

Business archives reporting structures: Is there an ideal placement?

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This article examines the current organizational placement of business archives in the United States, although it also includes information on the archives of British Telecommunications in the UK.

It includes a discussion of what little information on reporting structures appears in the literature and attempts to provide a view of what is currently happening through information gathered by survey and by solicitation through the Business Archives List. This article provides data on the reporting structure of 55 corporations. The conclusion is that there is not a single ideal organizational placement for business archives. The ideal is to have supportive administration from an area that understands the role and function of the archives and can provide the necessary resources to implement a program that meets the corporate needs.

The impetus for this article came from questions that were asked of me by a company with which I was working on the plans for the establishment of an

archives program. The company was interested in knowing where other similar corporations had decided to place their archives within the organization. When I searched, I could not find anything in the recent literature that directly addressed the issue of departmental placement and reporting structures in current business archives. I recalled that in 1975, when I first was hired to establish a corporate archives as part of Nationwide Insurance Companies' celebration of its fiftieth anniversary, I searched the literature for advice and information. The most informative publication available was Edie Hedlin's *Ohio Business Archives Manual* published in 1974 by the Ohio Historical Society as a part of the OHS's efforts to encourage private Ohio corporations to "create and support their own archives."

Hedlin advised that, "[a] critical consideration is the location of the archives in the organization structure. To insure maximum cooperation between archives employees and the rest of the company, the archives should be as close as possible to the upper executive levels. If company managers show firm commitment to the archives program, they can help the archivist deal with employees' natural tendency to consider the records which they maintain to be their own property, thus lending their cooperation in transferring records to the archives."¹

Then in 1979, the Business Archives Affinity Group of the Society of American Archivists,² began to formulate a set of guidelines for business archives. The group accepted the guidelines at the 1981 SAA annual meeting in Berkeley, California and SAA Council approved them in January 1982.

In the section of the guidelines relating to "Administrative Relationships" the guidelines state:

"To carry out its mission and serve the company well, a business archives should:

1. Receive support from the highest levels of the organization.
2. Be placed with an organizational unit that provides visibility, understands the goals and functions of the archives, provides appropriate physical and administrative resources, and opens channels of communication to all areas and operations of the business.
3. Have clear authority to collect materials from all units within the organization and be part of a well-defined chain of command.
4. Be administered by a full-time, professional archivist who has authority to prepare budgets, develop programs, make long-range plans, and outline needs to superiors."³

The common wisdom of the time suggested that reporting to the Office of the Corporate Secretary would be an excellent administrative placement for an archives since the responsibilities of that office typically include the maintenance of Board records and other essential corporate documents such as, articles of incorporation, stock and proxy certificates, etc. It was felt that the Corporate Secretary would have an understanding of the importance of preserving company records, and also the suggested high level of authority within the corporation necessary to secure company-wide cooperation for the archives's efforts to collect and make accessible permanently valuable records.

My experience at Nationwide Insurance Company seemed to reinforce that common wisdom, although the archives began in different circumstances than reporting to a top management office. The initial reporting structure was to a manager in the Office of Corporate Facilities and Services who had responsibilities that ranged from administration of the parking garages to the corporate library. The fact that the corporate library reported to this individual made it the inevitable choice for the archives in top management's opinion. In the first year or so it worked out well enough because there was a company-wide interest in the upcoming Fiftieth Anniversary which engendered a high level of enthusiasm and cooperation for the preservation of historical material. However, the vision for the program was narrow in scope and there was not much support for the creation of a broader program which would serve the information needs of all of the departments and divisions in the companies. It took about five years of public relations and educational efforts, with a gradual movement upward in the management structure that involved reporting to various Directors, before the archives was finally incorporated into the Office of the Corporate Secretary. I reported directly to the Assistant Corporate Secretary.

Unquestionably this placement was ideal for the archives within the companies. It allowed the archives to broaden the scope of its collecting policies and to institute an active oral history project. The archives interviewed with past Chairmen of the Board, Presidents, and Senior Vice Presidents from the founding days onward (the majority of them were still alive). The archives also instituted interviews with all Board Members and senior executives at the time of their retirement.

The fact of the matter is that this administrative placement worked well largely due to the personalities and the enthusiastic support and understanding of the potential value for the program by the Corporate Secretary

and Assistant Secretary. In my ninth year there, the archives merged with the corporate library and records management to create an information center which I administered. At the same time there was a change of top level administration due to retirements and the ever present shifts in organizational structure that characterize most American businesses. The archives found itself once again reporting to the Office of Corporate Facilities and Services, which had fought to regain control of the library that it had administered since the 1940s. I learned first-hand that while business archives programs do need the support of upper level management, even more critical is the need to report to an area within the company, and an individual, who both understands and can effectively lobby for the planning, budget, and personnel required to run an archival/information services program that meets the corporation's information needs. Unfortunately, the information center lost that support in the change and had to begin the process of re-establishing itself anew.

My quest for information on current reporting structures led me to believe that current data would be of value to the profession, as well as to companies contemplating creating new archival programs. Some of the information presented here was gathered for the Records of American Business project sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Minnesota Historical Society and the Hagley Museum and Library⁴, and other data was gathered from a request I posted on the Business Archives ListServ asking archivists to let me know about their internal reporting situation.

The request to the Business Archives ListServ elicited a small number of responses, but many of these respondents were willing to discuss their experiences in some depth. I offer some of their comments as illustrative of what is the general nature and significance of the various reporting structures for their respective positions.

For example, Becky Haglund Tousey, archivist for Kraft Foods Inc., a company which offers strong and generous support to its archives and to the larger archival community, reports to the Director of Internal Communications. She says that while her immediate boss is a Director she feels that, "I have solid support at the Vice President and Senior Vice President levels as well. I don't necessarily think the management level alone determines whether the program gets support."

Robbin Mayo, Archives Resource Manager for United Parcel Service, echoes Becky Tousey's comments. "Our archives is part of the Communication

department [within Human Resources]. We do not lack support from our upper management, the company is based on tradition and legacy, and looks to the archives as a good resource.” When I queried Robbin for more detailed information about the UPS archives, she responded, “My immediate manager reports to the Communications manager, who reports to the Vice President of Human Resources, who reports to the Senior Vice President of Human Resources. I have full access to all of these people as the need arises.

Robbin goes on to say, “My collection is representative of the 14 key functions in UPS, however we have 78 departments. The 78 departments are represented in some way through the 14 key functions. I focus on areas that we have a lot of holes in, but I spend a lot of time with the Public Relations department, and Business Development. My recent endeavors have been to retrace the early growth cities of UPS and I have been able to capture some original documents from our founders.”

Claudette John of CIGNA relates the following: “Years ago, the INA Archives in Philadelphia reported to the Corporate Secretary. Today CIGNA has a repository at the corporate headquarters in Philadelphia and another, also professionally staffed, in Bloomfield, CT, where most of its health care and financial services subsidiaries are located. Since the formation of CIGNA by INA and Connecticut General Corporations in 1982, the Archives has reported to the Services Division of Human Resources and Services. If the pending divestiture of the CIGNA P&C domestic and international divisions—both of which are located in Philadelphia—receives the necessary approvals, there will probably be an extensive reorganization of Philadelphia-based services. Who knows where we may report next?”

Shaleen Culbert, archivist for Cargill in Minneapolis, says, “At Cargill the Archives has always been part of our Public Affairs division. I report to the director of our Corporate Library and he reports to the Vice President of Public Affairs. Recently a new department was created, Corporate Records and Information Management, which is affiliated with the Law department. A proposal was made to move the Archives from the Public Affairs department and place it under the direction of the new Records and Information Management department, but that proposal was overruled. There are many reasons why it is in Cargill’s best interests for the two departments to remain separate, the least of which being the research and writing of the third volume of our corporate history. As archivist, I am also our corporate historian’s primary research assistant. I also handle a small museum-like display in our main atrium and manage some internal proprietary data-

bases. It has been most advantageous to the Archives to be part of the Public Affairs department in terms of visibility and support. The Law department does not have the budget or the inclination to maintain the Archives in the manner that Public Affairs has for the past 10 years. I work closely with our Corporate Records Manager and, although I know that she still feels that her department should oversee mine, I really feel the reporting structure we currently have works best for the Archives. In fact, it would actually serve Records and Information Management better to be part of the same division as the Corporate Library because it would assist greatly with funding for key items and provide more access to people and resources that deal more directly with information management on a daily basis. I suspect that the reporting structure will be an ongoing discussion, but I feel fortunate to be where I am. So much thought and effort has gone into support for the Archives in the past 10 years that it makes it unlikely that Public Affairs will want to dump a department that they have invested so much in and that has the potential to continue to yield positive and visible results.”

David Hay of British Telecommunications wrote a most interesting brief history of how his archives has been involved in a number of organizational changes over the years. He says, “I suspect that our experience is similar to that of most colleagues, but over the years we have moved organisationally several times reflecting wider reorganisations within BT (British Telecommunications). Sometimes we have temporarily benefited from this, at other times our reporting line has been truly bizarre. At times I have reported to managers responsible for administration services, office services, building & facilities services, internal contact services, internal phone provisioning services, catering & even chauffeurs! Some of the stranger positions were under the umbrella of Human Resources, which, naturally enough, didn’t see us as part of their core business and didn’t really know where to position us.”

“Since last year we have reported to the Director of Corporate Governance within the Company Secretary’s Area. This has assisted us immeasurably; we have an increasing profile, we are in a part of the business which values us and sees our activity as complementing others in the area. We are better resourced (I have been allowed to recruit another professional archivist) and supported, and we are much closer organisationally to key individuals and people who have daily contact with key people across the business i.e. Board Secretariat (and their records!). Equally important is that by the nature of its activity and the relatively small number of people

in Secretary's Area it is much less likely to be prey to constant reorganisations going on elsewhere. Change is constant to some degree, but we have much more stability than before. Before this last move I had 5 managers in two years, all of whom had to be 'sold' the value of an archives and persuaded to provide budget, with varying degrees of success. This obviously detracted from our proper activity."

David adds, "The only downside to this last move is that we have been divorced from the records management activity which has since moved from Human Resources to Facilities. This has caused a few headaches budgets-wise (who pays for storage of materials being held for review?), but we still have a close working relationship and understand the value of each other. Functionally, there has been no practical difference, but ideally we would all have the same reporting line."

He continues, "There are those who say that in these days of flatter structures and matrix management organisational position is irrelevant. From personal experience I can say that this is utter rot. Organisational positioning and personal support from key senior managers is critical. The argument that archives can 'hide' behind a records or information management function really no longer holds water. Managers these days are constantly hunting for activities to crop to reduce costs, and a business archives has to demonstrate value on its own merits, however it chooses to do so."

Philip Mooney of the Coca-Cola Company Archives noted that, "the message from David Hay rang particularly true for me. Like David, I have been in various parts of the organization over the years, including the Facilities placement that was probably the worst. At the moment, I live as part of the Marketing Division, reporting to a Vice President who is also the Executive Assistant to the Chief Marketing Officer. In this position, I have access to resources that were never available in other parts of the company. Since the organization itself is essentially a Marketing Company, the Archives has a visibility and a 'business' role that it would not enjoy if it were elsewhere in the organization."

Phil states, "My long standing argument on this issue is that the Archives needs to be near the core of the business. If you work for a bank or other financial institution, the Corporate Secretary's office may be the best fit, but if you are part of a Consumer Product organization, that may not be as good a positioning. Access to decision-makers and visibility are key components of most successful programs."

Susan Box of American International Group (AIG) provided a great deal of interesting information that compared and contrasted her experiences at AIG with those at Phillips Petroleum Company.

Susan began her communication on this issue with a comment and a question. “I still believe it is important to report as close to the top as possible. Having said that, however, my experience has been that success is related more to what kind of access one has to the top levels as well as across the company, than whether or not one is actually reporting at the high or highest levels. I have reported to all levels and the support of the person you are reporting to is crucial—whether they have access or the ear of the top people is irrelevant if they are secure enough to let you have it if you need it.”

She goes on to say, “I found it interesting that you have discovered that most are reporting at the Director level. I thought most of us were reporting at the Executive or Senior Vice President or Vice President level. I wonder if the size of the company has anything to do with the difference? Fortune 50, 100, 500, etc.?”

In relating her experiences at Phillips Petroleum, Susan Box says, “I started the archives under the Manager of Internal Communications. He reported to the Senior Vice President of Corporate Affairs, who in turn reported to the Chairman/CEO, who was personally involved with the creation of the archives and always took a personal interest until he retired three years later. This Manager (Phillips doesn’t have a Director position, this is the equivalent) had a fabulous vision of and for the archives and totally empowered me to do what needed to be done and go where I needed to without feeling threatened. A lot was accomplished in a very short amount of time as a result.”

She goes on to describe how for about nine months the archives reported to the Supervisor of Records Management, who reported to the Manager of Facilities and Services, who reported to the Vice President of Corporate Services, who reported to the Executive Vice President of Transportation and Services, who reported to the Chairman/CEO. This was not a good placement for the archives because the Supervisor was threatened by the access and rapport to top management that Susan had established. The archives was returned to reporting to the Manager of Internal Communications. Phillips went through a downsizing which “the archives survived but the Manager of Internal Communications didn’t.” The archives was designated to report to the Supervisor of Audio and Visual Communications.

Susan states, “It was an incredible reporting function but turned out to be very beneficial and supportive. The new Chairman/CEO used them a lot, and so in turn came to know the archives, began to use it and have it do projects for him as a result. Hence my comment, support and access is the most important aspect.”

She continues, “After three more downsizings I finally left, but was able to train my successor. She reports to the Manager of Corporate Information Services in Research & Development, who reports to the Vice President of Research & Development, who reports to the CIO (Chief Information Officer).”

Susan then worked for several months for the Columbia University Health Sciences Center in New York City before accepting the position with AIG. She offers the following description of her experience in establishing the archival program at American International Group, “It had a bit of a rocky start the first year because the Chairman/CEO wanted me to report to him, but he didn’t have the time nor the inclination for the daily grunt work and details necessary to get it going. The Senior Vice President I now report to for my daily work and for signatures is Senior Vice President of Communications, who reports to the Chairman/CEO, but I still have face and phone contact regularly with the Chairman/CEO. The Senior Vice President of Facilities and Services interjected himself for a brief while in the middle of the first year and I was reporting essentially to three people and almost had a nervous breakdown by the end of the year—it was very, very difficult for everything, budgets, signatures, permissions, goals, vision, etc. etc. The Chairman stepped in and straightened it out firmly to my total satisfaction.”

Susan says, “I think for a start-up archives situation, it is often seen as the Chairman’s latest pet project. With its high visibility, many people want to climb on the bandwagon which can both help and hurt progress and requires tons of tact and diplomacy, lost of listening and careful decision making and opinion giving. AIG is like no other company that I know of. The Archives is the very first totally centralized division of the company on a worldwide basis to the shock (at the beginning) of all of the management. My best ally, best advice giver, best ear here has been the Senior Vice President of Human Resources—he has been incredibly supportive, given wonderful advice, and given me access to him when I most need it I have learned an enormous amount here at AIG, but Phillips was my proving ground, Columbia taught me still more, and I have applied lessons learned there to here. I was firm in where I wanted the archives to be physically

located, firm in who I wanted to report to, firm in basic budgetary and staff needs—I was prepared to turn the job down if they weren't willing to meet my terms because I didn't see how it could succeed otherwise. I also asked for a commitment on their part of 5 years (they usually give new departments 3 years here to succeed). So far so good—I am in my third year now and things are very good.”

Susan final comments were, “There is no question that every company has its own peculiar corporate culture that affects every aspect—access, reporting structure, vision, empowerment, etc. Perhaps it's the corporate culture more than reporting structure that has the greatest effect on the longterm success of its archives.”

Using the information from the Business Archives ListServ and data from the Records of American Business Project⁵, I was able to amass departmental reporting information for a total of 55 corporations. Allowing for the differences in terminology for describing departments, I have tried to create generally recognizable departmental categories. Listed in order of frequency, the departments cited by the fifty-five respondents are:

Corporate Communications	12
Corporate Library	6
Technology/Business Information Services/ Information & Computing Services	5
Corporate Services/Administrative & Facilities Services	5
Corporate Relations/Corporate Affairs/ Public Affairs	5
Marketing/Public Relations	4
Human Resources	3
Legal/Corporate Secretary	3
Research & Development	3
Editorial Department	2
Creative Resources	1
Corporate Planning	1

Production Department	1
Operations	1
Regional Services	1
Treasurer	1
Purchasing	1

Another way in which to look at this data on departmental reporting structure is by the type of industry or business. Although these are general categories, and many conglomerates today are involved in the manufacture or distribution of more than one type of goods or services, this list reflects the different major types of business enterprises and their departmental reporting structures:

AUTOMOBILE MANUFACTURING

Corporate Communications

CHEMICAL MANUFACTURING

Information/Computer Systems

CLOTHING MANUFACTURING & RETAIL SALES

Corporate Communications

ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

Technology

FINANCIAL INDUSTRY (BANKING AND INVESTMENTS)

Corporate Marketing; Operations

FOOD AND FOOD PRODUCT MANUFACTURING

Legal/Corporate Secretary; Corporate Affairs; Corporate Communications; Marketing & Public Relations

HOUSEHOLD GOODS & HEAVY MANUFACTURING

Corporate Communications; Corporate Relations/Corporate Affairs/
Public Relations; Human Resources; Technology/Business
Information Services/Information-Computer Services;
Region Services; Treasurer; Corporate Library

OIL & GAS INDUSTRY

Research & Development;
Corporate/Administrative/Facilities Services

PHARMACEUTICALS

Corporate Relations/Corporate Affairs/Public Affairs

PUBLIC UTILITIES

Corporate/Administrative/Facilities Services; Purchasing

PUBLISHING

Editorial; Legal/Corporate Secretary

SERVICE INDUSTRY (INCLUDING INSURANCE COMPANIES)

Corporate Communications; Marketing & Public Relations;

Production; Corporate Library; Human Resources;

Corporate/ Administrative/Facilities Services; Business

Information Services/Technology/Information-Computer Services

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Corporate Communications; Corporate Planning;

Legal/Corporate Secretary

What this research demonstrates is that there is little or no uniformity in the choice of reporting structures for business archives in the United States. The Corporate Secretary's Office, while it may be a desirable organizational placement in some companies, is not the commonly selected administrative area for business archives. This survey, which is not comprehensive, indicates that Corporate Communications is an area to which a number of archives report. I suspect that this is because many business archives programs provide substantial support for their company's public relations and marketing activities.

The conclusions which we can draw from this information reflect the realities of the situation for business archives today. There is no single ideal reporting structure for business archives in corporations. The best placement for the archives will differ from company to company. It depends upon the nature of the business; the company's history and its corporate culture; the management style and the level of interest in the corporate history of the CEO, President, and other top management; and the personality, understanding, and enthusiasm of the administrator to whom the archivist reports.

The 1982 Business Archives Guidelines still offer an excellent summary of the key ingredients to successful business archives programs:

- 1) Support from the highest corporate levels;
- 2) Reporting to a unit that provides the archives with visibility, understands the goals and functions, and provides the necessary resources and support;
- 3) Having authority to collect materials from all units within the organization;
- 4) Having a full-time professional archivist to plan and administer the archives.

Number four in that list is something that I have not discussed in this article, but the knowledge, ability, and personality of the archivist are more important than any other single aspect of the business archives program. The ideal reporting structure will not lead to an excellent business archives without the presence of a skilled, hard-working, and personable archivist to shape and guide the program.

Business archivists have a different role to play from archivists in other settings. The business archivist is much more service driven. The archivist in a business provides services far beyond the collection and processing of the records. The key function or service of a business archives is the speedy and accurate delivery of needed information to the corporate users. The business archivist has to be able to anticipate what the internal information needs will be and then must promote the availability of that information throughout the company. Another important factor to success is that the business archivist must be someone who fits well into the corporate environment. The business archivist must engender confidence in his or her company loyalty and understanding of the need to protect valuable confidential and/or proprietary information about goods and services. He or she should exhibit intelligence, a spirit of cooperation, leadership ability, and at the same time be a team player. It is important that the personality, work-ethic, and style of the archivist meld well with the corporate culture of the business. The ability of the individual archivist in combination with sympathetic and supportive management is what creates the dynamic of the successful business archives. The stories related here indicate that an able archivist can create a successful program regardless of, or in spite of, the internal reporting structure—albeit that it is a struggle without supportive administration.

Endnotes

1. Edie Hedlin, *Ohio Business Archives Manual*, Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio Historical Society, 1974, p.7.
2. In the early to mid-1970s the Society of American Archivists had a Business Archives Committee which evolved into a section. In 1979 SAA created Professional Affinity Groups and its title became the Business Archives Affinity Group. It is currently the Business Archives Section again.
3. Linda Edgerly, "Business Archives Guidelines", *The American Archivist* v. 45, no.3 (Summer 1982): p. 271.
4. The project culminated in the publication of *The Records of American Business*, edited by James M. O'Toole, Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 1997.
5. The information gathered from the Records of American Business project was collected with a promise for confidentiality for the respondents. Therefore, the names of the specific corporations and their identified responses cannot be disclosed.