

SURVEY OF BUSINESS RECORDS

Colleen Pritchard

In 1986 a survey of a number of Australian companies was carried out to ascertain what archival records they kept, how they cared for these records and if companies would like advice on how to manage their holdings.

The survey was a joint project of the Historic Records Search and the Business Archives Special Interest Group of the Australian Society of Archivists. The Search is a Bicentennial Project which between May 1987 and April 1988 aims to seek paper-based records of historical significance held in private hands throughout Australia. A computer generated Register will provide researchers with details of records identified as being historically significant. The Historic Records Search participated in a number of surveys in 1986, the business survey was one of these projects.

The survey was the first major activity of the Business Archives Special Interest Group which was formed in 1985 to provide a forum for members of the Australian Society of Archivists who either work with or are interested in business archives. It was hoped that the results would help set the agenda for future outreach activities, including conducting seminars and workshops on the theme of business archives, in an effort to assist those who are responsible for their company's records but have no formal training.

In February 1986 a letter was sent to 131 companies outlining the aims of the survey, giving information on the organising parties and stressing the historical and administrative importance of records to their owners and to the wider research community. The companies were selected by searching through *Jobson's Yearbook of Public Companies* for businesses established during the 19th century and companies listed in the top 150 published lists established between 1900 and 1965. Companies known to have an archivist were excluded as were companies who used archival institutions to deposit their records. This initial letter suggested that companies might like to supply the name of an employee to whom the questionnaire could be sent. Only two companies replied that they were not interested in participating in the project.

In April the survey form was sent to 137 companies comprising the 129 first identified (minus the two companies from whom negative responses were received) and eight other companies who were mainly subsidiaries nominated by parent companies. The questionnaire was accompanied by a letter which made particular reference to the completion of question 4 (items 4.1 to 4.13) covering records held. It was acknowledged that the questions might be difficult to complete especially if non-current records had not been fully appraised and described or were held in storage. Companies were urged not to abandon the items but opt either for giving an educated guess or estimate, or a brief overall description noting why this was necessary. The due date for return of the form was 31 May.

By the end of June, forty-four returns had been received. As twenty-one companies who responded to the February letter supplying the name of a contact officer had not returned the form, it was decided in July to send a follow up letter. This letter suggested that if detailed completion was proving too time consuming partial completion with general estimates would be appreciated. A further seven companies responded to this request bringing the total replies received to fifty-one. In November 1986 all respondents were thanked for their participation.

A copy of the survey form is attached as Appendix A and a statistical summary of the results as Appendix B. The results of the survey show some interesting but often predictable practices. With regard to the records held, participating companies appear to keep the records of the key decision making bodies within their organisational structures, in particular the minutes of Annual General Meetings, Shareholders Meetings and Board of Directors Meetings. Good runs of financial records are retained, but a high proportion were held with gaps. The allocation of disposal dates were highest for financial records and they were the record type identified as being the most commonly microfilmed. Generally legal, administrative and operational records obtained the highest "no response" replies.

The replies to the questions covering record keeping practices employed by the companies are illuminating and perplexing, particularly those for 6, 7 and 8. Only thirteen companies employ someone to organise and retrieve archival records and even fewer companies—four—employ a records manager. However, thirty-three companies undertake systematic disposal of non-current records. Presuming those employees noted in questions 6 and 7 have some responsibility for identifying records for disposal, who undertakes this work in the remaining sixteen companies?

After the completion of the survey it is interesting to speculate on why the response rate was only 37%. The first assumption must be that the companies who did not respond were either not sufficiently interested or had not retained their permanently valuable records. The detailed nature of the form may have been a deterrent to those who have no control over

their archives, or businesses may have viewed the survey as a possible invasion of privacy. A personal approach may have encouraged a higher response rate.

Despite the low return both organising bodies obtained some positive results. For the Historic Records Search, at least twenty-eight companies have indicated that they are willing to have entries covering their records included on the Register. For the Business Archives Special Interest Group sufficient details have been supplied to indicate certain trends in the record keeping practices of at least fifty-one of Australia's large long-established companies. Also the survey provided contacts with sixteen companies who indicated they would like to participate in the Group's activities.

These companies were invited to attend a Seminar conducted by the Business Archives Special Interest Group and the NSW Special Libraries Section of the Library Association of Australia on the theme 'Managing Business Archives'. The Seminar was held in Sydney in July 1986 and the Society plans to publish the papers.

APPENDIX A

Survey of Historical business records

1 Name of company

1.1 Contact person: Name

Phone

Position

2 Brief account of the history of the company:

2.1 Date of foundation

2.2 Date of incorporation

2.3 Name changes

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2.4 Major takeovers

2.5 Main areas of operations and changes in areas of operations

2.6 If the Company has published a Company history or pamphlet/ leaflet on its history, please give details or attach a copy.

3 If your non-current records are not housed at the headquarters, do you lease off-site storage?

Yes No

4 Types of archival records held:

- If records are held for predecessor or subsidiary companies, please contact the National Project Officer for extra survey sheets.
- If it is not possible to provide the information requested below for non-current records **stored off-site**, please give a general description of those records on the last page of this questionnaire.

Date Coverage

4.1 Annual Reports

4.2 Minutes of:

Annual general meetings and shareholders meetings

Board of directors meetings

Board committees

Executive management meetings

4.3	Share Records (Registers, Indexes)	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.4	Financial Records:		
	Balance sheets analysis papers	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Ledgers	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Journals	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Cash books	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.5	Legal Records:		
	Property files	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Contracts	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Litigation files	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.6	Personal Records:		
	Wages/salary books	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Staff histories	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Superannuation records	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Compensation records	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.7	Policy Files	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.8	Operational Records	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.9	Scientific/Technical Records	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.10	Photographs	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.11	Other Printed Material Published by Company	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.12	Advertising and Publicity Material	<hr/>	<hr/>
4.13	Other	<hr/>	<hr/>

- 5 Approximate quantity of records held:
metres of shelf space _____
and/or number of filing draws occupied _____
and/or number of boxes/volumes/items _____
- 6 Does your Company employ someone to organise retrieve archival records? Yes No
- 6.1 If yes, what is the position titled (e.g. archivist, librarian, records clerk)? _____
- 7 Does your Company employ a records manager? Yes No
- 8 Do you undertake systematic disposal of non-current records? Yes No
- 9 If you do not hold the non-current records of your company, do you know what has happened to them?
- Deposited in an archival institution
- Destroyed by policy decision
- Destroyed by fire, water damage etc.
- Other (specify) _____
- Unknown
- 10 Do you microfilm records? Yes No
- 10.1 What types of records are filmed (e.g. financial, correspondence files)? _____
- 10.2 If records are microfilmed, what happens to the originals? _____
- 11 Would your Company be interested in sending a representative to a seminar/workshop on business archives conducted by the Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated? Yes No
- 12 Would your Company allow researchers and other interested individuals access to your archival records under conditions agreed to by your Company? Yes No

- 13 Does your Company consent to an abstract of the information contained in items, 1, 2, 4 and 5 being listed in the Historic Records Search Register? Yes No

Thank you for your co-operation. Would you please return this form by 31 March 1986.

POST TO:

Ms Marion Amies
National Project Officer
Historic Records Search
National Library of Australia
CANBERRA ACT 2600 Phone: (062) 62 1271

APPENDIX B

STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF RETURNS

The following 4 questions were not tabulated for this analysis as responses given were too varied:

- Question 1.1 Name and position of company contact person
" 2.5 Main areas of operations and changes
" 4.13 Other types of archival records held
" 5 Approximate quantity of records held

Foundation Date (Question 2.1)

to 1839	2
1840-49	4
1850-59	3
1860-69	6
1870-79	4
1880-89	13
1890-99	5
1900-09	1
1910-19	3
1920-29	2
1930-39	3
1940-49	1
1950-59	2
No response	2

Incorporation Date (Question 2.2)

to 1849	2
1860-69	4
1870-79	3
1880-89	8
1890-99	4
1910-19	5
1920-29	6
1930-39	4
1950-59	5
1960-69	3
1980-86	1
No response	5
Not Incorporated	1

Numbers of name changes (Question 2.3)

9 companies had none	
13 " " 1	
9 " " 2	
7 " " 3	
1 " " 4	
1 " " 5	
1 " " 6	
1 " " 7	
No response	9

Numbers of major takeovers (Question 2.4)

7 companies had taken over	1 Co
6 " " " " "	6 "
7 " " " " "	3 "
4 " " " " "	4 "
1 " " " " "	5 "
3 " " " " "	6 "
2 " " " " "	8 "
1 " " " " "	10 "
1 " " " " "	13 "
No response	8
7 had never taken over a Co.	
1 had taken over "numerous"	
1 had taken over "some"	

Record Types (Question 4)

Record Types	Held from Date of foundation and/or Incorporation	Held with Gaps	Held but Subject to Disposal Date	Not Applicable	No response
Annual Reports	24	18			9
Minutes of AGM & Shareholders Meetings	28	13		3	7
Minutes of Board of Directors Meetings	31	10	2	3	5
Minutes of Board Committee Meetings	12	4	2	19	14
Minutes of Executive Management Meetings	6	10	3	17	15
Share Records	17	17	7	4	6
Balance Sheets	15	12	10		14
Ledgers	15	17	13		6
Journals	12	17	14	2	6
Cash Books	11	15	14	3	8
Property Files	14	10	13		14
Contracts	11	12	10	1	17
Litigation Files	10	7	11	1	22
Wage/Salaries Books	6	17	14	1	13
Staff Histories	8	18	12	1	12
Superannuation Records	8	14	14	2	13
Compensation Records	7	12	10		22
Policy Files	8	8	4	2	29
Operational Records	9	9	6	2	25
Scientific/Tech. Records	5	13	4	6	23
Photographs	13	20	3	1	14
Printed Material Publ. by Company	11	15	4	2	19
Advertising & Publicity Material	11	14	6	2	18

Published histories (Question 2.6)
(Note some multiple answers given)

Yes (in various forms)	26
No	7
Unpublished mss.	6
In preparation	6
History presented in Annual Report	5
Under consideration	1
No response	4

Off-site storage (Question 3)

Yes	14
No	29
No response	8

Does company employ someone to organise and retrieve archival records?

(Question 6)

Yes	13
No	38

Titles held by those employed to carry out archival work

(Question 6.1)

Archivist	3
Historian	2
Student Archivist	1
Records Clerk	2
Museum Consultant	1
Archives Asst.	1
Records Manager	1
Curator/Archivist	1

Does company employ a records manager? (Question 7)

Yes	4
No	43
Consultant	1
No response	3

Is systematic disposal of non-current records undertaken? (Question 8)

Yes	33
No	13
No response	5

If non-current records are not held what has happened to them? (Question 9)

Deposited in an archival institution:

Yes	9
No	2
Some	1
No response	5

Destroyed by a policy decision:

Yes	27
No	2
Some	1
No response	21

Destroyed by fire, water damage etc:

Yes	4
No	2
No response	45

Other (as to specify):

Yes	3 (unspecified)
No	2 (unspecified)
Storage	2
No response	42

Unknown:

Yes	7
No	2
No response	42

Are records microfilmed? (Question 10)

Yes	24
No	26
No response	1

Type of records filmed (Question 10.1)

Financial	15
Correspondence	4
Share records	4
Policy records	1
Technical records	3
Minutes	1
Newspapers	1
Some COM	1
No response	26

Action on records after filming (Question 10.2)

Destroy	17
Stored	3
Retired	1
Unknown	1
No response	1

Companies interested in participating in Business Archives Special Interest Group Activities (Question 11)

Yes	16
No	33
Possibly	1
No response	1

Would access be given to researchers and other interested individuals under conditions agreed to by company? (Question 12)

Yes	28
No	19
Uncertain	1
No response	3

Would companies allow an abstract of the information contained in questions 1, 2, 4 and 5 to appear in the Historic Research Search Register? (Question 13)

Yes	28
No	15
Subject to further clarification	8

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- Records Management
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- Office Systems

Applicants must be graduates with at least five years relevant experience. Preference will be given to candidates who have:

- Suitable postgraduate qualifications and are eligible for membership of the relevant professional associations (Records Management Association and Australian Society of Archivists)
- A broad range of information management experience.

Please telephone Michael Suckling or Graham Willson on (02) 929 0033. Written applications to Coopers & Lybrand WD Scott, 13th Floor, 213 Miller Street, North Sydney. The strictest confidence will be observed.

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