

Commentary II

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THE FACT THAT THERE IS SO much anxiety about survival might be a sign of the relative youth of business archives. On the other hand, that anxiety may also be a reflection of the context in which business archives operate, in that their primary rationale is to serve the profit-making corporation. The case for their survival, therefore, is keyed to justifications that clearly define the archival function as part of corporate culture and organization. Their "perceived costs and risks," as George Smith noted, must be outweighed by their utility, and they must come to be viewed as indispensable to the operations of the firm.

Success within the corporate setting is normally identified with income-producing activity and the wielding of power. Business archivists already have the potential to attain these goals, but whether they are conscious of it is another question. How realistic is it to link profit and power to archives? It is best to take each point separately.

The archives as an income-producing center is a function of its utility. As has been demonstrated in discussions at numerous conferences, the use of archives for legal affairs and corporate planning preserves profits—even though no funds actually change hands—as it saves money; the perceived savings on anticipated court cases, administrative reorganization, or policy changes can be just as persuasive in budget discussions as can actual cash flow. The ability to perform key legal research for a corporate counsel strengthens the arguments that promote business archives as indispensable. The usefulness of the archives in public relations work links it to a key corporate function whose justification is well established; as the resources of the archives further enhance public information activities, the rationale for funding will be strengthened.

Bottom-line success for archives is linked with, and influenced by, the

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status of the archivist. While status reflects delegated power and authority, it is also a product of four factors: an archivist's credentials; position of the archives in the firm's organization; value of the archival function to the company; and personal relationships. Of the four, position in the corporate hierarchy and credentials are the more "objective" elements that influence valuation of the archives.

The business archivist should report to a top executive whose purview is the entire firm; such a person might be a corporate secretary or executive vice president. The archivist not only accrues status by proximity to such a person, but is recognized as available to serve all departments and divisions. Assignment to a specific area like public relations or general counsel may limit the type of clientele attracted and services performed.

An archivist reporting to a high-ranking executive should be able to present the archival function as integral to policy formulation. Policy is the responsibility of the top echelon of officers in most firms. The ability to influence and shape policy generally broadens one's power and authority within an organization. An archivist participating in policy development therefore stands to benefit. However, management must first see the archivist as a person whose expertise and special knowledge of the firm's history can contribute to policy discussions at

this level. More than being an administrator, manager, or organizer with superior technical skills, the archivist must also be an historian who can interpret records for litigation, policy, and research. Interpretation for such purposes wins respect, responsibility, and status from both executives and clients.

The use of an archives by scholars is an additional function that also contributes to its status. By disseminating information to the general public in a responsible and professional manner, the archivist performs an important public service. Needless to say, serving the research community brings a certain measure of intellectual prestige to the archives and the corporation. Without access to the firm's executives, and status among them, the archivist and the archives will be viewed as peripheral to the ongoing concerns of the organization, and thus neither indispensable nor justifiable by any criteria.

While business archives share many of the same functions, problems, and methodologies with other kinds of archives, their success is more contingent upon providing utilitarian value to an in-house clientele unfamiliar with the notion of using the past to make current decisions and plans for the future. Visibility and authority make possible a vital role in the company and are the goals for which business archivists must strive.