

RECORDS ADMINISTRATION IN THE TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY¹

MANAGEMENT'S concern with records in the Tennessee Valley Authority ten years ago is illustrated by a memorandum report of a conference on the establishment of files. After much discussion of the comparative advantages of the alphabetic and subject filing systems, the conferees decided that a subject system should be adopted and appointed a committee to draft a classification system. It was understood that this system was intended for the central files and that individual offices would have systems tying in with the central system, but the many factors in the life of a record were not considered. Today, management's concern with records administration is not restricted to the type of filing system or the question of centralization *vs.* decentralization, but includes also the creation, preservation, and retirement or disposal of records.

To understand records administration in the TVA, some familiarity with the organization is necessary. The TVA is a government-owned corporation. Its activities are directed by a three-member board of directors with responsibility for over-all administration delegated to a general manager. Nineteen departments, with offices throughout the valley area, execute the provisions of the TVA Act. Each department is semi-autonomous and may be compared to a bureau in one of the cabinet departments. Or, the relationship between departments may be compared to an industrial concern having a home office (the general manager) for administrative purposes, and various branches (the departments) for productive purposes. The direct flow of the activities of the program departments in developing navigation, controlling floods, improving land, and disposing of surplus power is assisted by a cross-flow of such services as personnel, finance, legal, and office management. The basic programs are primary and the flow must not be interrupted; the services are secondary and an adjunct to attain the objectives of the programs. Employees concerned with records administration keep in mind always that the authority was established to accomplish broad programs, not to create records, and that their contribution is to facilitate the accomplishment of those objectives.

¹ A revised form of an address entitled "Records Administration—Its Relation to Management" delivered before the Interagency Records Administration Conference, January 28, 1944, Washington, D.C.

In 1933, the year of the authority's creation, a central file was established to contain all the corporation's records. About six years later the central file was discontinued because administrative emphasis had shifted to decentralized departmental branch files which were controlled centrally by operation under one department rather than by location. As standards were developed, decentralization was still further emphasized by permitting departments to operate their files if they desired. The goal anticipated was identical—an integrated system for the greatest benefit to all concerned.

Under the present organization the archivist of the authority, who is director of the Office Service Department, is administratively responsible, among other office services, for a staff and line organization executing the records program. The Office Records Section of the Office Management Staff carries out the delegations of the archivist with respect to all TVA records. The staff plans, develops, and co-ordinates the over-all records program, using such controls as its *Manual of Files Operation Standards* for the methods, and files audits for review to secure compliance with the standards. The Files Section of the Office Operations Division, the line organization responsible to the director, operates current files for the departments, record storage files, and a microfilm unit. The departments may, if they prefer, operate their own files in accordance with files standards.

Unlike most record organizations, the Office Records Section is responsible for the design of office forms and standards for reproduction or printing of material. These two functions are important in relation to records administration; responsibility for them is usually placed in organizational units not interested in records. In addition, we are fortunate in having the complete record cycle, from the creation to retirement or disposal of records, handled as a separate functional unit by the Office Records Section, but interrelated with other office management activities affecting records handled by other sections of the same staff.

Even though the TVA has a definite records program, it must not be assumed that this activity is paramount because office methods and procedures, work simplification, layout, office equipment and supplies; and written instructions are important factors in the work of any office. Records administration is one factor of office management that is consolidated into an integrated whole. For example, all office forms are centralized in the Office Records Section. As

one function in the design and co-ordination of a new or revised form, questions are raised with the originating office as to the necessity for each copy, retention periods, quality of paper for permanence and use, size to meet equipment requirements, and the like. Several non-standard-size forms have been changed in such an analysis process. Similarly, requests for odd sizes are discouraged.

Perhaps examples of the processes of handling records will best describe the TVA procedure in records administration.

1. *Equipment and Supplies*—Although another section of the Office Management Staff establishes standards for office equipment and supplies, those items which are primarily related to files are co-ordinated with the Office Records Section. Use of nonstandard items is approved prior to purchase, and installations of special systems, such as visible record systems, are handled by the Office Management Staff. Conservation and salvage of filing supplies are encouraged with a resulting saving in expenditures and re-use of items no longer obtainable.

2. *Preparation*—Records preparation may be divided into two categories: correspondence and forms. Letters and memoranda are written in accordance with a manual of standard secretarial practice. Record copies are prepared on buff tissues; extra white copies are prepared as necessary and these may be destroyed at the option of the recipient. Standards for forms are followed in design, reproduction, and completion. As previously mentioned the size, paper quality, retention period, and necessity for multicopies are each questioned from the viewpoint of records administration as well as of forms design. In some instances the retention period is printed on the form, and we expect to increase this practice as retention schedules are approved and forms are revised. Unnecessary copies are eliminated if possible before a form is printed, and the filing of informational copies is discouraged unless it is intended to serve some useful purpose. If the form is filed, we try to dispose of it as soon as it has served its purpose to eliminate useless copies. Improvement in forms co-ordination in its relation to records is vital to the improvement of the whole status of records administration.

3. *Mail*—With the exception of intradepartmental messenger service, the line organization provides mail service. Special studies on mail room procedures, schedules, and regulations are made by the Office Management Staff.

4. *Filing System*—The filing system, including methods and procedures for classifying, sorting, cross-referencing, filing, and searching is operated in accordance with file standards. The centralized control or co-ordination point is the Office Records Section. The section plans, develops, and establishes the system and the various phases related to records administration. The control techniques are standards, audits, and installation service.

Searching in each departmental file is normally performed by the operator of that file, but the section does provide a research service whereby special requests for records on a specific subject will be gathered from the various departmental files. Abstracts or digests also may be prepared if requested.

5. *Retirement and Disposal*—TVA has been quite active in the field of retirement and disposal of records. Procedures have been developed and are in effect for scheduling and disposing of useless and short-lived records. Of course in the evaluation process semi-permanent and permanent records also are scheduled, but emphasis has been placed on disposal because of space and equipment requirements.

Our experience indicates that too much emphasis has been placed on the filing and classification system with a resulting lack of attention to the factors of disposition. The major planning and research work has covered classification systems and methods of filing the ever-increasing quantities of material in the shortest time possible. The fact that much of it should never have been filed seems to have been overlooked. Consequently, we have a multitude of records, and the separation of the important and unimportant is an almost impossible task because both have been intermingled. The TVA, as other organizations, has turned to evaluation and scheduling of record material—in some instances even before it is prepared.

In the present scheduling program, retention periods are recommended for specific record items after a complete evaluation and concurrence by the department having custody of the material. Each department has a direct interest in this retention program, and the procedure includes the department's approval of every item scheduled. Of course, we encounter problems between departments as to whose copies will be retained and whose copies will be destroyed. Here the Office Records Section reconciles all preferences in line with archival requirements and for the benefit of the greatest number. All

departments are co-operative in this effort. The section also prepares and transmits disposal lists and schedules to the National Archives for its approval and subsequent Congressional action, and supervises the actual disposal of records approved for disposition.

As economy measures, methods of disposing of nonrecord material were developed over a period of years. Until 1939, every copy of every document which was prepared was required to be filed and retained until it was lawfully approved for disposal. The first step toward the elimination of extra copies of memoranda and letters was the designation of official files in which the record copy would be retained and the issuance of instructions permitting the disposal at option of all extra white copies which had been prepared. A few years later the procedure was broadened to permit the disposition of what are termed nonrecord materials by permitting the disposal of documents without filing any of them.

For example, our requisition form for obtaining warehouse materials is prepared in an original and two copies. The original, or accounting office copy, from which charges are made to specific accounts, is scheduled for six years on issues affecting operations and permanently for issues affecting the plant. The permanent retention item is a requirement of the Federal Power Commission. The duplicate or warehouse copy is scheduled for two years, sufficient time to permit the auditors to verify entries to stores ledgers. The triplicate copy is retained by the requisitioning office and may be destroyed at the option of the office. The original and duplicate are considered records and are cleared with the National Archives prior to disposal; the triplicate is interpreted as nonrecord and permission is given to offices to destroy it at will. Written instructions defining record and nonrecord material have been of considerable aid in circumventing future accumulations of useless papers, but unfortunately they do not eliminate quantities of papers already filed.

Scheduling or disposing of general correspondence files is a difficult task. Aside from the time required to review each letter, the evaluation process of old correspondence is relatively dangerous because valuable letters may be destroyed through lack of knowledge of their importance. The person best qualified to make the evaluation, the administrator, seldom has time to devote to the selection process; records employees or file clerks who have the time seldom have the required knowledge of the subject to feel safe in disposing of it.

An experimental procedure for marking correspondence in temporary and permanent categories before it is sent to the files has proved worth while. The recipient of incoming correspondence or the originator of outgoing correspondence marks the material, assuring the best evaluation possible. The file clerk segregates the classes in the file drawer and its ultimate disposition is a matter of routine. While this procedure cannot be used in every instance, a beginning has been made and its wider use is expected.

A few additional points should be mentioned to show the relation of records administration to management. The administrator should have a records program or plan and be familiar with its objectives. His primary interest is in seeing that an efficient system is established, that provision has been made for the preservation of permanent records and the ultimate disposition of temporary records, and that the various organizational units using this system co-operate to make the program a success. Explanation should be made to each organization as to the part it plays in the over-all program and the need for its co-operation and assistance. Certain legal requirements govern the preservation and disposition of records, and these, too, should be explained to the organizations.

The administrator is, of course, concerned with the type of organization which executes the records program. The type of organization required is dependent on the over-all organization and administrative policies of the enterprise.

Budgets and expenditures are important, and, if the administrator does not control them directly, he should at least review them with his records officer periodically so that reasons for changing costs may be made known and justified.

The question of personnel and training should not be overlooked. No system or program is better than the employees who operate it, and the administrator should be concerned with general efficiency and morale. The Office Records Section has conducted training courses for file operators, and improvements in techniques and attitudes are apparent.

The administrator is interested in reports and reporting procedures, and he should know what the reported items signify. He may raise valid questions which may have an effect on the trend of all records activities in his organization.

The efficiency of any file organization is affected by the physical

or working environment. Lighting, acoustics, sufficient floor space, and layout are each an integral part of an efficient program.

Records employees handle the filing system, records preservation, storage, microfilming, disposition, and the like, and therefore the administrator does not need to know the detailed procedures connected with the records program. However, he should be sure that it is being effectively conducted and meets the requirements of current use and ultimate preservation or disposition.

In conclusion, I wish to leave a thought about authority. The Office Records Section has been given the authority and the staff to accomplish the functions of records administration and forms design, including authority to deal with officials in planning and executing the program. Although without this authority the section could not hope to begin, if the authority had to be exercised arbitrarily to accomplish the job there would be two strikes against success. The third strike would be called if a "must" attitude were assumed or if the procedure were placed on an "order" basis. This is true because of the decentralized organization and administrative policy in the TVA.

First there is a selling job to do—selling the ideas and their benefits to the top executive and to the operator who will perform the work. To succeed, there must be a competence in the performance of the job which engenders confidence in the services offered. The other fellow's point of view should be considered and recommendations offered consistent with his requirements and the over-all program. As the chief of our staff has so often pointed out, get the authority to do the job and then forget you have it. Coercion, or establishment of systems because of authority, may be expected to fail. The spirit of co-operation, of give and take, will go further toward accomplishing the aims of records administration than any "must" methods employed by top management.

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