

# Government Archives and Records Management

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**I**N reporting on the present situation of archives and records management in Government I am pleased to say that the situation is not so bad as it has been. The main reason for this is that under the Hoover Commission a study of paperwork management in the Federal Government, 1947-49, pointed up the need for greater control over the generation, storage, and disposal of records. The report on this study also contained recommendations to establish and maintain the needed controls. A second report was made in 1955, based on a survey broader in scope than the first, and it again contained recommendations designed to overcome the faults revealed. In the room left for improvement, however, we could easily test-flight our moon shots.

In today's situation we find ourselves with archivists and records managers. I suppose that an archivist is a records manager who has specialized or that a records manager is an archivist who has become a general practitioner. Whatever the difference is, there is need for a closer relationship between the two, for today records managers are accumulating Federal records scheduled for permanent retention at the rate of 200,000 cubic feet a year. Add this annual increase to the 5.7 million cubic feet of records already scheduled for permanent or indefinite retention and the archivist, the final custodian of this flood of paper, will find himself in a sea of records with a poorly charted course. The vision of the archivist, who can foresee what records will be required 50 to 200 years from now, should be used now to prevent the current practice of designating vast records holdings as permanent. Of the 24.5 million cubic feet of Federal records, 24 percent are designated for indefinite or permanent retention. As Wernher Von Braun said, "We can lick gravity, but sometimes the paperwork is overwhelming." There is, however, one happy note in the accumulation of records. In the past 10 years total Federal records holdings have been reduced by a million cubic feet.

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As most of you know, there are severe penalties for the unauthorized destruction of Federal records. The process of determining which records should be kept and which may be destroyed is necessarily cumbersome since in today's complex operations no one individual has sufficient overall knowledge to make a decision for all types of records. Our engineers and scientists are too engrossed in current problems to be truly objective in determining record retention periods. As a result we are spending too much money to retain too many records too long.

Most of us today do not have the time to read and study the reports, periodicals, and trade publications concerned with our work. Technological advances in most areas of endeavor are being made at a rate never before known in history, and we expect these breakthroughs to be accelerated. For example, take the publication *Chemical Abstracts*. The number of abstracts is doubling at the rate of once every 8½ years. If this rate continues, by the year 2000 half the population of the United States will be engaged in writing or reviewing *Chemical Abstracts*! We are progressing somewhat, through information retrieval systems, in making this mushrooming knowledge available to those who need to know. The Atomic Energy Commission has established several "information centers." Other Federal agencies are also establishing "information centers." Thus far, however, these centers have been devoted to highly technical areas of scientific and engineering research.

You may want to borrow an idea from our information center that has kept costs down. Each author submitting documents to the center is asked to prepare abstracts of his own work. This has eliminated the need for one additional scientific review of the publication. A highly skilled person is still required to code these documents properly so that they are compatible with the hardware. Once the abstracts are prepared and the coding done, however, retrieval becomes a push-button operation. All of us look forward to the day when the specific information wanted can be given and when the need for reading much unrelated and repetitive material will be eliminated.

There is no doubt that computers have been a boon to our technical advance. Today we can make in minutes calculations that would have taken a lifetime a few years ago. Vast inventories can be maintained on an hourly basis if needed. Financial reports and payrolls are prepared by these mechanical wizards in less time than it takes to describe their functions. But what have computers done

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for archivists and records managers? They have compounded our problems in several ways. They belch forth records at the rate of more than 800 lines a minute, adding to our accumulation. They bring about a need for a complete reevaluation of retention periods for computer-involved records. In many cases our source documents cannot be read without machines—and who knows now whether the same machines will be available 50 years hence? As yet, we have no clear understanding of what is needed for audit trails.

Data processing equipment has become a status symbol, and the Federal Government is much concerned that some equipment is being procured without a real need for it. This has resulted in a controversy that is not yet settled. On the one hand we have the possibility that one agency, the General Services Administration, may be given complete control of all ADP equipment for the Federal Government. On the other hand we have the individual agencies and departments claiming that they are quite capable of determining what equipment is needed and how it will be used. Whatever the outcome, you may be sure that feasibility studies will be more carefully made, followups will be made to assure that the equipment is doing the job for which it was procured and that it is utilized to the extent reasonably possible, and due consideration will be given to the advantages and disadvantages of renting rather than buying ADP equipment.

Today the Federal Government is taking a hard look at its forms. Murray Haber of the National Archives and Records Service reports that between 70 and 75 percent of records currently produced are filled-in forms. Personal experience proves that a thorough review of forms generation and utilization can be extremely worthwhile in reducing records creation and making forms a better yet less expensive tool of management. As an example of how we are benefiting from form surveys, let me cite one case history. In one of our contractor organizations we found at the beginning of our forms survey that it had 13,300 authorized forms. The survey uncovered more than 5,000 additional forms that were temporary or "bootleg" forms. After much study and work, 2,016 of these forms were consolidated into 524, which are serving the intended purpose better than the former profusion; 2,160 forms were revised to eliminate useless or add needed information and to make them easier to complete and read; and 840 new forms were originated and 8,299 were discontinued. It is not possible even to guess at the monetary savings resulting from this project.

It certainly curtailed the generation of several hundred feet of records. It reduced requests for filing equipment. It substantially reduced paper and printing costs. The greatest savings and the most difficult to calculate, however, are the savings in man-hours. Now that the forms are properly designed, they can be filled out from 1 to 5 minutes faster than formerly and they contain more complete information, which is easier to extract and use than was possible with the superseded forms.

There are other fields of records management—or, to use the broader term, paperwork management—to which the Federal Government is giving attention. Consider, for a moment, reports. A great deal of time, effort, paper, and printing go into the preparation and reading of reports. The sad situation is that many reports are being prepared year after year in the same routine fashion and that the original reason for them does not even exist any longer. Many reports that have justification are given circulation far greater than is necessary. This not only wastes paper, it also generates unnecessary records and wastes man-hours because people read this material, often just out of curiosity. Human nature being what it is, many people like to see their names on distribution lists; it gives them a feeling of importance to receive quantities of material even though the material may be completely unrelated to their duties. The Federal Government is attempting to limit the creation of reports to those actually needed for the Government's business and to distribute them only to those who need the information. Letter writing is also being improved by training people to write more clearly and briefly and, again, to prepare only the required number of copies. Closer control of printing equipment, quick-copying devices, and management directives will benefit records managers and archivists through a reduction of records created. It will also help to assure that the records that are generated are better tools of current management and accurately reflect for posterity the policies, procedures, and programs of the Government.

Throughout this report I have referred only to the Federal Government. From the information available to me, however, it is apparent that the situation in the Federal Government is very similar to that of agencies of State and local governments. It is safe to say that at all levels of government there is keen awareness of the problems of paperwork and that progress is being made in eliminating or controlling these problems. For this reason it can be reported that the situation today is not so bad as it has been.