

# Appraisal Criteria for Retention and Disposal of Business Records

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**W**HICH business records should be retained? Which business records should be discarded? Every business archives with a space problem has appraisal criteria, formal or informal, for maintaining and disposing of materials. Every business archives threatened by a space shortage inevitably must develop such criteria.

Archivists with business holdings are well equipped—often better equipped than business historians—to determine which records should be kept and which should be thrown away. But the views of the business historian, as the chief client of the business archives, perhaps can help the archivist to improve his retention-disposal criteria. If this premise is correct, the following suggestions for the handling of business materials may be of interest and value to those who must pare burgeoning business collections.

The highest priorities in any business accession, aside from an organization's articles of incorporation, or a copy of them, should be assigned to the minutes of board meetings and other committees of which the chairman and president are members and to annual and quarterly reports, proxy statements, and prospectuses. These documents often omit much more than they tell about a given meeting or about a given year's activities. But at least these data have the merit of being official statements, and one can be sure that the chairman, the president, the general counsel, and other top executives have scrutinized every word that has gone into them.

The correspondence and office files of the chairman and president are next on the priority list. The correspondence of both chairman and president should be preserved, if only because the chairman is usually the chief executive officer of the firm—primarily concerned with policies, long-range planning, and often finance—while the president is usually the chief operating officer, responsible for day-to-day operations. The files of the chairman and president almost always contain many identical copies of routine intracompany memoranda. One set of these memos can be eliminated without important loss to scholarship.

Many letters from the public to the chairman and president also can be thrown away. Not every letter from the public is priceless. In fact, if one has read 10 invitations to the chairman to speak to a Rotary

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Club in Dubuque or Peoria or a dozen appeals for a million-dollar loan to perfect a perpetual motion machine, he has virtually read them all. Executive office files also are replete with duplicate literature—company policy statements, circular letters, executive speeches, sales promotion materials, and so on. Certainly one set of these materials, with perhaps duplicates of those containing marginal notes, is all that need be kept.

A reasonably high priority should be assigned to the correspondence and files of the various staff vice presidents—the heads, for example, of the personnel, finance, legal, engineering, manufacturing, and public relations staffs. These staff records often are useful to one who is writing a general history of a company. They are indispensable to the historian who is writing, let us say, on the research and engineering laboratories of General Electric or the history of Republic Steel's labor relations. These files also can be substantially screened without important loss to the historian. Each staff head's files, for example, will duplicate much of the general company literature found in the chairman's and president's offices, and, except as this literature bears on the specific staff function, it can be discarded.

For the same reason that value is placed on the papers of staff vice presidents, importance, although less importance, should be placed on the papers of the general managers of the divisions of multidivision corporations. Here again, if a person is writing a history of the University Microfilms division of the Xerox Corp., he needs material bearing on that division. But divisional papers also can and should be screened substantially. Papers of each division, like staff vice presidents' files, contain a great deal of redundant company literature, memos, and the like.

It perhaps goes without saying that archivists and others should discard materials with extreme care. Often a document, standing by itself, seems irrelevant and valueless; but frequently, as most historians can attest, a single piece of paper, when placed beside other information, can fill a gap much as a stray piece of a jigsaw puzzle enables one to complete a part of the puzzle itself. An isolated letter, for example, might indicate that a company was interested in a certain kind of activity years before anyone thought that it was; a piece of advertising might suggest that a particular advertising campaign was a gleam in someone's eye before somebody else took credit for thinking of it; and rough drafts of company statements can show the evolution of a certain policy as it was being threshed out within the company. This is not to suggest that an archivist does not dare discard fragmentary papers. But it does suggest that he should keep in mind that a letter that appears inconsequential may provide the key to a stubborn lock. As the archivist screens papers, he brings to bear his training, experience, and common sense. No one can ask more of him; and I for one have been highly gratified by the excellent screening done by archivists and librarians.

A high retention priority should be placed on books and articles

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dealing with a company, its industry, and its leading personalities. High priority also should be assigned to employee magazines and newspapers, information handbooks, product brochures, advertisements, and above all, photographs and scrapbooks containing articles on a company and its people. Why the emphasis on photographs? Because, as the saying goes, a picture, whether of company operations or personnel, is often worth a thousand words, and more. Why the emphasis on scrapbooks? Because the clippings in them can give one a better balanced view of a company and its people than any other single source. Here, typically, one can learn what a few dozen publications, ranging from the *New York Times* to the *Sauk City Herald*, think of a company's or an executive's actions. There is no better way to get a more objective view of a subject, assuming that the compiler of the scrapbooks has pasted in both favorable and unfavorable material.

If an archives plans to microfilm part of its holdings, it probably should start with scrapbooks and company literature. These records usually lend themselves more easily to microfilming than does correspondence. Also, it is easier for the historian to use microfilm dealing with literature than with correspondence, unless the correspondence is indexed to the *n*th degree, which often it is not.

Certain business records should have a low retention priority or simply can be thrown away. Among such items are employee timecards, payroll records, shipping invoices, purchase notices, and plant maintenance records. No archives that accepts current materials can hope to retain all or even a small part of such records. Most of these materials—except for those dating from a very early period or those considered representative of or crucial to studies of later periods—simply must go. Fortunately, they are expendable; in terms of volume, their potential yield to scholars is less than that of almost any other kind of document.

Ledgers pose a special problem. They are exceedingly bulky, yet, as the final books of record in business transactions, they are more valuable than timecards, shipping invoices, and the like. Given this problem, many archivists today suffer from "ledgeritis." They may devote valuable space to ancient ledgers, yet have a nagging feeling that possibly no one during the next century, if ever, will peer inside many, if any, of these volumes. Yet conscientious archivists are reluctant to discard these white elephants. Perhaps they would like to microfilm them but believe that their microfilming funds might better be spent on other records.

So what does one do with ledgers and materials like them? Few historians are willing to recommend to an archivist that he simply destroy these materials unless they can be microfilmed. But if an archivist has space and budget problems and anticipates even greater space and money problems in the future, and if something has to give—the archivist's sanity or some records—he should first discard, virtually en masse, employee timecards, payroll records, shipping invoices, purchase notices,

and plant maintenance records, and then take a hard look at the ledgers. But ledgers should not be discarded until office correspondence and files have been screened to the fullest extent possible.

If, after the foregoing advice has been followed, the archivist still has a space problem, he might, as a last resort, ask a historian with a special interest in "expendable" records what might be done with them. Most historians, natural-born string savers, cannot bear to see potentially useful documents cast aside; and many of them have extra roomy attics. It could be that, by asking a historian for help, the archivist will not—to paraphrase a familiar expression—be losing an accession, but gaining a private archives.

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