

# Consulting into Business Archives

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*'Consulting into Business Archives' explores the role of consultants in business archives. It suggests that there are a number of reasons that external assistance is required, and there are generally five types of drivers for establishing business archives programs: creating order out of chaos; closure or transfer of custody of the Archives; establishing corporate memory; due diligence/verification requirements; and support for existing archives/records programs or functions. Some examples are cited of the role of the consultant in these types of programs, and the resultant commitment of the businesses. It also suggests that despite the recent trend towards outsourcing, the attention paid by the private sector to its archives appears to be increasing. Digital archives are now the challenge for these organisations and for the consultants that support them.*

## Introduction

Businesses of various types commission the assistance of a consultant archivist to resolve a specific problem, or to lend their expertise to what appears to be a complex set of requirements involving compliance/accountability regimes, facilities problems, or the need to produce material for the corporate history. This paper examines the types of organisations, the archival projects or programs, and the reasons such projects are commissioned. It also notes issues that are not considered by these businesses (e.g. electronic archives), as well as what happens once the consultant completes his/her task.

For the purposes of this discussion, the term “archives” is used loosely. It is used as the businesses themselves may use the term, to describe anything ranging from true archival collections, to cupboards of ephemera and artefacts, or basements of inactive records of unidentified value. In many examples cited, no disposal instrument existed, therefore the organisation did not understand, or had not determined, which records were in fact archives. In most cases, the collections were referred to as memorabilia or historical collections, and comprised a mixture of paper-based records, artefacts and artwork. Electronic archives were rarely considered, except in those organisations with well established archival programs and professional staff.

## **Types of Organisations**

The “business archives” identified in this article includes any company, community-based organisation, or not-for-profit organisation. It is any organisation which is not entirely government funded or within government jurisdiction. With permission, some specific organisations are cited from a range of sectors; other examples describe the industry only. The types of organisations discussed below include: transport, clubs (social and sporting), community schools and private colleges, industry associations and employer bodies, insurance, pharmaceuticals, organisations for the disabled, utilities, and the finance sector.

## **Role of Consultants in Business Archives**

Businesses commission archival consultants for some of the following reasons:

- There is no Records Manager and/or no Archivist.
- Additional expertise is needed which is not available in-house.
- External assessment or recommendations are needed - for objectivity purposes; or views which are based within a wider knowledge of the industry; or for political reasons it is useful for recommendations to come from an external source.
- Dedicated resources are needed, for example a person to undertake a project on a full time basis.

## **Reasons for Identifying or Managing Business Archives**

Businesses establish archives programs and projects for many reasons. This paper focuses on those reasons that most often require consultancy services. For example:

- Creating order out of chaos
- Closure or transfer of custody of the Archives

- Establishing corporate memory
- Due diligence/verification requirements
- Support for existing archives/records programs or functions.

These are described in more detail below, with examples of some of the consultancy projects that have been undertaken to meet these business needs.

## **Types of Services and Projects**

### ***Creating order out of chaos***

10-100 years worth of inactive records have accumulated, they are in no coherent order, and they are virtually inaccessible due to the physical storage arrangements and lack of control systems. The business may require the space for other purposes; it may require information, which is probably buried in the collection; or it may simply wish to tidy up its housekeeping and use of facilities.

The size and scope of this type of problem varies considerably. For example, the head office of a manufacturing company had approximately two linear kilometres of material in a city basement, ranging from board minutes to 50 year old accounts payable vouchers. In contrast, the Athenaeum Club in Melbourne had three wooden cupboards in the corridors of a 19th century building, containing statutory records, membership records, photographs, and building records, some dating from 1909.

The terms of reference for such projects are usually “tell us how to fix it”. The results will be:

- An inventory of holdings
- Disposal recommendations
- A strategy and procedures for the control and management of temporary and archival records
- Assignment of in-house responsibility for the function, and training
- In some cases, a range of physical and intellectual activities required to establish an archive, followed by handover to the client.

The focus is almost exclusively on paper-based material and sometimes artefacts, especially for the smaller organisations. Recognition of the need for creating or capturing electronic archives is only just emerging, and does not involve “creating order out of the chaos” of the past 20 digital years.

### ***Closure or Transfer of Custody of the Archives***

The archives collection may need to be relocated for various reasons, for example:

- the organisation is terminating
- the business is sold to, or is merging with, another company
- the business decides to outsource the storage of the archives, and some times the function.

In the first two cases, disposal policy rarely exists; therefore the issue is often seen as logistical - involving decisions about where to send the material, what to send, how to transport it, and costs. The imperative is to remove the problem; with as little cost as possible, and to ensure that all legal obligations requiring documentation have been met. It rarely involves consideration of electronic archives (usually because none exist or have been designated as such).

In such cases, consultancy assistance is used to:

- Provide ad hoc advice on what to retain and destroy (not using a formal disposal instrument) to meet legal requirements.
- Investigate storage options, transport, destruction services and costs.

In the recent years of privatisation of government services, utilities have been bought and sold, merged and divested. This has engendered a new awareness in management of due diligence requirements. (See *Due Diligence* below.) This process has demanded that decisions be made about the future ownership, custody, control and maintenance of business archives, and provision of access to such records. External assistance may be used to provide advice on such issues.

In contrast, a private community school had used consultancy services to establish its archives for operational and corporate memory reasons, and some years later was forced to close due to lack of funding. At this time, the archives were able to be transferred to the State Library of Victoria in excellent condition, with full control systems and access availability.

In the third case, the outsourcing of the archives function and/or storage may occur for a number of reasons. For example:

- Archives is seen as non core, and an unnecessary overhead.
- Facilities rationalisation may require storage of the collection elsewhere, but management of the function is retained by the business.
- The business may not have the necessary expertise, and perceives the collection as better managed by external experts.
- Combined with other reasons, the business might want the collection accessible by a larger audience, but does not wish to service such a function itself.

Consultancy may be used to:

- Identify the perceived and potential value of the archives as an in-house function.

- Redefine roles for retaining the archives management function and outsourcing the storage.
- Investigate the availability, quality and costs of suitable external storage and/or archives management.

The trend towards outsourcing of the archives function and/or storage has become more prevalent over the last two to five years with economic downturn, downsizing of businesses, relocation of companies to non CBD accommodation, divestment of property, and the significant uptake of outsourcing in general. There appears to be little change to this pattern in the immediate future. Also the issue is still very much perceived as a hard-copy/physical problem, with digital archives only recently being developed and usually retained in-house, using external organisations for media backup services.

### ***Establishment of Corporate Memory***

Archives programs are often established for various research, historical, or promotional purposes. The cultural, industry, and promotional value of such programs is of greater interest to the business than commercial objectives.

A company may instigate a project to identify or manage its archives when the material is to be called upon for the writing of a company history, or for the use in public exhibitions or publications. Historians and writers commissioned to write company histories may often require the company to provide access to archival material which is already ordered and described, or at least identified at a basic level. Occasionally the impetus to control the collection may occur after the writer has departed, with parting recommendations to tidy up the mess, to make the research easier next time.

Public Relations departments frequently use archival material in internal and external company publications, videos, and advertisements. In some companies, the best sources of archival material are held, and fiercely guarded by such departments. Projects may include: digitisation of film based material, development of item level controls, and preservation programs. These initiatives may occur in isolation from whatever archival programs or records exist elsewhere in the company.

Many long established organisations engender a culture which places a strong link between its history, the development of the organisation and its place in world. For example, many private social clubs, golf clubs and similar organisations have a strong community, based upon common interests. The records of these organisations carry this history and are frequently used in modern communications, events, and promotion. The Royal

Melbourne Golf Club commenced its archives program 15 years ago. The collection is varied, catalogued by purpose-built software, and is managed and housed according to archival standards. Under the jurisdiction of the History and Archives Committee of the Council, a keen group of members, including a professional archivist, undertake the management and maintenance of the archival and artefact collection.

Schools and colleges also place a strong link between their history, and the development and place of such institutions within their immediate and broader community. Archives are more frequently used in curricula; public displays are common; and organisational culture is reinforced.

In the above examples, consultancy was used to develop control systems, provide advice on preservation and displays, design or select software, implement systems and train staff.

Consultancy assistance to the VSDC Services for Deaf Children (formerly Victorian School for Deaf Children) involved project management for the capture, management and use of archives, development of procedures, training of two staff and 10-15 hearing impaired volunteers, and assisting in the promotion of the collection to the community and stakeholders. Most of the work was done by senior students, past students and volunteers. The aim was to make the extensive and rich collection, dating from 1860s, available to the school community and the wider community, as a source of information about the commencement and development of education for hearing impaired people in Victoria.

The RACV Archives provides research and access services to internal and external sources, stages displays, promotes the collection beyond the organisation, and includes lists of archives and artefacts on its Web site. The collection dates from 1903. External expertise was initially used to design the storage area, develop manual and later computer-based control systems, arrange, describe and catalogue the legacy collection, and develop procedures for ongoing maintenance and development of the collection. Subsequently, professional staff have been employed on contract and now on a permanent basis to manage the Archives which reports to the Chief Manager - Corporate Planning and is located with the Library to provide a one-stop-shop for research.

In 1995, the celebration of Vision Australia Foundation's (formerly the Association For The Blind) centenary raised the awareness of the organisation's heritage, and the need to ensure that existing and future historical material be identified and preserved, and that the corporate memory be made available to its community. Under the Chairmanship of the former President of the

AFTB, the Tilly Aston Heritage Collection Committee commissioned a consultancy to undertake a feasibility study into the establishment of a formal archives. The project resulted in a strategic plan to capture, preserve and make accessible the material of archival and heritage value relating to the Vision Australia Foundation. This included defining the mission and role of the collection, goals and activities/tasks. These were linked to the mission and objectives of the organisation, in particular good corporate governance, and expanding opportunities for print handi-capped people to access printed and electronic information. Vision Australia Foundation has subsequently appointed a professional archivist/curator to implement the strategy.

### ***Due Diligence/Verification Requirements***

Frequently archives are searched for documentation to support due diligence processes, for example: business acquisition or sale, litigation, risk management investigations. In businesses where these processes are common or are likely to occur in the future, it has resulted in a strong awareness of the need to manage evidence of business, including archival records.

Archives activities arising from due diligence processes include:

- Identification of records required for core business activities, business critical (or vital) records, and of course statutory records.
- Establishment of control systems and well managed storage of such records.
- Provision of quick access to information contained in those records.

Consultancy assistance may involve:

- Provision of strategic advice on the evidential requirements of due diligence processes.
- Risk analyses.
- Recommendations for control systems, methods and storage.
- Establishment of “data rooms”, and/or detailed searches of records for specific information.

Due diligence requirements will have greater importance with the increase in frequency of company acquisitions and mergers, high levels of litigation and greater awareness of the need to manage corporate risk in general. Again the extent of electronic archives in this context is usually confined to historical data within line-of-business information systems. More attention must be paid to the digital repositories of both structured and unstructured data so these accountabilities can be met.

## ***Support for Existing Archives/Records Programs or Functions***

Some organisations with well established in-house archives require additional assistance from time to time. This is for any of the reasons discussed above, or to assist with:

- fluctuations in workload - especially for archives with national or multi national jurisdiction
- undertaking market evaluations of external services
- developing strategies
- reviewing internal functions and processes.

The Company Secretary's Department of the ANZ Banking Group commissioned a consultancy study to rationalise facilities use for hardcopy records in its headquarters office. It resulted in 200+ metres of extremely valuable archival records (1877-1998) being listed and transferred into ANZ Group Archives for expert processing and care. This mostly comprised company (statutory) records from past companies, including overseas companies.

In the early 1990s the Australian Nursing Federation Head Office initiated a number of projects under the auspices of its Information Manager. Previously the focus had been on managing and providing access to reference and resource information. The new projects included a classification system for current records, implementation of software, development of a disposal schedule and rationalised storage of the 200 boxes of inactive records in the basement dating from 1930s. The Information Manager was a Librarian and was able to undertake or contribute well to these projects. Consultancy was used to develop and implement the disposal schedule and provide advice on current recordkeeping projects.

## **Ongoing Responsibilities and Maintenance**

Assigning responsibility for the ongoing management of the archives is critical to the overall success of any archives programs, especially where organisations do not initially have in-house expertise.

Organisational commitment to the maintenance of an archival program is dependent on various factors, such as:

- Focus on short term goals only (e.g. fixing a space problem).
- Experience of litigation and potential for future litigation.
- A culture which favours the retention and use/exploitation of the organisation's corporate memory, e.g. for public relations purposes, knowledge building.
- Business reasons, e.g. compliance, acquisitions, mergers.



Those organisations with a broader view of the problem (for example, which understand the corporate memory and governance issues) tend to maintain their collections well, once order has been established. Those focused on the “quick fix” tend to end up with a repeat of their problem within two to five years.

Smaller organisations, and not-for-profit organisations which have commissioned consultancy assistance for establishing their archival programs seem more inclined than larger organisations to commit resources to the maintenance and use of the collection. For example the Athenaeum Club, Vision Australia Foundation, and Royal Melbourne Golf Club defined an archivist role and appointed a designated person; some of these people were subsequently trained by the initial consultant. The role may be assigned to staff (part time), volunteers from the organisation’s community or a contracted expert.

Larger, commercially focussed organisations which do not have an internal archives or records management function are less likely to dedicate staff to the role. Future needs tend to be met by ad hoc projects, usually initiated by problems, than by planning. An exception in the examples cited is the RACV.

The largely ignored issue of electronic archives will remain unattended in many organisations where no ongoing archival responsibilities are assigned. Technical solutions are being offered by IT professionals, as well as data warehousing and data mining for specific information systems; librarians may implement solutions such as “Digital Library” for specific resource-based collections; and records managers capably manage the hardcopy records of the past and present under agreed disposal programs.

## **Conclusion**

There is an enormous wealth of archival material held, often unknowingly, by Australian business. This material has the potential to contribute to our research base, to inform and educate the community, and to provide a tangible asset for ongoing business. Reasons for initiating archival programs vary according to the business driver/s at the time. Consultancy might be used to manage or implement those programs. Results may be short, medium or long term, but in all cases are positive and reinforce the importance of archives to our society, as well as providing immediate and long term benefits to the businesses.

Despite the recent trend towards outsourcing, there is evidence that the attention paid by the private sector to its archives is increasing. This is supported by consultancy, in the form of strategies, plans, process design, procedures, and training. In turn, businesses must take ownership, by maintaining enterprise-wide, professional programs, and by enabling access to information. Digital archives is now the immediate challenge for these businesses, and for the consultants that support them.