3 vols., index vol., pub. 1915). Copies may be obtained free from the Office of the Secretary, Library of Congress, Washington 25, D. C.