

Commentary I

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ALL THREE ARTICLES are concerned, from their respective viewpoints, with questions of definition and perception. Each of the papers treats a variety of important sub-issues for the consideration of business archivists, but those critical underlying themes of definition and perception continually resurface.

In his historical overview, David Smith describes the gradual evolution of internal business archives programs and suggests some encouraging growth and developmental patterns that have occurred in the last decade. Smith optimistically notes that this renaissance is at least partially attributable to a "greater awareness of the value of business history," yet such growth appears to be almost universally restricted to the actions and interests of corporate America itself. The development of new archival programs in the field has been stimulated by the perceived self-interests of the host institutions in allocating funding and space to the archival function.

The issue that is both intriguing and

puzzling is the role of the private institution in the collection of business records. With the exception of the well-known and well-documented collections of business history at such repositories as the Baker Library and Eleutherian Mills, universities and research institutions have not placed a high priority on the preservation of economic and business history.

What are the operating perceptions of archivists and curators that do not allow the inclusion of business history in their collecting canons? Do not the records of a major consumer products firm, financial institution, or retail establishment have equal claim on the attentions of our academic brethren as the papers of social welfare agencies, political organizations, and literary circles? Why have the thoughts so clearly enunciated by William Overman and Ralph Hidy concerning the value of business archives found so few converts in academe?

Where too are the practitioners of business history—those who earn their

livings through teaching, writing, and research? Only a handful of our natural clients are actively engaged in efforts to develop new sources of business history, particularly at their own institutions. Once again arises a question of perception and role definition!

The papers by Douglas Bakken and George Smith are concerned with functional perceptions from both internal and external viewpoints. The recent attention accorded to business archives by such popular business publications as *Dun's Review* and *Industry Week* is indeed a double-edged sword. Such articles raise the right questions with respect to records preservation, but the answers provided are usually inaccurate, superficial, and perhaps even dangerous. Their importance lies in the fact that they are generally reflective of management's equally naive assumptions about the role of archives in a corporate structure.

George Smith has rightfully advocated a system of linkages as a critical element in the development of corporate archives programs. Unless the archival function is clearly positioned as a contemporary resource contributing directly to the development of the business, it is open to serious question and possible extinction. Managers must be able to justify the operating costs of their units and should be continually seeking to make their programs more relevant to company needs.

Linkages to such natural areas as marketing, advertising, public relations, personnel, training, legal affairs, publications, and technical operations should be fully exploited. Natural ties to other corporate information centers (specialized libraries), media collections, and records management programs should also be investigated. Yet, perhaps the areas most central to the future lifeblood of a business are strategic plan-

ning and public issues monitoring, which George Smith has outlined. It requires a particularly able and energetic archivist to secure these responsibilities for his department, but his training, analytical skills, and understanding of the organizational development should make him a prime candidate for the position. A centralized resource center with both research and reference capabilities is clearly in the corporate mainstream and offers enormous possibilities for its managers.

Bakken's article provides a very good working summary of the state of the art in business archives today. He correctly points out the great divergencies in archival practice, the lack of clear positioning within the corporate structure, and the disappointing level of understanding among corporate executives about archival programs. Surely all of this is true, but just as surely the same conditions exist throughout the archival profession. These conditions are not unique to the business world and have in fact characterized American archival practice for generations.

While all of the comments voiced by the authors concerning archival self-perceptions are true and require a vigilant eye, I fear that we sometimes become too introspective in our self-analyses. Any support service is vulnerable to budget cuts in a tight economic environment. The same concerns raised in the papers are continually raised by business associates in such areas as public relations, consumer information, and administrative services, although the language used may differ somewhat. The movement of the archives within the corporate structure is probably more a process of an evolving corporate structure than it is a comment on the value of the archival program itself. When the ranks of management are chiefly occupied by managers emerg-

ing from marketing, financial, and technical backgrounds, it is not surprising that their understanding of the archivist's function is limited. Yet does this attitude differ so radically from that of the academic library director who has risen to his position through one of the technical service or public service areas when he is confronted with the problem of a special collections unit? In both cases, the clear challenge to the archivist is to develop lines of communication with the supervisor concerning the services rendered by the archival unit. Both instances require the existence of internal "outreach" programs.

Similarly, while the diversity and ap-

parent lack of standards among business archives is noteworthy, this condition is certainly not unique in American archival practice. If a similar survey were conducted among all institutions claiming archival facilities, the variances would be even more pronounced. As a professional group, archivists have failed to agree on a common set of archives practices that merit the use of the term "archives" and have been unable to develop certification procedures for either institutions or educational programs. The *Directory of Business Archives* is a mere reflection of more general practices in our profession.