

ing into the work flow. Perhaps in your field of responsibility you are limited as to what you can do in eliminating records before they are started. There is, however, much you can do toward keeping useless papers from getting into the files and toward controlling the length of time records are retained. This in a sense, is the same kind of effort that is required to prevent unnecessary records from being made in the first place.

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SCHEDULING THE DISPOSITION OF RECORDS

NO PROBLEMS of records administration highlighted by the present expanded activities of the federal government deserve consideration more than those relating to the disposition of records. Whoever was acquainted with the rate of records accumulation prior to the war was rightfully concerned lest the flood of records overwhelm everything and everybody in its path. Today this apprehension has become outright fear. A few examples will serve to illustrate what has happened as a result of the war.

We know, for instance, that on February 1 of this year the Navy Department had something like 16,500 four-drawer filing cabinets in use; since February 1 over 5,000 five-drawer cabinets have been issued for use in the filing of records—almost a third of the number in use eight months ago. The Bureau of Supplies and Accounts has reported also that the quantity of forms issued has almost tripled in the last year and that there will be an even greater increase next year. Certain forms show much larger increases than others: an inspection report, for instance, had a normal annual issue of 1,700,000 before the war; this year 15,472,000 copies of this form were used.

What is happening in the Navy Department is not unique; every emergency agency and most of the old line departments are suffering the same growing pains. One need only observe the number of new government buildings, temporary and permanent, erected in Washington during the past two years; the Navy Department alone has half a dozen. These buildings are all rapidly filling up with records; and something ought to be done now to plan for their future—some-

thing must be done if we are to avoid intolerable confusion at the close of the war.

The problem is one that concerns several groups: (1) The administrators and business managers—because space and equipment cost money and even more because the physical volume of records impedes action and chokes the flow of business; (2) the records officers—because they are responsible for servicing the records; (3) the archivists and others who are interested in the ultimate fate of the public records—not so much because archival institutions will be called upon to absorb and preserve the vast accumulation but rather because only a small fraction of the total accumulation deserves permanent preservation. Few greater dangers threaten the comparatively small quantity of valuable records that accumulate in government offices than the intermingling with them of huge quantities of routine and valueless material; if the important records are not actually lost in the confusion, they stand a good chance of being buried so deeply that the task of the archivist who must appraise and administer them is made doubly difficult if not impossible.

Anyone who gives the problem even limited attention doubtless will arrive at the proper solution. Commander McCormick has suggested it as the attack on the third phase of the records problem, that is, to formulate a policy of disposition that will cover all records produced or accumulated by the individual agencies. I use the term "disposition" as Dr. Brooks has defined it to mean everything that is done to records whether it be elimination, transfer to storage or to an archival institution, or reduction by microphotography.

The agencies of the federal government have in the past disposed of records by removing them to storage, transferring them to the National Archives, or destroying them. Such action, however, except in a few isolated instances, has not been based upon intelligent overall planning; in most cases it has been motivated by space or equipment needs. Constructive planning on the basis of what should be done with records rather than sporadic, piecemeal action on the basis of what has been done to relieve a space or equipment problem is an essential in good records administration.

Such planning will result in what may be termed "schedules of disposition." A schedule of disposition is simply a listing of records with an indication of the action to be taken regarding each item listed when it is no longer needed for current administration. Although

this sounds like a fairly simple job and one that most efficiently managed organizations would long since have performed, especially since the idea is by no means new, actually less than a dozen agencies in the whole federal government have developed schedules. To regard the task of preparing a schedule of disposition as a simple one, however, is a grave error. The work involved is tedious, requiring careful attention to detail, and at times the problems involved call for the exercise of judgment of the highest order.

The most important element in the formulation of a schedule of disposition is the initial survey or inventory of the records. A review of the experience of several organizations that have recently scheduled their records indicates that the procedures followed in making the survey have varied considerably. It may prove of practical advantage to discuss some of the questions that should be answered before the survey is undertaken.

Who should initiate and conduct the survey is a preliminary question that can be disposed of at once. Logically the primary responsibility for this work rests with the agency that creates the records; its officials are the principal ones concerned with questions of space, equipment, and personnel, and they also are the ones who know why the records are produced and how they are used. If an agency is fortunate and advanced enough to have a records officer with staff functions, the responsibility is clearly his, and the archivist need only advise which records should be retained. Actually, of course, since few agencies have appointed records officers and since most chief clerks and business managers are too busy to give attention to the problem, the archivists, for their own protection, must take the initiative and sell scheduling projects to the agencies that they serve. The selling job will normally not be difficult if the salesman has clearly in mind the advantages of his product.

A second and more important question is: How should the survey be conducted? Two alternatives present themselves. The job can be assigned to an individual who by means of study and interview will collect the data necessary for the schedule; or the required information can be assembled by means of a questionnaire or survey form. Tailor-made jobs will ordinarily result in more complete schedules than those produced by questionnaire, but they do take time. The Navy Department has nearly finished an individual scheduling job for the voluminous records of the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts.

The work has been well done, but it has taken the full time of one individual for the past six months.

Time does not permit this striving for perfection, and to speed up the process the department has decided to adopt the questionnaire method. That this method will produce results is demonstrated by the work being done by the Tennessee Valley Authority and by the project conducted by Commander McCormick a few years ago for the scheduling of the records of the Carnegie Illinois Steel Corporation.

A third question is: What should the survey cover? It should cover all of the records produced or accumulated by the agency concerned at its central headquarters and field offices and it must cover them specifically file item by file item rather than by general category. General categories have a way of becoming vague categories and of avoiding problems of disposition rather than solving them. Any attempt to omit any class of records is apt to result in an unsatisfactory product. For instance, to survey only those records that can be destroyed will fail to satisfy the archivist. He cannot judge what records can safely be disposed of unless he knows what records are being kept. The survey should cover nonrecord material and non-official files as well as the official papers. Unofficial files are just as expensive to keep as official records. Often they can be eliminated after a survey has disclosed their existence. By no means should the field records be omitted. In the Navy Department the greatest overall saving in money, it is anticipated, will result from the establishment of an orderly and periodic disposal program for useless field records.

Whether the survey should cover past accumulations of records or should simply attempt to establish a policy for the present and future depends upon the individual case. If there is a large backlog of obsolete records of doubtful or unknown value, their survey may be warranted. In most government agencies, however, such backlogs will have been consigned to storage and their existence forgotten by the officials who created them. If the questionnaire method is used, it will therefore be best to omit reference to past accumulations.

Finally, the survey should cover the general correspondence files as well as the forms, plans, reports, and other items that have a definite character and a controlled use. These correspondence files constitute a special problem, however, and I shall consider them later in this discussion.

A fourth question is: What information should be collected by the survey? The answer to this question will depend again upon the results desired. A survey for archival purposes will probably require less information than one designed to serve administrative purposes in the agency. Archival agencies, for instance, would ordinarily not be vitally interested in the handling of records that are to be destroyed, say after five years. The administrator, on the other hand, pressed daily for additional office space and harassed by demands for equipment is interested in learning whether the file that has to be kept five years cannot be removed to storage after one year. The greatest immediate saving afforded by the Supplies and Accounts Bureau schedule, it seems to me, will come from a speeding up of the transfer to storage of records that have a limited life.

In general, the survey, whether it be made by individual or by questionnaire, should obtain answers to questions such as these. What is the purpose or use of the record? Where does it originate and to what offices is it distributed? Which is the official file copy? How is the record filed? What is its relationship to other records? Is it an intermediate or subsidiary item or is it an end-result record? The reasons for these questions are obvious—they are necessary to a competent appraisal of the record. Other questions can be asked concerning the size and the form of the record and the grade of the paper on which it is made. The latter item—paper grade—may be quite important even to the archivist; it may be found, as it was in the Navy Department, that the official file copy of outgoing correspondence has the least rag content of all copies produced.

The survey should also obtain the recommendations of the originating or custodial officials as to the disposition of the record. Questions such as the following will guide officials in the formulation of their opinions: Should the record be filed at all? (I have Commander McCormick's word for it that this is a very important question.) Is the record suitable for microfilming? Should it be sampled? How long is it necessary to keep the record in office files for current administrative use? How long should it be retained in storage? Does the record have sufficient value to justify its permanent retention? Should it be transferred to the National Archives? Final decisions as to the disposal or retention of federal records should naturally be made jointly by representatives of the originating agencies and the National Archives.

When the information suggested by these questions has been

assembled the preparation of the schedule itself is a matter of editing. As new forms are added or others become obsolete the schedule can easily be revised. One of the most constructive suggestions made recently in this connection is that the officials authorized to originate or approve new forms be required to decide upon the fate of the original and all copies at the time the form is devised and that this decision be incorporated into the instructions appearing on the form.

General correspondence files, as I have suggested, cannot be scheduled as easily as form material. The difficulty comes partly from the diversity and unique character of many of the papers in the files and partly from the fact that file classification schemes usually make no provision for segregation of the valueless from the important documents. It is seldom if ever practical to "weed out" the individual papers, a year or five years after the file has been created. Segregation at the time of filing is the only solution to the problem, but this presupposes, that someone either in the file rooms or at the action desks of the agency has the ability and the time to classify the correspondence as to its value before it is filed.

The Tennessee Valley Authority is, so far as I know, the only agency that has inaugurated procedures to control its volume of correspondence, and the program is frankly labeled an experiment. According to its value and importance each piece of correspondence is marked for one of the following groups: (1) That filed for thirty days, (2) that filed for one year, and (3) that filed permanently. The official who initiates or receives the correspondence is responsible for determining the class into which it is to be placed. It will be interesting to learn whether this experiment turns out successfully. Few records administrators in Washington today would have the temerity to suggest that the burden of classifying correspondence by retention periods be added to the already crowded work day of operating officials. If it were required, the job would more often be done by stenographers than by officials.

The problem is one that does not have an easy solution. When the solution is reached, I am sure, it will be the result of joint action by archivists and records officers.

Some things, however, can be done with the general files immediately. Most such files have whole categories of material, such as requests for publications, that can be scheduled for disposal. A careful

and searching study of the records received in any file room will disclose numerous comparable groups. Segregation of these to permit disposal is a simple task. It is possible also to provide for periodic breaking of files and indexes to permit transfer of the noncurrent material.

Schedules of disposition are not cure-alls. They will not solve all records problems. They are, however, indispensable as a control over the volume of material accumulated. They should, to list their advantages:

1. Establish a standard, uniform, and considered policy for the retention, transfer, and disposal of records. Responsible officials will know precisely what the status of the records situation is.

2. Provide for regularity in the retirement and disposal of useless papers from the files. Disposal will no longer depend upon the sporadic motivation of space and equipment needs.

3. Give protection to the valuable core of records that must be retained.

4. Inform archival institutions as to what material they may expect to receive.

5. Provide the records officer with an inventory that will make possible the rendering of a more complete reference service to the officials of his agency.

6. Furnish filing officials with a sound basis for the formulation of classification schemes. It seems logical that one should first decide what has to be kept for what periods of time and then proceed to the formulation of filing procedures.

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