The Indispensability of Business Archives

By HELEN L. DAVIDSON

Eli Lilly & Co.

IN the complex world in which we live there is little that can be done without the use of existing business records of some nature or the creation of new ones. Memoranda, correspondence, reports, plans, charts, and many more kinds of records are all needed so that modern society can function with some degree of control. It is not possible and certainly not desirable to keep all business records indefinitely. Without some control the acquisition of filing cabinets alone can increase at an alarming rate—at an approximate cost of $50 per drawer per year, this equipment can be a staggering investment.

Selected material should be permanently preserved by individual firms, for the historical information contained is of definite educational value to the firms themselves, to the historian, and to the public served by the business. A business organization can profit from a better knowledge of its own history.

In a small company the manager may know the business so well that he keeps much knowledge in his head, and as the need arises he can draw upon his knowledge. But as a firm grows and becomes complex, this capability no longer exists. And then there comes the day when the manager is no longer there. What happens then?

Whether the organization is small or large, some provision should be made to preserve those records that will be of historical significance. If this can be done early in the life of the business, so much the better.

With the advent of the office copying machine the rate at which business records are accumulating has accelerated. To control the accumulation some firms regularly destroy all correspondence and most of their other business records as they become 5 or 6 years old. They may keep statistical and accounting records for a longer period, but they destroy the correspondence and other explanatory material that supplement these records. Yet, statistics will not reveal gradual changes in the firm's organization or new managerial policies that have been put into practice. Nor will statistics reveal

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changes in manufacturing or marketing procedures that have been responsible for the increase in annual sales.

Printed annual reports may supply the facts and figures of particular areas of the company's activities, but motivation and methodology will not be documented unless provision is made to preserve specific files. If company records are destroyed without regard for this truth, the researcher, whether he be company employee or historical scholar, will find it necessary to rely on inadequate data such as human recollection or source material outside the company. There is the mistaken idea that if the firm's publications are preserved the company records may be destroyed. But without the primary source materials a complete and accurate account can never be developed.

Information gleaned from company historical records can be valuable as background material for articles in company house organs or may be used to document statements made outside the organization. This need to document certain events may be the factor that brings management to a decision to establish company archives. When boxes of records that have long been gathering dust in attic or basement are brought to light and the files sought are not found in them, the realization comes that something should be done.

If a firm has a formal records management program the company archives can be a natural outgrowth. But many companies do not have such a program. At Eli Lilly & Co., for example, there is no overall records management program. Certain manufacturing records are scheduled for retention for specific periods, as are financial and legal records, but in most areas of the company the retention or destruction is left to the discretion of the management of the various components. The unfortunate results of this policy were first realized in 1946 when a member of the public relations staff wrote a short history of the company covering the first 70 years of its existence. Three of the Lilly men were still living and active in the company. There were some files, price lists, examples of advertising, pictures, etc. in the company library, but the records were sketchy; and because memory is not always reliable, errors crept into the story. Company archives were talked about then, but it was not until 1956, or 10 years later, that the decision was finally made to establish the Lilly Archives with full-time personnel. Then began the difficult task of bringing together all of the existing materials that were worth preserving. Because of the delay in the decision, valuable files have been destroyed.

We are now approaching our 100th anniversary, and an outside historian is at work on a history of the company. Without the archives now preserved it would be impossible for any writer to prepare an accurate account of the growth and development of the company.

If possible, papers of families connected with a business should be collected. A study of these family papers along with memorabilia will give a better understanding of what lies behind a company. It is often difficult to separate the family and the business. We are fortunate in having Lilly family papers, dating from about 1780, which include Civil War material and items pertaining to the city of Indianapolis. Three generations of Lillys have been so closely associated with the company that its history is in a sense a personal biography of the Lilly men.

Locating and preserving documents that show the *how* and *why* of past decisions will be a most important aspect of any adequately supported archival program. Some modern businessmen, however, are so involved with activities of the moment and plans for the future that they have no time to be concerned with events of 25 or 50 years ago. They fail to realize that present-day programs would not be effective without basing them on the activities of past years. We tend to remember the good and forget the bad, but the records of mistakes within an organization should be preserved as well as the records of accomplishments. For instance, memoranda and reports concerning a manufacturing procedure that was tried and failed should be preserved, for knowledge of such an attempt may prevent an expensive repetition in the future. Or a study of the records of past efforts, in the light of existing knowledge, may lead to new and improved procedures.

There are important legal advantages also to be derived from the possession of old company records. There is the case of the Lilly capsule.

In 1898 Eli Lilly & Co. began the manufacture of the hard gelatin capsule. Some were filled with Lilly preparations, but most of the capsules produced were and still are sold to other companies for their filling. This capsule was rounded on both ends. In 1952 Lilly developed the parabolic-end capsule. In 1960 an application was made for trademark registration. In support of this application evidence had to be gathered to prove that Lilly gelatin capsules have been and are sold in bulk and that there is a need to distinguish its finished products from those of other manufacturers. The Archives was called upon to furnish much of the documenta-

tion that accompanied the trademark application. This trademark was registered on June 5, 1962. Fewer than half a dozen trademarks for configuration have been registered in the United States.

The use of old records is not to be overlooked in preparing advertising copy or in preparing or illustrating stories and articles for company publications. Books and pamphlets prepared for company anniversaries or as souvenirs for employee dinners can be made interesting, attractive, and factual with the use of historical material. And we should not underestimate the importance of collecting pictures along with company records. A good picture collection complements a good records collection. There are times when the evidence revealed in a good photograph is the only information available on a given subject. In 1912 Lilly purchased 156 acres of ground at Greenfield, Ind., to become the Greenfield Biological Laboratories. The first shipment of biologicals was made from the laboratories in the summer of 1915. An investigator recently wished to know the dates when certain buildings at this site were under construction. A search of the engineering records in the Archives failed to produce the information.

A picture was to give the answer. Periodically groups of salesmen are brought into the home office for refresher training, and photographs are taken of each group. In the early days of the Biological Laboratories, the groups were taken on the interurban cars to Greenfield, where they spent the day looking over the new facilities. A short time after the question about the construction at the Greenfield plant was asked, I was sorting through a stack of pictures of groups of salesmen. Most of the pictures were dated in the twenties and had been made at the Indianapolis plant, but one bore the date of June 1914 and had been taken at Greenfield. Very clearly in the background were two of the vaccine buildings under construction. So the question was answered although nothing was ever found in writing.

Another use of pictures is for exhibits. A good spot for a large bulletin board or display case is near the archives room. As employees look at the displays they may have questions or comments regarding a certain picture. If the archives room is near at hand they can enter to ask about the picture. The company archivist should take every opportunity to talk with employees about archives. A few moments spent away from the job of classifying and indexing can pay off later through the receipt of another old photograph, an anniversary souvenir, or some other item that has been in the possession of the employee to whom one has given a little

time. For the archivist, the librarian, or whoever is in charge of the company archives must be a press agent on his own behalf. It is vital, of course, for management to be behind the archives program, but it is equally important for employees to know of the existence and use of the archives.

Over the past several years I have had the opportunity to appear before Lilly's secretarial training schools, held three or four times each year. I give a brief history of the Lilly Archives and show a few examples of the types of materials in which we are interested. Since a roster of those attending shows the departments represented, archival material from these departments is exhibited. I give also some examples of pertinent reference questions that have been answered. This technique has resulted in the forwarding to us of files that might otherwise have been destroyed and has informed the secretaries that there is a place where information about the company and employees is readily available.

If a firm manufactures a product, the archives can also be the recipient of product samples, packaging literature, and other items. These are valuable as exhibit material both within and without the company, and they provide illustrations for articles and ideas for advertisements.

Whether a company preserves only the written word or whether provisions are also made for pictures and all of the miscellaneous items that can be collected, there are many ways in which the materials preserved can be used and thus be of value to the business organization.

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One of the dynamic elements in the creative earlier years of Records Management was the openhanded willingness of those in this field to share readily their knowledge and experience with others. In recent years there has been a noticeable slackening of this spirit. In part, this may stem from the way past help has been received. A disturbingly large number of people in this field have built their efforts on the ideas of others, and have failed to acknowledge this debt or to help others. However, this problem's most pressing aspect is glaringly revealed in the indifference of some to the problems of those who are following us in this field. It is a matter of getting down to business with professional training. It is a matter of the Records Management *image*. And, it is much more than all of that. Surely, it is the urgent reminder that none of us has it made.

—Belden Menkus, "A Word in Conclusion," in *Records Management Journal* (Spring 1967). Quoted with permission.