TECHNIQUES OF AN ARCHIVES SURVEY

Allan Horton

(Associate Librarian, University of N.S.W.)

Any institution which produces records will improve its record keeping if it introduces an archival programme which provides for the systematic care of its records. This is true of all types of bodies from the social club to the government department.

A planned archival programme is likely to result in satisfactory records being available when they are required. This will not be so in a body in which no planning has been done. It is perhaps better to have destroyed the total documentation of a body consciously and deliberately after planning, than to have allowed the records to be destroyed completely without any consideration having been given to the records problems of the body concerned.

A planned programme can take into account the known needs of the body and also make some provision to meet its possible needs in the future. It should provide a satisfactory "memory" for the body.

Just as no one current records system is suitable for all offices, so no one archival system will be suitable for all bodies. While the basic principles of an archival programme are similar, each body needs a system that is tailored to meet its particular needs.

The information required to design an archival programme may be obtained by making a survey.

More specifically, the purpose of the survey is:

(1)   to discover what records the body is creating;

(2)   to discover what records created in the past have survived;

(3)   to discover which records from classes (1) and (2) above are worth permanent retention, and the periods for which the older records should be kept;

(4)   to provide other information from which the consultant can plan a programme.

The stages of such a survey are:

(a)   Collect the data necessary to make a satisfactory survey;

(b)   Analyse the data collected;

(c)   Make a report that will lead to the development of a satisfactory archival programme.

(a) Collecting the data:

Background Information

An archivist experienced in the archives of the particular field
in which the survey is to be made may not find it necessary to make any
detailed research in the literature, but an archivist from another field
will find it profitable to read in the specific field in which the
survey is being made. Any archives system recommended should be based
on the particular situation in the body being surveyed, but an awareness
of problems likely to be encountered in the particular field can be
gained in advance by reading. If this literature survey is supplemented
by correspondence with archivists in bodies similar to the one being
surveyed this will speed up the later stages of the survey. Archivists
may be short of many things but seldom short of time to give advice.

History

A fairly full knowledge of the history of a body is required before
a satisfactory archival programme can be planned. It will be necessary
before and during the survey to consult written sources and the staff of
the body concerned. One must be aware of the antiquity and origins of the
body and its predecessors, of particular problems in its growth, and of
the contribution it has made in its field before one can advise intell-
igently. Knowledge of plans for the future development of the body are
equally relevant.

Information on Procedures

To make a detailed examination of record keeping procedures the
consultant has at least two choices open to him. He can rely on infor-
mation obtained from the various sections of the body by questionnaire
or he can interview representatives of each section. The first method
appeals at once because it appears to save the time of the consultant.
It would seem that most of the information which the consultant may
need for a survey could be obtained if a standard questionnaire were
prepared. The sort of information wanted for each series is:

Section creating the record.

Series title.

Dates.

System of classification used.

Size of record.

Quantity of records held.

Annual increase of records.

Quantity of records current.

"   "   "   semi-current.

"   "   "   non current.

Present disposal procedure.

It is simple to design a form to obtain these details but there are
disadvantages in the use of this method. There is the difficulty of

obtaining completely satisfactory replies to such a questionnaire even from intelligent men. Would the consultant and the section head mean the same thing by semi-current? Do they even speak the same language? The archivist handles such terms as "running feet" and "disposal procedures" quite comfortably, but these terms are new to many administrators. One must even explain what a "series" or "set" of records is, to them. Furthermore, the presentation of a questionnaire, completely impersonal as it is, will not guarantee a complete answer, or even any answer.

But probably the most useful way to collect the information required here is in some form of schedule. One must therefore combine the techniques. It is better to prepare the schedule during an interview, or have it prepared after consultation with the relevant officer, than to collect the information using a questionnaire alone.

The interview has many advantages. It has public relations value. If conducted well it can serve to make the officers aware of the need to preserve records, as no "minute" or "order" can. More relevantly, it is valuable because the men who are working for a body often have given some thought to that body's record problem. It may not have been thought about the principles and purposes of record systems but probably will have been thought provoked by failures or apparent failures in the system of record keeping.

The reasons for any failure of a record system will be of interest to the consultant. Some of the failures may have been caused by:

(1) failure to index adequately;

(2) premature destruction of records;

or (3) failure to record information.

Not only failures to supply the relevant record but also the degree of difficulty experienced in using a record system can point to faults. The need to use too many files to complete a transaction, or conversely, having to search through one very large file for one piece of information or the papers which constitute stages in a particular transaction are other pointers to changes needed in the current records system which the experienced archivist will recognise.

Whatever the circumstances, while the records system will to a greater or lesser extent reflect the structure and functions of the organization, the comments of its officers will give some idea of the amount of distortion there is in the image, in other words, of the shortcomings of the system.

It is essential that the archivist be aware of these shortcomings. Whilst his function is not that of the "organization and methods" investigator, sound archives practice can only be based on a records system that is in itself sound.

Examining the Records

At this stage the consultant will be ready to make a detailed

analysis of the records themselves handling samples of particular
records selected for him by the administration. He will also want to
sample some of the series independently.

In the course of this examination he will make himself familiar
with the content of the files, the principles used in bringing them
together, the system of classification used and the various controls
and finding aids used. He will try to assess the completeness of the
record group· or groups examined.

(b) Analysing the data collected:

In any investigation, analysis is going on as evidence is gathered,
and in many cases the identification of a problem is the major step in
its solution. If one can state clearly what it is one wants a system
to do one can usually arrive at a solution which will achieve the
desired end. One can also see why the system in use can or cannot be
used to achieve that end.

To establish a satisfactory archives programme it is necessary to
control the records from the time they are first created to the point.
at which they are finally destroyed or transferred to the Archives.
This may be done –

1. By recording the total documentation in a "register of sets"

2. By providing for systematic and regular destruction of value‑
   less records.

   (a) Destruction of whole series of records following
       approved schedules.

   (b) Culling record series by the destruction of specified
       classes of records on the advice of action officers
       and records officers following a predetermined dis‑
       posal schedule.

3. By the establishment of an intermediate records repository.

4. By the establishment of an Archives.

Such a programme must be the responsibility of a competent archivist.

The above is the general pattern that the consultant will keep in
mind while he is gathering information. He will note the comments of
officers, and check them against the records themselves. At all times
he must watch how the existing current records system may, as far as
possible without alteration, be fitted to the disposal pattern he has
in mind. He must also watch for the points in the current record
system that will result in information not being readily available when
required.

For example, failure to index adequately or failure to record
information are both record keeping faults that would have an effect on
the subsequent availability of information. It is the consultant's
duty to advise not only in the methods of preserving or disposing of
current records, but also on what information should be recorded in the
records system and methods of making it available.

Similarly criticisms of a record system relating to the makeup of files may point to faults in file classification which will be relevant to the archivist's enquiry.

Record series are of various types and these present different problems. A division into record types can be made on the basis of their degree of homogeneity. So there are :-

> (1) Repetitive document series in which all the documents contain similar information in similar form about different but similar subjects or transactions;
>
> (2) The miscellany;

and

> (3) Combinations of (1) and (2) above.

The problem is to ensure, as far as reasonably possible, that all records essential to the institution, from an administrative or historical point of view will be retained. At the same time it is desirable to destroy records of ephemeral interest as soon as their value has passed.

It is not possible for the body's archivist and senior administrative staff to personally examine every paper or even every file, and so it is necessary to ap_raise not files but classes of files. For this to be effective there must be uniformity in file construction. In some cases with the existing record system the methods of file construction will not be altogether satisfactory for the application of disposal schedules and it may be necessary to recommend alterations. The principles enunciated by Maclean in his article* in the American Archivist are an example of principles which may be applied to produce a records system to which disposal scheduling may be applied.

The archivist is able to make appraisals of various classes of records and judge whether they have sufficient value to justify permanent retention. Similarly the administration can decide on the value of each class of record from its point of view.

But records are not usually organized into classes with a view to this appraisal for disposal by an archivist or even by an administrator although such an arrangement may occur accidentally. This is particularly true of type (2) records but it is not uncommon to find even type (1) records in an order that makes their disposal expensive, or even impossible.

Therefore, the archivist's first task is to identify mutually exclusive classes of records existing in the institution, or the possibility of introducing such classes where they do not exist. The consultant's analysis must reveal these classes. He can then evolve methods of controlling the disposal of the records. It must always be understood that some records cannot be classed and therefore cannot be

---

* The American Archivist, volume XXII, number 4, October 1959, pp. 387-418 - Australian experience in record and archives management by Ian Maclean.

disposed of on schedule.

The identification of classes of records will involve the consultant in a close examination of the record systems.

Central Registry records may be either type (1) or type (2). The miscellany type of registry series (type (2)) presents the more difficult problem and this type is probably the more common. For instance, with central registry type records it is necessary to examine the basis of file construction. In any registry an act of classification is made when the papers are received through the mail or as memoranda. The consultant must check to what extent this act of classification is intended to ensure that –

> (1) only papers of some continuing interest are placed on the files;
>
> (2) all the papers relating to a particular transaction are together on the one file in sequence;
>
> and
>
> (3) separate files are created for separate transactions.

He may also have to check how the files are indexed so that papers can be retrieved.

Developing schedules for the destruction of records in a registry which is a miscellany requires particular skill and a detailed knowledge of the system. Initially at least they must be developed by registry officers guided by the archivist. The method used to develop the schedules will depend on the system in use in the registry. A disposal schedule can be applied to a registry where the filing unit is based on the "transaction" but it is often difficult to develop a satisfactory disposal schedule for a registry which has a filing unit based on the "subject".

The first step then for the registry is to discover the basis on which each file is brought together and in the miscellany this is the key to effective disposal scheduling. On the other hand with repetitive document series, problems are found in interfiling of similar records with different values to the future user.

Repetitive document series are more commonly found in the operative branches. They may be registered or unregistered. In many cases it is possible to dispose of all the records in a "repetitive document series" created before a certain date, once a period of time has elapsed and legal, audit or other obligations to retain them have been satisfied. Many accounting records are so organized.

But when the records are not filed in the order of their disposal, be that chronological or some other order, the only method available to dispose of them is expensive culling. The archivist in these circumstances may recommend the introduction of some other system of arranging the records.

Procedures may be established to divide the files into "live" and "dead", "routine" and "policy", or some other predetermined division at some time when other steps are being carried out, or it will be arranged that essential information will be divided elsewhere.

Accumulated Records

The introduction of procedures to arrange for the systematic disposal of current records is an important part of any archival programme but depending on the age of a body and its record accumulation the weeding of non-current records can be even more formidable and exacting task.

The identification of series is the first job to be done. If the physical order has been preserved and the books or records have some notation or mark that indicate both provenance and order, and if no records have been destroyed and if ...... There are just too many factors to consider here.

Consider the problem of the archivist who has to establish series in a mass of records which is the residue from the amalgamation and splitting of 20 functions over as many years. This has been one problem at the Commonwealth and to a lesser extent at the State level. Consider the problem of the archivist who has hundreds of tons of records to sort.

The solution might lie in examining the records where they lie in the case of smaller accumulations, or of transferring them to a centre where they can be sorted and processed. There is no one solution. There is a rule, however, which should usually be followed. Do not try to apply current disposal scheduling to accumulations of non current records.

Schellenberg recommends the disposal list. Whether a formal list is used or not it is usually only possible to dispose of many series after a fairly full description of them has been made and after they have been, shall I call it classified, and placed in position in the revelant record group, on paper but not of course physically. On the spot decisions about the value of accumulated records cannot usually be made. Of course if the information in a series is not unique and it duplicates another series, then those records may be destroyed. Such duplication is rare and expensive to prove in most cases.

(c)   The Report:

The final stage is the production of the report. The report should be considered as a means to an end and not the end in itself. It will therefore be confined to points essential to the introduction of a sound archival programme. This will normally include a discussion of the problem and a statement of proposed solutions together with suggested schedules and a list of recommendations for implementation.