

# THE VALUE OF ARCHIVES/SELLING THE PROGRAM

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*This paper was presented at the Seminar on Problems and issues for Corporate archives in Sydney in May 1986. It is printed here without alteration from the text of the address as delivered. The paper covers the design of a corporate archives program and strategies for convincing management of the value of such a program.*

“Many designs in nature might be justified by their beauty alone. However, investigation invariably reveals that also there is a highly functional reason for their structure”.

As an example, one may cite diatoms, those exquisite little “glass” houses of single-celled aquatic plants so small that 15 million constitute a thimbleful. They live in both fresh and salt water. As living organisms they provide about 90% of all the food in the ocean. In death their skeletons are used in a multitude of engineering applications. Of more than passing interest to us in this context, however, is the fact that although the basic plan of these shells is the same, many of the 10,000 different species have very characteristic shapes, sizes and structure.

I invite you to contemplate the lesson of the diatom—a beautifully simple structure, perfectly adapted to its environment, functioning on several levels and sharing common characteristics while exhibiting differences. As a definition of an archives, this serves well. It provides those of us in the position of designing and implementing archival programs with a workable ideal, a reachable goal.

Note that archives, like diatoms, should be designed for *use*; that is that the form must follow the function.

My task is two fold: to present to you a discussion of the value of archives, a rather theoretical topic, and to prepare to “sell” an archives, a practical justification of an archives program. I intend to combine theory and practice to propose a total archives program conforming to archival science principles and practices but tailor-made to fit the needs of the

organisation it serves. I will focus on the development of archives in the corporate sector and on placing the archives within the total scheme of corporate management. However, I base my remarks on the following assertions which serve as the “cornerstones” of my approach to archives:—

1. archives and records management programs are or should be synonymous and should provide their parent organisations with full records handling procedures through all phases of records;
2. archival principles and practices do not or should not differ from organisation to organisation whether the organisations are governmental or non-governmental.

I firmly believe that the science of managing information effectively through the demands of the 1980s and 1990s requires the adoption on the part of the archival profession of these two statements as basic goals toward which we will work individually and co-operatively.

The need to know, the right to know as much as possible about our society, our institutions and ourselves as individuals forces us to revise the accepted notions about archival practice which have seriously impeded the growth and development of archival programs. Indeed, as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Report on Canadian Archives maintains, in whatever format records should be retained and preserved by those originating them; series of records should be kept intact, custody of records should change as little as possible and then only with formal authority; archival materials should remain in the locale or milieu in which they originated. The common commitment of archivists to these tasks and to the basic principles involved is, in the phrasing of the Report’s authors, “as important as their work individually in carrying them forward . . . whatever happens, if there is to be a new level of co-operation among Canadian archives it will rest on a common understanding of what the archival process involves and a common commitment to the principles according to which this process should be developed”. The Association of Canadian Archivists Response to this Report summarises what I maintain is the prescription for the future growth of Canadian archives programs:— “Management of an institution’s records must involve archivists at all stages to ensure that archives receive those records of legal, administrative and informational value to the agency the archives serves and from which cultural benefits will naturally be derived by their preservation”.

If this sounds like a policy statement, it is intended to be just that. While it would seem to be an accepted basic tenet that an archivist cannot simply sit and wait to receive materials, it is not an easy leap for many people to make in practise. A good and necessary starting point for all archivists is to sit down and assess their collection, their institutional parent and how much the one is a true reflection of the other. (Note that this

assessment must be done for manuscript—or what I term “arbitrary” collections, as well). The archivist by doing so is demonstrating the ability to be selective and is giving notice that there is a definite purpose to what is being done. This exercise will proceed from a working definition of archival records (as being created for purposes of action and/or documenting the formation, growth, operations and accomplishments of an organisation and/or detailing the beginning, changing or ending of a policy or by exceptional event and/or comprising approximately 8% of the total records created by an organisation) through to a policy statement which must comprise three factors:— a determining of the records (manuscripts) to be acquired, an assessment of the records currently being produced by the organisation, a projection of future needs.

Once the policy statement is written, the following procedure should be followed:

- (1) sell the policy to the top administrative level
- (2) design a full archives-records management program
- (3) implement and operate the program on an ongoing basis

As an example of a policy statement submitted for senior management approval, I offer the following from the Bank’s archives files:—

### **Mandate**

“The aim of the Archives is to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of records control within the Bank by the judicious application of modern technology and records management and archival sciences.

The disciplines required to operate the Archives need to specialise without separating or it becomes impossible to join the various components into an integrated network. The Archives will be responsible for the design, implementation and ongoing management of a system which will control the creation, use, transmission, retention, maintenance, storage, retrieval, protection, preservation and disposition of the records of the Bank”.

Note that the components of the total records policy outlined above combine to provide the organisation with both an information base and cost justification. Management cannot fail to appreciate the logic of a system which provides both cost effectiveness and efficiency. The information base services management by giving it access to a most valuable asset — its records—and servicing management is the key to survival for any developing program. At a time when budget cutbacks are the norm and programs perceived by management to be frills are slashed at the very same time as the explosion in paper and non-paper information makes the problems we face critical, the archivist must convince the top administration level of the benefits to be derived from a total archives programs and of the inherent dangers of a non-existent

or partial program. An institution may or may not shudder at the prospect of an anniversary going by unnoticed but it should appreciate the risks, both financial and legal, that it is taking by not formulating procedures for the maintenance, control and use of permanent-value records.

The process and benefits of a total archives program administered by a trained professional archivist are many. The trained archivist brings the necessary overview to records handling to ensure that active records are created, filed and maintained in the user's office in a way that recognises their overall value, that semi-active records are retained in an orderly, economical way, and that inactive records are identified and disposed of according to a predetermined schedule. Permanent records and those vital to the organisation's survival are retained, while the bulk of records are destroyed routinely (and with all necessary security) after their legal and administrative function is complete.

All this may seem familiar territory, but what is significant from the organisation's standpoint is that systematic control and use of records is maintained, that the system recognises that records are a corporate asset for their *current* informational value and *future* research potential. Furthermore, especially in the case of corporate archives, assisting in the growth of the corporation (by organising permanent records so that the information in them is readily accessible) is a primary function of the program. Making records available to researchers outside the organisation is excellent from a public relations standpoint.

Canadian Archives Report to Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council March 1980, Page 7.

"An Archives must be part of every modern administrative body. Every organisation must retain certain records, whether it is to meet legal or audit requirements, to satisfy the continuing need to refer to past decisions or previous experience, to record agreements of titles, or for more general historical reasons. Such records, though, are but a small portion of the mass of files, microfilm, computer records and the like generated daily by any modern government, business, or other organisation. Much of this documentation can safely be destroyed soon after it has fulfilled its immediate administrative purpose. If allowed to accumulate unchecked, important records become submerged in the trivia, making information retrieval inefficient; storage costs, both for space and equipment, escalate rapidly. Through the techniques of records management, archives can introduce order into any records system. In regulating the life cycle of administrative records in all formats, from their creation through their eventual disposal, a records management program simplifies information retrieval, ensures that the most efficient documentary medium is employed and provides for a routine flow of records from office, to bulk storage, to destruction or to the archives. Most importantly, essential records of long-term legal, administrative or historical significance are identified and are regularly transferred to the archives, while the more routine material fulfills its administrative purpose and is then destroyed.

Over the years, the federal government, several provincial and municipal governments, and a number of corporations and universities have discovered the economies and efficiencies of full records management programs. By applying a systematic approach to handling their administrative records, these organisations have reduced the need for office space and records storage equipment, and have found referring to previous decisions or policies much simplified. Indeed, quite apart from the cultural or public benefits of an archival program, archives which are thoroughly involved in records management are economical. The direct savings in space and equipment and the less tangible savings in staff efficiency exceed the costs of operating the archives. Such savings can be realised in administrative structures of almost any size. Archives perform a valuable administrative function."

In addition to the cultural benefits, public relations benefits, administrative (meaning effective, efficient and economical) benefits to be derived from a total archives program, I invite you to consider the following benefit, expressed in a report submitted to Calgary's City Council by former City Archivist Tony Rees:—

"The modern corporate archives is the corporate memory and an integral part of any information management system. In order for it to be a complete memory, it requires access to a complete set of information. As there is nothing to be gained by retaining information which has no further value so there is nothing to be gained by restricting archival collecting to whatever out-of-date files can be scrounged from the backs of filing cabinets, or, worse still, from the trash".

While the previously mentioned benefits apply to various sectors or divisions of the organisation (Public Relations Marketing, Operations, Systems, etc.) this last benefit, controlling the corporate memory, applies to the whole organisation. The significance of this should be underscored for it extends the archivist's sphere of influence throughout the corporation. In any corporation this is valuable but in a corporation with the size and scope of the Bank of Nova Scotia with over 1200 offices in Canada and 46 countries around the world operated by a staff of 26,000—it is imperative to the program's survival and growth that it be perceived by the top management level as a management tool which sets standards and guidelines for the operation of all levels (in the Bank these levels are General Office, Regional Offices and Branches).

In proceeding from policy to the design of an archives/records management program, the archivist-as administrator must be cognisant of the inter-relationship of the staff required to drive the program to many other functions within the organisation. Although the Archivist cannot expect to have accountability for the operation of most of these functions, the policies and procedures developed by the Archives will significantly influence costs and strategy in these other areas. Also, the archivist must be fiscally responsible; no organisation in the current economic situation can or should contemplate undertaking programs which involve empire-

building. The beauty of simplicity is apparent here: the archives as a small resource centre planning policy, developing procedures containing expertise on state-of-the-art technology and providing management by objectives in concert with the parent organisation's overall plans.

Once the basic archives program is in place, its ongoing effectiveness can be ensured by setting up a system of periodic review of the parent organisation on a department-by-department basis to assess:—

- a) the adequacy of department records classification systems
- b) the extent to which important policies and programs of the department are documented for future research.
- c) the extent to which records are segregated as to value and given adequate storage and handling to protect them from loss or accidental destruction.

The archivist thus functions as in in-house consultant to provide management with the design, implementation and continuing refinement of a total records control program.

In the Bank, we are building upon the following policy areas now in place:—

- records storage standards for the branch system.
- inactive records destruction standards and operation for the branch system
- file classification systems for departments and divisions (on a by-request basis)
- case study analysis
- micrographics procedures
- review of all file equipment and space needs in General Office and Regional Offices
- identification, acquisition and preservation of permanent-value records
- operation of the Archives as a resource centre to facilitate use of information by staff and public.

We have identified the following areas as being required to augment and complement the current program:—

- forms design and control

Our role in the management of information begins with the creation of information. It is at this point in the life cycle of information that systems must be implemented, not only to regulate the amount of data created, but also to make certain that once created it is in a usable format. This requires a clear and precise understanding of what is needed so that

the forms and reports required for presenting the information are properly designed.

- retention scheduling

The retention schedule is the one document that identifies the relative importance of collected information by assigning a life span to it. Its arrangement of information by records series enables us to know what records are used together as units, filed as units and have a disposition life as units. As a document created in the “normal course of business” the retention schedule clarifies actions for future evaluation. It minimises the hoarding instinct by limiting the tendency to arbitrarily store records.

- records inventorying

Detailed inventories provide a valuable overview of all records holdings as well as statistical information regarding the space and equipment being used to house such materials. The procedures followed for obtaining approvals for retention periods require that all levels of management—the users of the records—be involved, thus assuring a greater appreciation on their part of the relative value of the records they use.

- storage/retrieval centres for semi-active records.

The records centre concept has replaced the negative terminology of dead storage and warehousing sometimes applied to areas where we house records which have passed their active office value. The basic qualities of low cost space and equipment, orderly arrangement of materials and prompt retrieval service inherent in records centre operations will continue to be one of the most visible result of good records management.

- vital records strategy

- confidential records control

- disposition of inactive records in all formats.

Built into any program must be procedures which are adaptable to the transition from a paper-infested office environment to one dominated by word processors, timesharing terminals, micrographic systems and facsimile devices to transmit information.

No discussion of the advantages and benefits of a total archives program would be complete without a review of the consequences of an organisation not undertaking it. This catalogue of horrors includes:—

- administrative inefficiency

- duplication of effort

- development of non-integrated filing systems

- inadvertent loss, destruction or unnecessary stockpiling of information

- conversion to one records format when another better suits the needs of a particular records type.
- non-conversion of paper-format records to machine-readable formats with attendant rise in operating costs and failure to keep pace with the corporate sector in preparing for the office of the future.

In financial terms, archives/records management offers profit improvement in general records costs. The U.S. Commission on Federal Paperwork study showed that American business spend between \$25 and \$32 billion per year meeting government reporting and records retention requirements. The Canadian Office for the Reduction of Paperburden shows similar costs borne by Canadian business. While this financial burden may be eased by recent legislation, there continues the high cost of internal processing of forms. The tested formula is that for every dollar spent in the procurement of business forms, 11.2% is spent filing and maintaining those forms, 84.4% is processing costs (forms preparation, checking, routing and auditing) and only 4.4% is actually procurement costs.

Archives/records management's strength lies in the ability to consider all records formats and to use them most effectively. Legally, every organisation has specific responsibilities and guidelines by which it must operate. In banking the Bank Act's most recent revision (in Section 156 (i) ) permits records to be bound, recorded on film or "recorded by any system of mechanical or electronic data processing or any other information storage device". This diverges from the Canada Evidence Act and sets up potential problems of transfer to alternate systems, which the Bank's legal counsel has addressed. Co-ordination of records handling systems is required more than ever to fully comply with records legislation which will impact upon the operations of every organisation.

I leave it to you to decide which and how many of these "down-side" arguments to incorporate in selling an archival program to management, and how detailed an outline of the operation you feel is required to convince management. I advise you to be as comprehensive as possible to give the program scope for development. You may be invited by management initially to address one problem or one significant event – the loss of records to fire, flood or a company move, the writing of the company history or celebration of a key anniversary. Yet if you restrict yourself to this one item and fail to design and implement a full program, your failure will have a devastating long-range impact on the organisation.

My own responsibilities extend over 3 broad categories: Archives services, records administration and the Bank's Fine Art Program.

In Archives services, I am responsible for the Bank's overall archival policies and directions and overall supervisory responsibility for management of the Archives. The Bank's 150th anniversary in 1982 meant



my involvement in assisting and supporting the Bank's written history project, the preparation of a special 150th anniversary report by Public & Corporate Affairs, developing major displays for exhibition in branches and offices, and representing the bank in various professional groups and at special function.

In Records administration, I have broad functional responsibility for developing records handling policies and procedures on a Bank-wide basis. In 1981, my unit was transferred from Operations to Public & Corporate Affairs which necessitated clarification and re-definition of this function. In 1982 the Archives became a full department, reporting to the Corporate Secretary.

The Fine Art program is an outgrowth of the Archives program, a "special collection" if you will, and involves all phases from acquisition to inventory and maintenance of a major collection of contemporary Canadian art. I co-ordinate this program and "exercise direct responsibility for operating the collection".

This outline of my responsibilities is intended to give you an idea of how the theories and practices I have been discussing work in a specific case. It also serves as an example of the importance of senior management's perception of the archivist's role for it is expressed in the terms used by my previous supervisor, to assess my performance. The test of whether or not the corporate archivist has been successful at "selling" the archives program ultimately hinges not on what we think we do but on what our employer thinks we do or ought to do.

The archivist's ability to educate cannot be over-emphasized. The archives staff's main contact is with non-archivists and time is split between promoting the archives program within the company and performing archival tasks. All small archives must operate within their company's organisational system and if necessary change it. In this, I would suggest, lies not only their greatest challenge to the archivist's ingenuity (and sanity) but also their greatest strength. Articulating the purpose of the archives program on an annual basis, via our budget submission is critical to our continued development.

Business archives contain the basis for the writing of economic and social history. For the social science researcher, the sources contained in business archives are vast, varied and virtually unmined. For professional archivists, the need to develop more and better business archives (if for no other reason than to provide a comparative data base for research) is a pressing one.