

# North American Business Archives: Results of a Survey

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IN AN EFFORT TO ASSESS CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS ARCHIVES, the Business Archives Committee of the Society of American Archivists conducted a survey in the spring of 1975. The objective was to gather more information than could be gleaned from the Society's *Directory of Business Archives in the United States and Canada*. To prepare that directory, the Business Archives Committee had sent a brief questionnaire to 2,000 corporations, private companies, and other institutions; included in this canvass was the *Fortune* 500. When most of the returns had been received, a considerably longer questionnaire was distributed to those respondents reporting an archives. Fifty-eight of one hundred and forty-two persons in charge of business archives responded to the second questionnaire, for a response rate of 41 percent; twenty-one, or 36 percent, of the respondents were SAA members.<sup>1</sup> It was apparent that the larger archives were more likely to respond to the longer questionnaire, although some of the returns did come from quite modest operations.<sup>2</sup>

The detailed survey questionnaire consisted of forty-one short answer questions, some of which included a number of subquestions, and a space for free-response. The longest question inquired about the presence of fourteen different types of records. General questions sought information on the sponsoring organization and its archival facilities. A number of items dealt with the size, composition, and activities of the archives staff. The contents and use of the archives, including arrangement, storage, and retrieval systems, were covered as well. Reference to the responses to most questions will be made in this summary of the results.

Although the respondents were given the opportunity to make anonymous returns, the origin of fifty-four of the fifty-eight replies was identifiable, making it possible to derive additional information from other sources, notably *Standard and Poor's Register*, particularly concerning the nature and size of the organizations.<sup>3</sup> Most of the respondents worked for well-established corporations in such fields as food and beverages, petroleum and wood products, insurance, publishing, entertainment, pharmaceuticals, banking, and manufacturing; seven, however, reported non-profit status: foundations, membership associations, and not-for-profit corporations. *Standard and Poor's Register* indicates that about half of those responding

<sup>1</sup> Late returns and follow-ups brought the final total listed in the *Directory*, published in 1975, to 196. Response rate for the *Directory* questionnaire was less than 15 percent, of which about 80 percent reported an archives.

<sup>2</sup> Partial data from the *Directory* indicated that the respondent companies to the survey questionnaire were on the average more than three times larger, in terms of linear feet of holdings, than non-respondents.

<sup>3</sup> Questionnaire items did include year business established, type (private, public, nonprofit, other), and number of employees.

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did more than one billion dollars of business every year, and forty had combined annual sales of more than 102 billion dollars. It is interesting to note, in comparison, that half of the members of the United Nations had, in 1970, total national incomes of *less* than one billion dollars; it should, therefore, be evident that many of the archives in this survey pertained to extremely wealthy organizations. A further indication of size is that half had more than 11,500 employees, and a quarter had more than 30,000.<sup>4</sup>

The survey confirmed that although North American business archives are still relatively scarce, their number is growing. Establishment dates for the archives ranged from 1925 to 1975, but half were founded since 1959, and a quarter since 1969. Many, however, are not directed by professional archivists. As one respondent, a records manager, added in the free-response section of the questionnaire, "It has been my observation that most profit-oriented industrial companies are just beginning to recognize the need for a professional records manager and cannot be sold on the need for a professional archivist."

This observation was supported by questionnaire results. Only thirty-one, or 53 percent, of the fifty-eight archives in the sample were directed by archivists, and this proportion was about twice that found in the *Directory*, which was in itself an archivally biased sample of the business community. The remaining archives in the survey sample fell rather easily into two groups: 24 percent were directed by librarians (Group L) and 22 percent were directed by records managers (Group R).<sup>5</sup> Those programs which were directed by archivists will be referred to as Group A. These assignments to groups were usually based on the title of the person responding, but in several instances other information, such as the department in which the archives was located, was necessary for the categorization.<sup>6</sup> Group data comparisons indicated significant differences among the types of archives; those directed by archivists tended to be more well-developed. The survey also found conspicuous differences when SAA members and nonmembers were compared.<sup>7</sup> The SAA members, most of whom were archivists, tended to work for larger organizations than the nonmembers, and to have the more impressive programs.

Perhaps the most revealing finding concerning Group L was that more than half of the librarians spent 10 percent or less of their time on archival work, and median total staff for Group L was equivalent to one person.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, these archives tended to be quite modest in scope and facilities, and to have a relatively low level of activity. Indeed, some appeared to be almost totally inactive. The librarian from one such repository at a 125-year-old company with 11,000 employees commented:

Archives here are in infancy. Majority of material neither inventoried nor classified. Need for organization recognized, but state of economy discouraging management from committing

<sup>4</sup> A quarter of the SAA members worked in organizations with 50,000 or more employees.

<sup>5</sup> Group R does not include a few organizations at which the librarian or archivist also had responsibility for records management.

<sup>6</sup> The *Directory* includes a number of archives, usually quite small, which are directed by other types of employees than the three discussed here. Attorneys are one example.

<sup>7</sup> Because the data for groups involves especially small numbers of cases, statistical results must be used cautiously, and, when making comparisons, confidence that differences are not due to chance can only be placed in large intergroup differences, generally, 25 percent or more. Statistics for SAA members, however, are thought to be more reliable, as the sample included most of the known SAA business archives population at the time.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the percentages reported in this paper are based on respondents answering the question discussed. Ninety-five percent of the items were answered by 96 percent or more of the re-

funds . . . Archives at present home for any materials that may be of interest that no one wants to keep in their departments, but that no one wants to throw away.

Another librarian at a ninety-year-old company with 15,000 employees described a similarly regrettable situation:

We have an "archive" collection, but it is, at this time, only stored. Very little use is made of it, there are no company guidelines set, and the Business Library is only the "keeper of the key." The collection was gathered for the writing of a company history and little else has been done with it.

While these two cases provide examples from the lower end of the archival spectrum, it should be noted that at least both did have the beginnings of a collection, and a professional librarian with good intentions.<sup>9</sup> In a company of which the author has personal knowledge, a similar situation eventually led to the hiring of an archivist included in Group A.

Data from the survey strongly suggested that the archives-in-library phenomenon was associated with the smaller organizations in the sample: median number of employees was 2,000, only 17 percent of the total sample median of 11,500. This result might suggest that Group L had less need for a separate archives department. On the other hand, these firms also tended to be somewhat older, half having been established before 1879, as compared with the total sample median date of 1898.

Findings for the size of Group L archives were consistent with size of company; median floor space of the archives, including offices, was 365 square feet, about one-third of the total sample median. Not unexpectedly, Group L also reported a lower frequency of use than the other groups.<sup>10</sup> It is also significant that they reported a lower proportionate use by nonemployees as compared to the archivists. This aspect of archival function will be discussed in more detail later.

Concerning the contents of the archives, the survey found that some of Group L are restricted in the variety of materials collected. More than 80 percent held only publications, clippings, reports, and photographs. In contrast, these record types as well as correspondence, internal memoranda, minutes, financial records, personal papers, and samples of advertising were kept by more than 80 percent of Group A which was also found much more likely to have tapes (77 percent vs. 21 percent), oral histories (71 percent vs. 7 percent), and motion picture films (68 percent vs. 21 percent). The prevalent record types in Group L may help explain another finding: the well-organized, library-type business archives tend to follow library rather than archival methodology in that materials tend to be arranged by subject, stored in file cabinets or in bound volumes on shelves, and indexed by a card catalog; the materials collected lend themselves to this treatment. Moreover, these methodologi-

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spondents, with the exception of 6 personal questions for which the response rates ranged from 76 to 93 percent. Low response items will be noted where appropriate.

Of the time spent on archives, the librarians tended to work more on reference than the archivists and records managers, who tended to spend more of their archival time on acquisitions and administration. Proportion of time spent on processing was about the same for all three groups.

<sup>9</sup> Although none of the librarians were SAA members, more than half reported membership in another professional organization, in all but one case the Special Libraries Association. The proportion of SLA members in the survey sample was probably higher than among the total business archives population as the SLA membership list was used when the earlier questionnaires for compiling the *Directory* were distributed.

<sup>10</sup> Group L median number of requests for documents or information per month was 10.5, as compared to the total sample median of 18. Median for SAA respondents was 36.5. Response rate for this question was 84 percent.

cal procedures may be reflective of the contrasting educational backgrounds of the librarians and the archivists; library science was by far the most commonly reported major field among the librarians, whereas history was the most frequently reported major for the archivists.<sup>11</sup> All these findings suggest a subtle difference in orientation and function: Group L tends to be concerned with the storage of certain types of material, while Group A seems to be collecting whatever is necessary for comprehensive historical documentation.

More will be said about Group L, but let us change the focus for now to the records management type archives, which comprised 22 percent of the sample, a slightly higher proportion than that found in the *Directory*. Seventy-seven percent of those in charge of these archives were also in charge of their organization's records management program which was their primary responsibility. In fact these records managers, more than half of whom reported membership in the Association of Records Managers and Administrators, reported spending even less time on archival work than did the librarians; half spent 5 percent or less time on their archives and median total staff for Group R was equivalent to only five-eighths of one person.

As compared to the library group, this indication of low level of activity cannot be as adequately explained by small company-size, for the median number of employees at Group R was 12,000, slightly above the total sample median, although it is true that Group R did not include any organizations with more than 34,000 employees.<sup>12</sup> Age of the organization does not seem to be a discriminating factor either, but it was interesting to find that the median establishment date for Group A archives was 1950, a decade before the total sample median. Half were established in the 30s and 40s, when professional archivists were rare and many businesses were only beginning to think about records management, much less about archives.

Considering the amount of time spent on archives in Group R, and the general orientation of records managers, one can expect that these archives will usually consist of those records on permanent retention schedules. Frequently, rather little special treatment is given the collection, except perhaps microfilming, and use is almost entirely in-house. A number of cases in Group R, perhaps the majority, may be represented by the following comment of one records manager:

The Archives Department is basically an Inactive Records Center and has responsibility for preparing record retention schedules and for receiving and storing inactive records, including permanent records . . . . The purely archival function is negligible and is largely incidental to the need to curb the growth of space required for storage of records. An attempt is made to preserve papers of historical interest to the Company, but the emphasis is on destruction of records not legally required to be retained.

This archives was not the only one in Group R at which the distinction between an archives and a record center was unclear, and some of the answers of Group R respondents had to be ignored for statistical purposes. One records manager, for instance, volunteered that records in the archives were kept until the destruction notice was received.

<sup>11</sup> Response rate for the question on major field was 64 percent. On different questions with high response rates, 38 percent of Group L reported archival education or training, as compared with 70 percent of Group A. In contrast, 86 percent of Group L reported library science education or training, as compared to only 20 percent of Group A.

<sup>12</sup> Twelve of the thirty-one organizations in Group A had between 36,000 and 400,000 employees. That these giants in the sample had archivists should not be interpreted to suggest that *most* huge corporations have archivists. It should also be considered that thirteen organizations in Group A had 12,000 or fewer employees.

Nevertheless, some members of Group R may be considered to have good programs. These archives have certain advantages, particularly those with trained and sufficient staff. Perhaps the greatest is that they are part of a records management system, and valuable documents flow routinely into the archives.<sup>13</sup> Group R had the highest percentage (69 percent) reporting an effective company policy concerning which records should be turned over to the archives.<sup>14</sup> For those without such a policy, at least the records manager has easier access to historically important material. A records analyst in charge of a Group R archival program wrote that she could take what she wanted for the archives from those records she came across during her normal records management activities. Many full-time archivists would envy this opportunity.

Some members of Group R also have excellent storage facilities, as evidenced by this group's leading the others in percentage with temperature-humidity controlled storage areas<sup>15</sup> and use of microfilm.<sup>16</sup> In most other respects, however, Group R fared less well in comparison. For example, although the finding aids most commonly used by the records managers were inventories, they were used by only 38 percent, as compared to 67 percent for the archivists.<sup>17</sup> Only 36 percent of Group R reported the use of acid-free storage materials, as compared to 55 percent of Group A.<sup>18</sup> More than half of Group R reported no archival education or training, and a third reported the high school diploma as highest educational degree obtained.<sup>19</sup> But probably of greatest import is the fact that at many of these organizations, very little time is devoted to archives. It seems evident that for most of Group R, as for Group L, the investment in archives is limited.

Unlike the librarians and records managers, the primary responsibility of the archivists was found, not surprisingly, to be archives; median percentage of time spent on archives by Group A respondents was 95 percent. Group A also tended to have "larger" staffs; the median was two (including the archivist), as compared to one for Group L and five-eighths for Group R. The Group A staffs also appeared more appropriately qualified for archival work. Seventy percent of the archivists reported archival education or training and 60 percent were SAA members.<sup>20</sup>

One might surmise that these archivists would work in the older firms in the survey. This hypothesis was not confirmed. The median founding date for these organizations was 1901; the medians for the other groups were 1891 for R and 1878 for L. Similarly, the archivists tended to work in more recently established archives; half were founded since 1962, and nine were started in the 1970s.

<sup>13</sup> Of the types of material included in Group R, more than 75 percent held correspondence, memoranda, reports, publications, clippings, minutes, photographs, samples of advertising, personal papers, and financial records. Percentages holding tapes, samples of products, motion picture films, and oral histories ranged from 23 percent to 46 percent.

<sup>14</sup> Fifty-eight percent of Group A had such a policy and 36 percent of Group L.

<sup>15</sup> Group R, 54 percent; Group A, 42 percent; Group L, 36 percent.

<sup>16</sup> Group R, 62 percent; Group A, 48 percent; Group L, 14 percent.

<sup>17</sup> Group L, 29 percent.

<sup>18</sup> Group L, 29 percent. Cutting the sample another way, for SAA members, 67 percent; nonmembers, 38 percent.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, however, the records managers tended to have higher salaries than the archivists, although the small numbers involved on this question (response rate of 74 percent) make this finding inconclusive. It was quite clear, however, that the librarians had the lowest salaries. Also, it should be noted that age was not found to be related to salary.

<sup>20</sup> Nineteen of the twenty-one SAA members in the survey were in Group A; the other two were records managers.



While not older, Group A's organizations did tend to be larger; the median number of employees was 19,000 as compared to 12,000 and 2,000 for the records management and library groups respectively. The size of archives followed the same pattern. The median area of floor space, including offices, for groups A, R, and L were, respectively, 1,400, 1,000, and 400 square feet.

Certainly, the number of employees is not the only factor determining whether a business needs an archivist. Some organizations, by the nature of their activities, may produce more records of historical interest than the number of employees might suggest, as, for example, a foundation, publisher, or firm which engages extensively in research. But, in general, large corporations tend to have more need, and can more easily afford, separately staffed archival programs.

Concerning the archivists, some interesting differences were found between SAA members and the non-SAA members in Group A. Sixty-two percent of the SAA members were professionals hired specifically for archival work, whereas 82 percent of the non-SAA archivists in Group A previously held non-archives positions at their organizations. The SAA members, who tended to be younger and more highly salaried, also reported more education: 61 percent had graduate degrees as compared to 22 percent for the others, and SAA members were twice as likely to have majored in history and to have had archival education and training.

The effects of some of these personal differences among the archivists could be readily discerned in such basic techniques as the use of acid-free storage materials: SAA members were four times more likely to use acid-free folders and boxes than the non-SAA archivists; in fact, higher percentages of records managers and librarians used acid-free materials than did the non-SAA archivists in Group A. But in many other respects, particularly with regard to the function the archives had in the organization, the two subgroups in Group A had more in common with each other than either did with Group R or Group L.

Aside from those differences among groups already mentioned, Group A was found to have more finding aids: 87 percent had card catalogs, as compared to 62 percent for Group L and 31 percent for Group R. Sixty-seven percent of the archivists used inventories, compared to 38 percent for each of the other two groups. The survey found also that the most common arrangement method used by Group A was provenance; others tended to arrange by subject.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the archivists, especially the SAA members, were much more likely to use document cases for storage, although they also commonly use file cabinets and records cartons.<sup>22</sup> These survey results suggest that archival methodology in Group A bears more resemblance to that found in other types of archives and manuscript repositories staffed by archivists than to the other groups of business archives discussed in this report.

Another suggestive finding was on the question of who uses the archives. It is almost common knowledge that most use of business archives is by the business itself; and for all the archives in the survey, five times more requests for documents

<sup>21</sup> Arrangement includes by provenance: Group A, 70 percent; Group R, 38 percent; Group L, 14 percent. Arrangement includes by subject: Group A, 57 percent; Group R, 46 percent; Group L, 64 percent. In addition to provenance and subject, 24 percent of the sample reported chronological arrangement and 22 percent reported arrangement by order received. About half the sample used more than one method.

<sup>22</sup> Storage in document cases: Group A, 61 percent; Group R, 8 percent; Group L, 14 percent. Storage in file cabinets: Group A, 71 percent; Group R, 38 percent; Group L, 79 percent. Storage in records cartons: Group A, 55 percent; Group R, 77 percent; Group L, 77 percent. About half the sample used more than one method.

or information came from within the organization than from the outside. But a closer analysis of the data revealed a greater tendency in Group A, particularly among SAA members, for the archives to be used by non-employees. For 18 of the 21 SAA members, the medians were 23 in-house and 13.5 outside requests for documents or information per month; for 31 of the 37 nonmembers, the medians were 15 in-house requests and only 1 outside request per month.<sup>23</sup> Four of the SAA members reported 100 or more outside requests per month.

Public service, as these figures suggest, appears to be an important difference in function between the more and less well-developed archival programs. Other statistics from the survey also support this interpretation. Seventy percent of the SAA members reported a public relations function, as compared to 40 percent of the nonmembers.<sup>24</sup> Also suggestive was that 52 percent of the SAA members had a permanent exhibit area, whereas only 19 percent of the nonmembers reported such a facility.<sup>25</sup> Contact with the public, therefore, seems to be a distinguishing characteristic of the more active programs.

In conclusion, the survey found wide variations in quality among North American business archives. Some, particularly those directed by SAA members, resemble other kinds of professionally operated archives. Others, frequently found in relatively smaller companies where the archives is the part-time responsibility of the librarian or records manager, are often less impressive. Nevertheless, even the modest archival programs are better than no archives at all, which may very well be the case in the majority of business organizations today.

The recent growth in the number of business archives is encouraging, although the number in existence is still quite small. One-fourth of those in the sample directed by SAA members have been established since 1970, and more SAA members assumed direction of business archives after the survey was completed. The current growth rate may even accelerate to the point where most major corporations will have archival programs. As for the smaller businesses, the future is cloudy.

Several methods have been advocated to facilitate the preservation of business history, including legislation authorizing publicly funded archival repositories for business records, as in Denmark where the Danish National Business Archives, the Erhvervsarkivet, has functioned since 1948.<sup>26</sup> Another alternative which continues to have appeal is for firms to deposit their records with state and local historical societies or in specialized repositories such as the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library. The large mass of business records, however, makes it likely that for at least the near future in North America, scholars will have to depend on the records businesses maintain themselves, for themselves.

<sup>23</sup> Response rate for question on requests per month was 84 percent.

<sup>24</sup> Public relations for Group A, 63 percent; Group L, 42 percent; Group R, 31 percent.

<sup>25</sup> Exhibit areas for Group A, 48 percent; Group L, 14 percent; Group R, 8 percent.

<sup>26</sup> In the U.S.S.R. and other Eastern European socialist nations, business archives (called "economic archives") are an integral part of the national archives.