

# Dead Figures? No—Live Facts!

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**D**URING the last week of June every year we usually hear the faint sound of gnashing teeth. Some of it emanates from baseball fans whose favorite team just can't seem to break that losing streak and some from husbands and wives deciding whether the family will have its vacation at the beach or in the mountains. But most of the molar-grinding is due to the fact that this is the time for making fiscal year reports. Perhaps we can take some of the edge off this uncomfortable period if we talk about how the records manager can make his report advance his program.

The annual records disposition report sent to the Adjutant General shows the *quantitative* aspects of management activities. Since records surveys, file maintenance, mail and correspondence management, document reproduction control, and training usually can be appraised only *qualitatively*, how can one make the figures in his report reveal the facts about his program?

First, compare this year's report with last year's—and even the report of two years ago. Find the trend of your holdings at the ends of the reporting periods and determine whether you are gaining or losing ground. If you have more records on hand now than you had last year or the year before—why? Are some records being retained too long? Are transfers and retirements being made as scheduled? Are disposable records not being disposed of? Are reference papers (convenience, transitory, nonaction, and working-paper files) being retained too long? Are too many copies of records being regularly produced either by typewriter or quick-copying devices? Are there duplicate sets of files as the result of failure to decentralize record copies?

Answers to these and similar questions will give you a picture of your trend in holdings, disposition, and creation. The answers may reveal good progress in some areas, fair progress in others, and no progress in a few. No program stands still; it progresses or regresses.

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So much for the big picture. For detail use your feeder reports (those you receive from individual units) to prepare percentage distribution tables to reveal peculiar or even illogical conditions that you must investigate. The more you examine the tables, the more meaningful and useful they become in pinpointing problem areas. For instance, tables in our office show that last year Army X held 19%, created 20%, and destroyed 12% of all records in the field. Army Y, on the other hand, held 9%, created 8%, and destroyed 11% of field records. Did Army X or Army Y do the better job? Why? That is the type of answer you need to get to the questions posed by an analysis of your own situation.

This type of analysis may show you, for example, that in an extreme case 75% of your records holdings is in the custody of Element A, and that the other 25% is distributed among 20 other elements. You may find that Element A, with the largest holdings, does the least disposition or destruction. Perhaps Element B, which has only 15% of the holdings, is creating 60% of the records. Or you may find that Element C, with only 5% of the holdings, is accounting for 90% of the destruction. These conditions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION.				
Organization	Holdings	Creation	Disposition	Destruction
Total—all elements	2,000	1,000	500	400
Element A	1,500 (75%)	200 (20%)	20 ( 4%)	10 (2½%)
Element B	300 (15%)	600 (60%)	40 ( 8%)	20 ( 5%)
Element C	100 ( 5%)	150 (15%)	400 (80%)	360 ( 90%)
All others	100 ( 5%)	50 ( 5%)	40 ( 8%)	10 (2½%)

Here are typical questions suggested by this percentage distribution.

1. Is *Element A* “hoarding” records and not making disposition? Are there too many sets of reference publications, all *supposedly* essential? How about other reference papers? Are some items being counted as “records” when they shouldn’t be?
2. In *Element B*, is the duplicating or quick-copying machine working overtime making too many unnecessary copies? Are unnecessary typewritten copies being produced? Exactly *who* in Element B is generating so many records? Is the files plan being followed?
3. In *Element C*, does the large destruction this year mean only that this outfit has finally cleaned out its old “junk”? If so, have steps been taken to prevent similar accumulations in the future?
4. *Overall*: Is the records management officer uninterested in his work? Untrained? Incapable? Bewildered? Preoccupied with other assigned duties? Spending too much time operating and not enough managing?

The answers to these questions certainly ought to point the way to corrective actions—and to commendatory actions, too.

Another revealing type of analysis is the ratio method. Using this you can determine, for instance, that Element A creates 1.5 feet for each foot it disposes of, and that Element B creates only 1 foot for each 1.6 feet it disposes of. This can be a very simple method of measuring and comparing progress. Table 2 is a sample of this type of ratio table. In the two ratio columns you will note that progress Army-wide is still much too slow. An ideal situation for the next few years can be reached if 2 feet are destroyed for each foot created. After a while a ratio of about 1:1 would be a desirable balance, and would reflect a firmly established disposition operation. (Note the impact of the Korean Campaign on records creation in fiscal years 1952 and 1953, also the accelerated generation of records when the "Space Age" giant began to awaken in fiscal year 1955.)

Table 2. RATIO ANALYSIS.

*Total Army Records in Current Files Areas (Operating Offices):*

<i>FY</i>	<i>Creation</i>	<i>Disposition*</i>	<i>Destruction</i>	<i>Ratio of Creation to Disposition</i>	<i>Ratio of Creation to Destruction</i>
1951	816,657	506,415	367,057	1.613 to 1	2.225 to 1
1952	1,070,734	775,186	467,199	1.381 to 1	2.291 to 1
1953	1,251,005	828,880	534,493	1.509 to 1	2.340 to 1
1954	1,129,464	1,089,717	715,581	1.036 to 1	1.578 to 1
1955	1,205,205	1,293,643	902,294	1 to 1.073	1.335 to 1
1956	1,089,718	1,126,650	810,754	1 to 1.033	1.344 to 1
1957	996,487	997,064	700,160	1 to 1	1.423 to 1
1958	959,461	982,687	713,654	1 to 1.024	1.344 to 1
1959	877,009	947,166	705,359	1 to 1.080	1.244 to 1

\* Includes destruction, salvage, transfer, and retirement.

It is the American habit to put a price tag on everything, and practically every records management action is basically money-saving. Manpower, materials, and space are translatable into money.

Take time occasionally to compute how much the improvements you have made contribute to dollar savings or even to dollar benefits. You will find that this will help you immeasurably to "sell" the next program action and to point out other areas you need to attack. Here are some areas of improvement:

1. Reduction in cost of files maintenance in current file areas (operating offices) through application of standard filing practices.
2. Efficient utilization of filing equipment, including the use of open shelves.
3. Accelerated transfer of specified fast-growing files.
4. Decentralization of record copies to eliminate duplicate sets of files.

5. Elimination of nonessential mail handling.
6. Reduction in the costs of records holding areas to maintain and service files.
7. Reduction in the number of copies of correspondence prepared.
8. Limitation on the use of letters of transmittal.
9. Increased use of form and guide letters instead of composed letters.
10. Distribution of reproduced material on a need-to-know basis.

Now let's explore the subject of "selling your program" or "briefing the boss," using an imaginary session for our purpose. We will assume that your boss, Mr. Big, has a *fair* idea of records management. The figures in your report reveal the facts about your program. It's most important that you solicit the continued support of top management—it's no accident that the rate of progress in any program is in direct ratio to the weight of the top support it gets. This is your annual opportunity—don't pass it up.

Here's a type of presentation statement we've heard all too often:

Sir. During the last fiscal year, this installation created 4,586 feet of records, effected disposition of 6,298 feet, of which 526 feet were destroyed and ended the fiscal year with 11,864 feet on hand—a reduction of 1,712 feet or 12.6% from the holdings of the previous fiscal year.

Mr. Big has not been initiated in the mysterious language of our craft. Let us try to read the thoughts that race through his mind.

"Created?" Is this guy reciting a verse from the Bible? "Feet?" We're not in the shoe business! "Destroyed" Government records! O my stars! We'll all be court-martialed! And me with 27 years' service! "Fiscal year?!" That must have something to do with money. "Feet on hand?!" This boy doesn't step on anyone's toes—he's mauling their hands! "Holdings?!" I wonder if he's talking about a hammerlock or a body press? Or maybe he's a mutual funds salesman in his spare time!

This reaction is not so ridiculous as you may think! To a layman our specialized language can be very foreign, may be misleading, and might even appear silly. The facial expressions we've seen have indicated this kind of confusion more than once. So we have our first important lesson. Know your audience and speak in terms that will reach it.

Let's try it differently:

Sir. During the 12-month period ending 30 June 1957 Fort Blank produced enough new records to fill 765 four-drawer file cabinets.

During that same period we transferred to the records holding area in Building 21 records that would fill 112 four-drawer file cabinets. Thus we made available for further use those 112 file cabinets, and we vacated the 672 square feet of office space those files occupied. This action resulted in an equipment savings of \$5,040 and a space savings of \$1,680.

Also, by following the instructions in Army Regulations we were able to sell as wastepaper the equivalent of 938 file cabinets of now valueless records having a total weight of over 84 tons. From this sale we realized \$1,848.

A portion of the records sold as wastepaper (the equivalent of 138 file cabinets) vacated 193 square feet of records holding area space valued at \$96. The remaining quantity vacated 4,800 square feet of office space valued at \$12,000 and emptied 800 file cabinets with a replacement cost of \$36,000. Our gross monetary savings, therefore, amounted to \$56,664.

At this point I am sure that you will have aroused Mr. Big's curiosity and he is likely to ask questions. For instance, he may wonder why the savings in the records holding area were so small compared to those in the operating offices. You should be prepared to point out (1) that records holding areas utilize shelving instead of file cabinets; (2) that records there are housed in cardboard boxes stacked as high as the ceiling and floor load capacity will permit; (3) that 14 square feet of floor space in records holding areas will house as many records as 60 square feet of space in offices, where file cabinets are used; (4) that both the cardboard boxes and the records contained in them are disposed of since it is more economical to throw away the boxes than to empty them; and (5) that the cost of floor space in an average records holding area is approximately one-fifth the cost of space in an office.

This is our second important lesson. Know your subject far better than anyone present. The only good reasons for "canning" your presentation are to save the boss valuable time and to permit you to give an orderly, uncluttered briefing. Always be ready to support or to explain your facts.

After you have answered all his questions satisfactorily, you continue your presentation.

On 1 July 1958 we had on hand the equivalent of 2,263 file cabinets of records or 13,576 linear feet of records (calculated at the rate of 6 feet of records to each file cabinet). By 30 June 1959 that quantity had been reduced by 285 cabinets to 1,978 cabinets—a reduction of 12.6%.

To get the job done, we had these costs: \$112 for fiberboard records boxes and sealing tape for the records holding area; \$250 for the transfer of records from operating offices to the records holding area; and about \$1,150 for 700 manhours on the operation in the records holding area. The \$1,848 realized from the sale of wastepaper alone more than offset the cost of disposing of those records. Our net savings, therefore, amounted to over \$55,000.

I mentioned previously that we had produced over 4,500 feet of new records or the equivalent of 765 four-drawer file cabinets. But for every foot of records gained we transferred to the records holding area, retired to records centers, or destroyed 1.373 feet of records. In fact we destroyed 1.227 feet for every foot we produced. This is a satisfactory ratio of disposition (loss) to

creation (gain), but it should be improved. We intend to continue to emphasize our controls on unnecessary copies produced either by typewriter or quick-copying machines, and to eliminate the filing of unessential papers.

At this time Mr. Big is likely to have more questions. Try to anticipate most of these and answer them factually. If you don't know the answer, tell him you will get it for him. Don't guess, don't hedge, don't bluff. If he asks your opinion on certain matters, give it honestly and without thought of "office politics." The records management officer who acts in this manner will be respected and trusted.

You have probably heard the old Chinese proverb that one picture is worth a thousand words. This brings us to the subject of charts. Not "pretty" charts prepared in many colors, with fancy lettering and illustrated borders, but simple, useful charts that enable one to grasp the significance of a condition at a glance. It doesn't make too much difference whether they are "line," "bar," or "pie" charts. The important thing about charts is that they can tell a story briefly and effectively.

Prepare charts accurately and use care in plotting details. Charts should be neat in appearance, should emphasize important facts by dark tones or heavy lines, and should reveal trends and progress towards a goal. They should never be cluttered up with details that detract from or obscure the main point. Properly used, charts can be exceedingly beneficial in reports, briefings, and training to put across a point or highlight a situation. One caution, however, on their use. Don't *ever* try to read exact figures from charts. A line or bar may show that the quantity plotted is in the vicinity of 250,000, but it *will not* and *must not* try to show that the quantity is exactly 253,487.

The annual records disposition report is our primary source of statistical data. This article has tried to show how to glean program facts from reported figures, how to follow through on the basis of these facts, how to exploit the facts to maintain the top support vital to a program, and how to expand the principle of the disposition report to additional program elements.

If you want your program to show up well, use the best prop you have—your annual report.