

THE PROBLEM OF RECORDS FROM THE STANDPOINT OF MANAGEMENT

I. ORIENTATION

IN SEEKING the solution of a difficult problem, it is sometimes helpful to view it from a distance, so that it may be brought into a proper perspective. In approaching the problem of records from the standpoint of management, this orientation is achieved, as the management of an organization is concerned not only with its records, but with every other factor essential to its proper functioning. By way of introduction, therefore, let us inform ourselves concerning the nature of an organization and its functions.

A. *The Nature of Organization and Function*

The device of organization is resorted to for the purpose of accomplishing large-scale enterprise beyond the scope of an individual. The resulting structure has been defined as the "combination of the necessary human beings, materials, tools, equipment, working space and appurtenances, brought together in systematic and effective correlation, to accomplish some desired object."¹ The human beings within an organization are associated in accordance with one of a number of possible plans, one of the most effective being the hierarchy. In this form, organization is accomplished through the process of the delegation of power and authority from its fountainhead at the top, where it resides in a single individual, downward through various widening levels, so that the whole structure resembles a triangle, each part of which has its special function to perform, the objectives of which are all directed towards the major goal of the organization.

The functions of an organization, or the work to be done in the attainment of its objectives, have two essential elements: (1) the field of activity in which they take place, or their subject matter; and, (2) the type of energy expended by the personnel in their performance, which we shall call "faculty." When it is considered that all record material is a by-product of function, these two elements of function, subject matter and faculty are particularly significant to us as an aid in the understanding of the nature of record material, which

¹ Schultze, J. W., *Bulletin* of the Taylor Society, IV (Aug., 1919), 3.

understanding must, of course, be a prerequisite to the proper administration of records.

The functions of an organization with respect to this element of faculty fall into certain classes common to all organizations. As during the performance of functions in each of these classes, distinct types of record material accumulate and remain as the evidence of such performance, it is important that we recognize these various classes wherever they may be located.

B. The Organization and Functions of the Treasury Department

For example we shall take the Treasury Department, as that is the organization with which I am most familiar. It is, like most of the administrative agencies, a hierarchy, whose structure may be represented by a triangle. For the sake of our theme, we shall divide this triangle into three sections by horizontal lines.

In the apex will be found the secretary, the under secretary, and three assistant secretaries of the Treasury. In them reside political responsibility, and they exercise the faculties of policy determination and final executive decision in all fields of Treasury activity, within the framework of the policies laid down by Congress, the president, and the Supreme Court.

In the middle section of the triangle are all those officials who report directly to the secretary, the under secretary, or an assistant secretary, and who constitute the higher staff of the Treasury. Their functions are policy formulating in character, and fall into four easily discernible classes, including those exercised by the administrative, advisory, executive, and promotional faculties. All matters involving policy pass through this section of the triangle, where they are considered from special points of view; and documents enunciating policy are prepared or reviewed before they are signed by a policy determining official.

The administrative functions have for their objective the organization of the department, the co-ordination of its activities, and its maintenance in such condition that it can effectively fulfill its functions.

The advisory functions consist of the conduct of legal and economic studies and the interpretation of facts and conditions from the legal and economic viewpoints, in all fields of Treasury activity.

The executive functions are performed by the heads of bureaus who control the operating units and who form the link between them

and the office of the secretary. In the formulation of policy, they contribute advice with respect to the needs and experience of the operating units in the particular fields of activity over which they have control.

The promotional functions have for their objective the establishment of good relations between the government and the people to be governed, during which the public is informed concerning the requirements and activities of their government.

Finally, at the base of the triangle will be found officials in charge of operations, each one having a special field of activity for which he is responsible. Here the policies that have been laid down are applied, and here the laws are executed. Thus all the functions of the Treasury have been provided for somewhere in the hierarchy.

C. Typical Functions and their Relation to Record Material

As the various classes of Treasury functions described above are typical of those of all organizations, they are summarized as follows:

1. Policy determining, exercised by the political faculty;
2. Policy formulating, exercised by the administrative, advisory, executive, and promotional faculties; and
3. Policy applying, exercised by the executive faculty.

Just as these functions are typical and fall into certain classes, so does the record material they engender fall into typical series. These series, as I have identified and named them, include:

1. General and miscellaneous records, contained in general series, mixed series, and nonrecord series;
2. Policy records, contained in main series and auxiliary series;
3. Administrative records, contained in main series and auxiliary series; and
4. Operating records, contained in operating series.

As this paper is designed merely to bring into focus the various ramifications of the problems involved in record administration, a detailed explanation of these series will not be attempted here.

II. THE NATURE OF RECORDS

Turning towards the problems of record administration, our first concern must be to determine the scope of this function, which, of

course, depends upon the definition of records. In actual practice, it is not always easy to distinguish between records and other types of documents belonging to an organization.

A. Documents

Webster defines a document as "an original or official paper relied upon as the basis, proof, or support of anything else;—in its most extended sense, including any writing, book, or other instrument conveying information; any material substance, as a coin or stone, having on it a representation of the thoughts of men by means of any species of conventional mark or symbol."² It is evident that this definition is broad enough to include all the property of an organization except such purely physical things as buildings, furniture, equipment, and the like.

B. Record and Reference Material

Record material may be defined as "documents received or produced and accumulated in an organization during the performance of function, of which it is a by-product and an essential part, and remaining as evidence of such performance." It is not sufficient, however, to determine what records are, but also what they are not. For instance, the material ordinarily kept in the library of an organization (which we shall call "reference material"), falls within the definition of "documents" but not of "record material," in that it is procured and collected for reference purposes only. Between these two classes are many borderline cases which must be settled. The criterion, however, should not be a matter of the form of the material, but rather of its functional origin and use.

C. Other Documents

There is still another class of documents produced in the organization which does not come within the definition of record material in that the documents do not "remain as evidence." They are original letters written to people outside the organization, and other documents destined to be sent out. These include not only typewritten documents but also duplicated and printed matter. It is important, however, that one copy at least of every document sent out of the organization be retained as record material. It is also permissible for *extra* copies to be retained, not as record material, but for reference use only. Stocks

² Webster's *New International Dictionary*, second edition (1937).

of extra copies kept on hand for distribution are not, of course, record material.

In the determination of what is and what is not record material, the fact should be borne in mind that record material is the only evidence that remains of the history of the organization, and what remains should tell a complete story.

III. RECORD FUNCTIONS

The objectives of the record functions are:

1. The receipt, custody, and care of the record material belonging to an organization;
2. Its maintenance in such condition that the material and the information contained therein may be readily available; and
3. Its proper final disposition.

These functions fall into three main classes. The first I have called "accumulation"; the second, "organization, maintenance, and service"; and the third, "custody, control, and disposition." Underlying all of these is the notion of order. As it is the essence of orderliness that there be a place for everything, it is necessary that official depositories or file rooms be designated within the organization, where record material may be kept when it is not in use, and that appropriate controls be maintained over the material as it flows throughout the organization.

A. *Accumulation*

The functions of "accumulation" revolve around the sources or origins of record material. Incoming matter must be received and distributed throughout the organization to the appropriate officials for attention. Some of the questions to be decided here are:

1. Where shall the incoming material be received—in a mail room independent of the file room, or in the file room?
2. What mail shall be delivered to the addressee unopened?
3. Shall a record of incoming mail be made, and if so, what kind, and in what form?
4. What control techniques shall be used, such as time-stamping, numbering, and initialing?
5. Shall the previous papers be attached to the incoming material before it is sent to the appropriate official?
6. Shall a follow-up of incoming matters be maintained?

The answers to these questions, of course, will vary according to the circumstances, which should be carefully considered before decisions are made.

Material prepared within the organization consists of matter to be sent out, matter to be retained for record purposes, and matter to be retained for reference use only. Among the questions to be decided here are:

1. Shall regulations for the preparation of documents be prepared?
2. Who shall dispatch outgoing mail?
3. Shall a record of outgoing mail be maintained, and if so, what kind, and in what form?
4. When and how shall this class of record material pass into the custody of the record personnel?
5. What control techniques shall be used to indicate custody, such as time-stamping, numbering, and recording?
6. What disposition shall be made of nonrecord material?
7. Shall the file room maintain stocks of extra copies of printed and duplicated material for distribution?

These functions of accumulation cover the period in the life history of record material from the time it is received or produced in the organization to the time it is first received in the file room which is to be its official resting place.

B. Organization, Maintenance, and Service

Perhaps the most important function of record administration is that of organization, as upon it depends the effectiveness of the reference service. It must be said at the outset that the problem of organization must not be confused with that of location or custody. Organization deals with the physical arrangement of the material, regardless of where it is located. The first question that must be decided is, shall all the material within the organization be subject to a unified plan of organization, or shall the material accumulating in various offices be treated as independent unrelated problems. The answer to this question should be determined in the light of a number of principles.

The object of organization is to provide a definite place in which any given document belongs. We have already shown that documents are a by-product of function, so the question refers back to the nature

of function. If a unit of the department or agency is so organized that all of the functions of the department performed in a given field of activity are contained in that unit, then it is feasible to consider the problem of its records independently. However, it must be pointed out that all the functions of an agency are directed towards its major objective, and are, in consequence, interrelated. Therefore, it is my belief that the basis of organization of record material within an agency should be function rather than unit of organization.

One of the great accomplishments in the field of archival economy has been the discovery of the principle of provenance, or, as the French call it, *respect pour les fonds*. According to this principle, record material should be organized with respect to its source. I believe the discovery of this principle is as important to archival economy as the discovery of the law of gravity is to physical science. However, I would add a corollary to the archival principle of provenance: "The organization of record material should reveal the functional history of the institution in which it was engendered." This principle would no more overthrow the principle of provenance than the discovery of the law of relativity overthrew the law of gravity. It merely cast more light upon it. If we really go back to the source of archival documents, we must go beyond the unit of organization in an agency to function, for the unit of organization is merely an instrument for the performance of function. If several units of organization work together in the attainment of a single objective, the records they engender should be regarded as a unit in the organization scheme.

There is so much substance to the functions of organization, maintenance, and service, that further consideration cannot be given to them in so general a paper as this. However, I would say with reference to "service," that there is very much room for further development in the direction of creating finding data and giving extension service. The results of certain experiments I have tried in this field have been most gratifying to the Treasury. The need for further development along these lines is apparent when we consider the importance of the business of government today.

C. Custody, Control, and Disposition

There still remains to be considered the question of custody, control, and disposition. The fact that documents are constantly coming

into existence and accumulating indicates the necessity of control. During their life cycle they pass through the following periods:

1. The period of accumulation and current use;
2. The period of infrequent governmental use; and
3. The period of historical use.

It is axiomatic that the material should be located near the people who are to use it most frequently. This requirement necessitates that record material be not kept in the same place throughout its life cycle. It is indicated, therefore, that current file rooms be established in convenient locations within the organization to hold the material during the period of its accumulation and current use; that file rooms located within the organization but more remote from current activities be established to hold the material during the period of infrequent governmental use; and finally, that there be a permanent establishment outside the organization where material of historical use may be permanently preserved. Responsibility for the custody and control of the material thus placed should be definitely fixed.

As one period in the life cycle merges into the next, the necessity of the transfer of the material arises. In this connection, it is important that the current file rooms located near the current activities of the organization be kept free from the incubus of increasing volumes of material infrequently referred to within the organization. This growing volume includes not only the valuable material that must be saved, but also ephemera of value only during the period of accumulation, the loss of which would in no way make incomplete the functional history of the organization. It is very important, therefore, in the administration of these current file rooms, that, at stated periods, time be allotted for the weeding out of useless documents for disposal and transfer of valuable documents to noncurrent file rooms.

Likewise, at frequent intervals, as material in the noncurrent file rooms passes into the third stage of its life cycle, arrangements should be made for its transfer to the central archival depository.

Much remains to be done in the various government departments and agencies in providing for the performance of these periodic functions. Until they are performed in truly effective fashion, the ever present space problem which is such a bugbear to administrative officials will always be with us.

In the direction of control over the accumulation of record material

in current file rooms, much can be accomplished. I have experimented in the taking of annual inventories with most desirable results, not the least of which has been the possibility of estimating more accurately future needs of space and equipment. The indications are that a system of accountability of record material belonging to an organization can be developed.

In this paper I have tried to bring into focus all the problems in the field of record administration with which management must be concerned. No doubt many of you will think that the considerations discussed here are far removed from the everyday problems that arise within your own jurisdictions; but the types of problems that management must solve condition all those that arise in the individual file rooms of an organization. We must, after all, begin at the beginning, and that lies in the province of management.

HELEN L. CHATFIELD

Treasury Archivist