

# Life After the “Big Bang”: Business Archives in an Era of Disorder

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**Abstract:** The future of business archives rests solely on the ability of business archivists to develop client-sensitive services and products. In this essay, the author argues that business archivists must revamp their image within the business community by becoming more proactive in their attempts to understand and anticipate the real information requirements of their client base. The author also contends that a successful business archives program must be built upon efficient information management technology that allows the client to reap the benefits of timely and accurate responses.

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BLOWN ONTO THE CORPORATE landscape by the winds of organizational change, Canada's first generation of professional archivists was a natural addition to the strategically planned organizations of the 1970s. Remote and sleepy basement archives were revitalized as the academically trained displaced career clerical employees from archives management. The impetus behind the development of corporate archives programmes was the promise of untapped research potential, and newly ordained corporate archivists were called upon to meld company archives with mainstream corporate activities.

Those of us who became corporate archivists at that time approached this task with a strong sense of security reinforced by a sense of uniqueness within the corporation—a characteristic that we willingly fostered. Our self-imposed isolation was driven by preoccupation with educational campaigns that attempted to link bottom-line business ethics with history and the lessons of experience. Archives were seen as a strategic force, the organization's heart and soul, and our values were far too cerebral to be crudely measured in dollars. True to our roots, managed archives took the benefits of historical analysis to new heights, and corporate records became windows to both the past and the future. The promise was seldom realized however, and although we implied that we were the new merchants of change, we generally failed to respond to history's most basic rule—when times change, we must change to survive.

The 1990s are not like the 1980s, and the upheavals of this decade are likely to appear tame when viewed from the next millennium. Outdated demarcations that once restricted competition will be eroded by industry-wide deregulation that benefits the almighty consumer. To facilitate the process, corporations will continue their commitment to increasing market share by the aggressive pursuit of technological solutions to information management.

How well positioned are the majority of corporate archivists to meet the challenges of the new world disorder? If history is to serve as our guide, we are surely targeted for professional annihilation should we continue to ignore the obligation to embrace competition and assume a larger presence in the information economy. The foundation for our obsolescence has already been laid by those among us who have rationalized falling fortunes as the unfortunate consequence of an inherent disinterest in history on the part of business executives. Management challenges to archives have often been met with disbelief and a sense of entitlement that corporations have an obligation to support their archives. Certainly we have learned that life is not static, so why have we clung to rigid definitions of who we are, what we do, and how we do it? The future will belong to those who prepare for it. Should the business of archives remain immersed in yesterday's world, business archivists will be swept out with the ashes.

### **“If You're Not Part of the Solution....You're Part of the Problem”**

When, in the 1980s, the American archival community turned to its professional body, the Society of American Archivists, to ascertain the popular perceptions of archivists within business, the general message was painfully clear. Overshadowing archivists' positive qualities—scholarly, skilled, and pleasant in character—were such damaging attributes as being obsequious, powerless, and subterranean.<sup>1</sup> This survey brought to light evidence that linked archivists indirectly with the ongoing problems of business archives.

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<sup>1</sup>Sidney J. Levy and Albert G. Robles, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists 1984), iv.

The results of the SAA survey (or the Levy Report, as it came to be known) clearly documented the disharmony between the archivist's scholarly image and the corporation's focus on the bottom line. The progressively difficult 1980s reversed the previous decade's support for those corporate archives that relied on a strong historical focus. Compelled to deal with advocacy efforts and to serve up valid business reasons for continued existence, business archivists often balked at the trend and looked outside the boundaries of standard business logic to history-friendly scholars for kind words of support. *Harvard Business Review's* early-1980s publication of Smith and Steadman's article linking future corporate success to a documented past appeared to be tailor-made for these archives.<sup>2</sup> History was assigned new diagnostic powers, and the corporate memory and its keepers were presented as crucial forces in the organization's future. Sadly, the economic realities of the decade overrode the authors' best intentions, and our struggle for relevancy continued down a well-worn path.

Should there have been any doubt about the growing movement to purge non-essential archives from the corporate landscape, Frederick Rose's 1987 article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "In Wake of Cost Cuts, Many Firms Sweep Their History Out the Door" cemented many corporations' views of history and their archives.<sup>3</sup> In his attempt to bolster archivists' slipping fortunes, Rose built a supportive case fortified by the testimonies of respected practitioners who contested the slashing of corporate archival programmes. The suggested logic behind the decline of archives and history was the much-too-simplistic theory that papers required space and filing, filing required labour, and labour required money, thus making archives a favourite target for tight-fisted executives. The old domino theory had been lifted from its familiar political context to explain the plight of the modern-day business archivist. As well-intentioned as Rose was in his attempt to shore up the link between history and archives, the absence of any criticism of archivists was conspicuous. Shockingly, what did not surface was comment on archivists' lack of salesmanship, which contrasted sharply with the innovative business-building efforts of other corporate citizens who better understood the dangerous impact of a slumping global economy and a near-record market crash. The *Wall Street Journal* article emerged as evidence of an ever-weakening defence.

### The "Cultured" Shall Inherit the Earth

On another front, the damage done to Corporate America by more efficient Japanese business practices inspired home-grown management theorists to delve deep into North American corporate enterprise. A new prescription for success came from an observation made famous by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman in their analysis of successful American companies: excellent companies shared a keen understanding of their respective corporate cultures. This sparked a flurry of research activity from business historians with revitalized interest in company history, and demand for access to company records escalated. The immense popularity of books like *In Search of Excellence* and *Corporate Cultures: The*

<sup>2</sup>George David Smith and Laurence E. Steadman's "Present Value of Corporate History," *Harvard Business Review* 59 (November/December 1981): 164-73, offers a full discussion on the many uses of history in the planning of the corporation's future.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Rose "In Wake of Cost Cuts, Many Firms Sweep Their History Out the Door," *Wall Street Journal* (21 December 1987): B1.

*Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*<sup>4</sup> sparked an awareness that effective decision making required a broader perspective on the corporation's activities. Corporate culture had become a definition of the corporation, and archivists held information that could reveal the organization's core values, beliefs, and traditions. The world appeared to be ours for the taking as archives were recognized as intellectual resources and cultural assets. Again, we would look to third parties from whom we would borrow varied theories that cast light on the important role of archives in recording change and culture and in determining organizational success. Historical references were temporarily cast aside and replaced with business jargon lifted from management gurus whose readership included those we so desperately needed to please. Our role within the corporate culture movement depended entirely upon our ingenuity in uncovering means and methods that would demonstrate to decision makers first-hand knowledge of the circumstances that shaped past policy and practice. But aside from traditional offerings of formal history to showcase a company's inherited culture, we found ourselves hard-pressed to develop appropriate products and services that could solidify our role as monitors and recorders of corporate culture movement.

Always present in the background was the broader issue of corporate image which offered more familiar possibilities for beleaguered archivists who could not make corporate culture work for them. The demise of Massey Ferguson, once Canada's largest manufacturer of farm machinery, offered a case study of what could happen when new management lost sight of the set of beliefs and decisions that had led to business success.<sup>5</sup> Failures of this magnitude fuelled public suspicion about the motives of big business in an era marked by mergers, acquisitions, and reorganizations. Resistance to external demands for unrestricted access to carefully guarded corporate files was softened more as a gesture of good corporate citizenship than as a result of pressures from freedom of information activists. Attacks on big business played to the historian instinct in archivists, and what better place than the company archives to serve as buffer between inquisitive researchers and the corporation's records. Back in the corporate vault, many archivists assumed their traditional custodial duties without trepidation and watched the larger world prepare for a new decade and accompanying metamorphosis. The 1990s intensified shareholder expectations, and corporate mission statements promised them nothing short of total quality service and maximum value. Although by no means excessive in their budgetary requirements, inward-looking archives were lost in the shuffle as corporate resources were monopolized by the initiatives that best contributed to the new goals and objectives. If business archives were to survive, it would take more than words to keep them from being written out of the story.

### The "Peters' Prognosis" Challenges the "Janitors of the Information Age"

Peter Drucker's assessment of the 1990s as a "decade of turbulence" truly encapsulates today's growing intolerance for conventional principles and expectations.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>4</sup>Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982) and Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1982) were perhaps two of the earliest and most identifiable works in support of the corporate culture movement.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Bliss, "The Last Harvest," *Report on Business Magazine* (August 1988): 53.

<sup>6</sup>Reference to Drucker's assessment of the 1990s as the "decade of turbulence" was found in Jo Ann Constantini's "Survival Skills for Information Professionals in the Decade of Turbulence," *Records Management Quarterly* (January 1994): 26.

assault on traditional non-profit functions by the "fee-for-service providers" is just one of several emerging threats to apprehensive archivists. As distasteful as the transition from cost to profit centre may be, the "fee-for-service" option is gaining momentum and archives will be expected to join the parade. Ask any business information services officer or business librarian about what is happening, and their responses clarify the reality. Essential services are the key to surviving through the nasty '90s, and the ability to develop revenue-generating possibilities is critically important.

While specialized functions such as library and graphics departments are still under discussion in many archives, some are paying their own way and have responded with fee structures to recover all costs. A good case in point is the business library at Canada's Royal Bank, the country's largest provider of financial services. For many years, this library held a reputation as one of the best in Canadian business, with a good percentage of its clientele coming from outside the company. Its collection was filled with the expected business literature, but also catered to the casual reader who enjoyed a large selection of easy-reading fiction, how-to manuals and classic works from the social sciences. Today, the generous book budget is no more, and the library's strict business focus comes at a direct cost to those who use this service. The library is run like any other business segment, and, should revenue fall short of expenses, the necessary adjustments must be made. Like it or not, it is part of the current culture.

Even more daunting is the growing threat of outsourcing, which is of immediate concern to many archivists. The J. Walter Thompson experience remains one of the darkest examples of American corporate disinterest in heritage.<sup>7</sup> The sale of non-core functions or products to other interests reflects management belief that non-essential services need not be provided internally if the identical or improved service can be obtained more cheaply elsewhere. The potential impact on archives can be, and in some cases has been, immense, and the Thompson episode certainly will not be the only example of the outsourcing of an entire archival operation. As offensive as the outsourcing option may be, arguments for continued custody would be better fortified with examples of how this information has served, is serving, and will continue to serve a company's bottom line. Those archivists who are comfortable with the simple responsibility of baby-sitting corporate records should recognize that such service may be attainable elsewhere for less cost and without sacrificing quality. So be it. This is exactly the type of logic that guides the management of our personal finances, and we can hardly expect more from those charged with managing the corporate coffers.

Amid the gloom and doom that the 1990s seem to have visited on corporate archives, there is an even more ominous warning from author Tom Peters, who proposed that information was now the only resource that a company needed to own.<sup>8</sup> The "Peters' Prognosis" posed fresh arguments that struck at the heart of all information specialities, by questioning whether the traditional skills of information managers meet the organizations' more complex knowledge management requirements. Across the fence, business librarians forged through the storms of the 1980s with an aggressive pursuit of high-technology information-management strategies and a deep commitment to better serve their clients' individual requirements through relationship management arrangements. This approach contrasted sharply with archivists' conventional selling of operations that offered

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<sup>7</sup>See Ellen G. Gartrell's essay in this issue of the *American Archivist*.

<sup>8</sup>"The Peters Prognosis," *The Economist* 314 (17 February 1990): 72.

across-the-board archival services and products to a single client base. Once again, the haunting conclusions of the Levy Report come to mind, and almost fifteen years later we remain vested in reaction rather than in initiatives that could better position us within the knowledge management economy.

In comparison with other information-driven disciplines, archives have been too closely identified with the unflattering and certainly dangerous reputation as “janitors of the information age.”<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, we have in our midst a growing number of iconoclasts who have attempted to tear down the barriers of tradition by attacking the sacred grounds of archival theory and practice. Unquestionably, the most outspoken of this group has been David Bearman, whose strong advice for the reinvention of the archival image has exposed the dangerous gap between the archivist’s altruistic intentions and the ability to deliver meaningful products and services.<sup>10</sup> Whether one agrees or disagrees with his prescribed remedies, Bearman has stimulated a needed debate about our future direction.

Let’s not fool ourselves. There is no universal path to stardom for corporate archives. Ours will always be a war for survival, and the idea that archives can ever achieve core status within the corporate structure is unrealistic. We can and should play a strong supporting role that spans the entire organization, but can only do so if we meet the challenges of emerging technologies. Most recently, Aetna’s archivist Paul Lasewicz has identified the realities that may erode the archivist’s traditional ownership of selected information.<sup>11</sup> Mercifully, Lasewicz has endorsed the archivist’s need to identify the true information requirements of the organization’s clients and businesses and to assume broader responsibility in the knowledge management revolution. At the end of the day, our best bet for survival will be the ability to demonstrate our information management skills and a familiarity with internal information networks. Our preoccupation with the past cannot be our sole *raison d’être*.

### Should the Streets of Paris Run with Blood, What are We to Do?

Much like any smart business proposition, the success of business archives programmes is largely dependent upon two fundamental factors: a genuine demand for the services/products offered and the necessary flexibility to streamline these to meet the client’s ever-changing requirements. Unfortunately, the presence of such logic has never been obvious in the traditional definition of corporate archives. Historically, the archives package has been advertised to management with a strong focus on the key activities of archival theory and practice—accessioning, appraising, arranging/describing, preserving, and reference—with little ingenuity demonstrated in how these skills can benefit the corporation. To be perfectly frank, who cares? Unlike the Morgans, the famous American merchant banking family who were renowned for their abilities to turn a profit even when

<sup>9</sup>Jim Coulson’s article “Our Professional Responsibility” (*Records Management Quarterly* 27 [April 1993]: 20-25), provides an interesting heretical assessment on how records managers’ clerical mind-sets are harming the popular perception of records programmes. Several of Coulson’s criticisms, although aimed at records managers, are equally applicable to the archival profession.

<sup>10</sup>David Bearman’s “Archival Methods,” *Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report* 3 (Spring 1989) and “Archival Strategies,” *American Archivist* 58 (Fall 1995): 380-413 are the most striking challenges to traditional precepts of archival theory and practice.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Lasewicz’s unpublished “Riding Out the Apocalypse: The Obsolescence of Traditional Archivy in the Face of Modern Corporate Dynamics,” (1997) provides a refreshing critique of traditional archival practice and concepts and provides examples of how the archivist can avoid certain obsolescence by pursuing new knowledge management opportunities.



the streets of Paris were running with blood, archivists are closely identified with the other extreme of the spectrum through their aversion to risk and their shyness at seizing opportunities. Formal efforts to enhance the value of archives have borrowed heavily from the writings of historians and popular business management gurus without significant reward. What we really need to know about survival is straightforward common sense. Surprisingly enough, much of it has been presented to us both on the printed page and in the lecture halls by a handful of enterprising archivists.

David Gracy's tongue-in-cheek tale of Crescent Dragonwagon addressed the unfortunate archival image by focusing on the very bane of our existence—the way in which we define what we do.<sup>12</sup> Gracy boldly challenged us to transform archives into something that is easily identifiable and urged us to become a true service profession with a proactive focus and entrepreneurial spirit—the “sentimental” archives simply had to perish. Both Randall Jimerson and Elsie Freeman Finch walked right into the heart of business culture by challenging archivists to develop client-sensitive products and services, and to learn the art of buying customers.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, their calls to simplify the art of selling archives by focusing on client needs may have not appealed to those who remain convinced that the true merits of the profession are to be found on a higher intellectual plane. The real value of Gracy's, Jimerson's, and Freeman Finch's comments was their universal acceptance of archives as a pure service function that urges archivists to have interaction with, rather than isolation from, real world issues. The rest was up to our own intuition to strengthen existing strategic ties and develop new business opportunities by working as members of the larger corporate team.

It was not that long ago that Alfred Chandler warned us that lawyers were the natural enemies of history because of their tendencies to destroy rather than preserve potentially sensitive corporate information.<sup>14</sup> Archivists have understandably decried legal fears of information and obstructive reactions to demands for the transfer of selected legal files to the archives. Ideological differences aside, the realities of the litigious 1990s have brought the lawyers and archivists together, and offer some glowing opportunities for business archivists. As a by-product of the “client as king” era, most corporations have been compelled to strengthen compliance policies and procedures and have also appointed internal ombudsmen to enforce conscientious business practices and to serve as an objective buffer between the corporation and the concerned. The building of the necessary information management infrastructure to support the compliance function has made it possible for business archivists to join a larger team of professionals, working side-by-side in a collective effort to devise timely and effective systems for tracking and managing a wide array of key information. It is imperative that business archivists capitalize on these opportunities to become integrated into the organization's legal web either through research

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<sup>12</sup>David Gracy's “Archivists, You Are What People Think You Keep,” *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 72-78, provides a strong argument for archivists to assume more personal responsibility for identifying real-life needs for archives and to pursue forward-looking strategies that can improve the popular perception of the value of the archival profession.

<sup>13</sup>Randall Jimerson's “Redefining Archival Identity: Meeting User Needs in the Information Society,” *American Archivist* 52 (Summer 1989): 332-40, and Elsie Freeman's “In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View,” *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 111-23, have both offered strong cases for the redefinition of the archivist's professional identity and role by moving towards a stronger client focus.

<sup>14</sup>See Rose, “In Wake of Cost Cuts.”

support or by the construction of automated databases to facilitate the management of information.

Whatever the situation—and the products and services of corporate archives will differ according to individual circumstances—the common thread that unites forward-looking business archivists is a strong endorsement of the entrepreneurial spirit. The typical understanding of archives in business has carried too many negative connotations, largely because we have sold an obsolete product that has demonstrated little, if any, connection with the dynamics of modern business. On a practical level, the glorification of our expertise in identifying and preserving lasting information sifted from the corporate ashes has been worthless without the ability to prove its utilitarian value. More importantly, in the face of the anticipated escalation of corporate cost-cutting initiatives, how can we legitimately contest management's reluctant funding for a service that functions as if it were a victim rather than a beneficiary of the information explosion?<sup>15</sup> The key to our longevity clearly lies in the ability to identify and pursue new business opportunities that will link us directly to the knowledge management revolution. David Gracy was right on the mark with his comment that no service profession can survive in this era of empire building, takeovers, and rationalization without possessing the ability to define the essence of its being.<sup>16</sup> Far too much emphasis has been allotted to the debate about the archival image with a focus on product knowledge rather than market adaptability. If we are true strategic thinkers, we should be comfortable with the redefinition of the archivist's conventional mandate. Skills that are compatible with the new economy, such as our expertise in developing strategies for the systematic management of internal knowledge and our familiarity with internal knowledge-based networks, will permit our active participation in the building of partnerships and strategic alliances with other players in the organization. The corporate archivist of the next millennium will need to assume expanded responsibility in determining the larger corporate knowledge management policies and procedures.

### When Shrimps Learn to Whistle: Surviving at Royal Bank

Canada's financial services sector has been radically transformed over the last decade as federal legislation has gradually eased the old restrictions on intermarriage between the four traditional pillars of financial services—banking, trust, securities, and insurance. Royal Bank took advantage of Canada's own "big bang" by acquiring major companies from each of the non-banking pillars, all well-established entities in their own right, with remarkably distinct cultures. Because the face of the Royal Bank Financial Group had changed with each new acquisition, the learning curve was steep as we became intimate with the legal requirements governing each respective component. We also needed to learn their customs and businesses and the impact that these alliances would have on the creation and dissemination of information within the corporate family. With a global staff of approximately fifty thousand, four of whom were archivists, the overwhelming volume necessitated a clearly defined strategy to guide the archives in meeting the escalating demands of current customers while also pursuing promising new business opportunities. The key would lie in our ability to successfully ascertain the unique requirements of each respective client group, while at the same time retaining a proportional balance between attainable results and the strains of modest financial and human resources. For existing clients, we

<sup>15</sup>David Gracy, "Is There a Future in the Use of Archives," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987): 8.

<sup>16</sup>Gracy, "Archivists, You Are What People Think You Keep," 76.



would concentrate on strengthening already valued relationships, while new business opportunities would only be pursued when they were mutually beneficial to both the organization and archives. We also believe that our horizons can be widened by selling ourselves as more than paper storage experts by drawing attention to our broader internal information management skills and intimate knowledge of information ownership and use.

To identify who our best clients were, the extent of their loyalty, and the types of services requested, we tapped into a database that we created exclusively to manage requests for service. Developed in the late 1980s to track the volume of queries handled to facilitate the compilation of typical volume-based statistics, this database took on a totally new dimension with the trend towards bench-marking and market segmentation analysis. For close to ten years, we amassed data segmented by unique fields according to client identity, position, department, reporting line, nature of the query, length of time to complete the query, and name of consulting archivist. By no means sophisticated in design, this database, coupled with a companion accessions database, permitted us to track user trends within the two core activities of disseminating and acquiring information. Once the results of our analysis had been thoroughly digested, our outreach efforts were guided by relationship management and marketing responsibilities. Each of the bank's four archivists assumed a portfolio that included several high volume, or tier one, clients and a grouping of less-consuming second tier departments whose buy-in to the archives held potential for improvement. There is a less important third group of potential clients who have yet to use our services. Attention to this group is low to moderate, and, in many cases, departments falling into this tier, by the very nature of their businesses, have no pressing reason to call upon us. Twenty percent of each archivist's time is dedicated to business development with the hope that face-to-face dialogue with the various client groups will strengthen the archives' presence throughout the company.

Our modest but growing expertise in the technical design of internal knowledge management strategies was offered to other Royal bankers, and, thankfully, resulted in the development of several key new relationships and the ever important strengthening of old ties. The door to an expanded role in non-archival information management initiatives was opened by accolades received from our roaming Process Review team, whose acknowledgement of our client tracking system led to increased internal interest in our consulting services. There has also been a growing awareness of our strong service ethic that is driven by our commitment to rapid response. The process to convert manual finding aids began in 1984, and since then we have developed abstract-based databases for documents, selected internal publications, executive speeches, and videos. The provision of near-instantaneous retrieval of requested information has afforded us the luxury of devoting more time to the analysis of information to ensure that clients are provided with exactly what they want. New business initiatives included our involvement in design and maintenance of databases for the bank's art collection and internal video libraries. Both systems combine the flexibility of inventory control with more sophisticated report-generating capacities that could mix and match any number of predetermined fields. We also serve as consultants for the implementation of an internal automated information tracking system for the Law, Taxation, and Corporate Secretary's Departments. In the case of the latter, we developed and maintain ownership of extensive databases for the minutes of the Board of Directors and the influential Board Committees and all safekeeping/trademark documents. We are currently working on a biographical database for all bank directors and a task-based database that will facilitate the planning of details for the bank's annual general meeting for shareholders. Emerging opportunities offered by both the Internet and Intranet are being

carefully monitored to ensure that both initiatives benefit from the archives' active participation as a vehicle to improve the corporation's image and as a tool for the wider management and dissemination of key corporate knowledge.

Royal Bank's archives has drastically changed its focus from its founding in 1977, when the importance of building the bank's archival collection far exceeded its ability to deliver value-added products and services. Our modest successes have been influenced by the examples of others on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel who have so ably led the way. The groundbreaking Bank of Nova Scotia archives has set the tone for other Canadian bank archives whose own beginnings were nurtured by the BNS experience. Across the border, we have many examples of exemplary business archives at Chase Manhattan, CIGNA, Coca-Cola, Proctor & Gamble, Kraft, and many others. They have provided leadership in these troubled times and have worked diligently to give the message that managed archives can really make a difference. The stark reality of our collective situation is that we are truly small fish in a large corporate sea, and that survival in these times requires the ability to sell value to those who determine our survival. There should never be any doubt that forward-thinking archivists have a responsible role to play in a corporation's business. We are experienced information managers with a keen understanding of internal information networks and a dedicated service ethic—all very portable skills. The time has finally come to accept the fact that our own worst enemy may not be business disinterest in history after all, but, instead, our own resistance to change.