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The Challenges of Documenting Modern American Business

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The challenges of documenting American business have led archivists to develop techniques for selection, appraisal, and use of a wide variety of records that provide essential information for depicting aspects of business history and corporate operations. Often working closely with business historians and corporate leaders, archivists have attempted to mine the rich resources worthy of preservation from vast mountains of modern business records. In order to understand past and present approaches taken by archivists to preserve documentation important both to company officials and to outside researchers, this book is essential reading. *The Records of American Business* provides a variety of perspectives on the current state of archival practice, both for in-house corporate archives and for repositories that collect records relating to American business and enterprise.

This volume is a tangible result of the Records of American Business Project (RAB), sponsored by the Minnesota Historical Society and the Hagley Museum and Library and funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This project brought together the two collecting repositories with the largest holdings of business records in North America in a joint effort "to refine and redefine the appraisal and use of corporate records" (p. vi). Many of the essays in this volume were first presented at the RAB symposium in April, 1996. By that time, the project had broadened its scope to include many of the most significant institutions and individuals actively engaged with American business records, including corporate archivists, archivists from universities and historical societies, and independent consultants. The variety of perspectives offered in this volume is impressive. The diversity of views indicates that there is no consensus concerning a particular approach to solving archival conundrums, but rather a healthy discourse representing different viewpoints.

The Records of American Business begins with a foreword by the editor, James M. O'Toole, who outlines some of the major themes that emerge from this collection of fourteen essays. One of the most basic issues is placement: should business firms establish in-house archival programs, or place their records at an external research institution? Other issues include the complex process of appraisal, by which archivists determine the long-term value of records. Changing technology has had a significant impact on archival operations, particularly in business firms, which often have confronted new technologies, such as the computer, before other institutions. Finally, O'Toole makes a strong case for the necessity of business archives to redefine their clientele and to build alliances of all kinds with other groups. "Only if alliance building comes to be seen as part of the core of archival services—equal in importance to appraisal, arrangement, description, preservation activities, and all the other familiar archival tasks—will archivists be able to meet the multifarious challenges of modern records," he concludes (p. xvi). O'Toole insists that these essays have a wider applicability than American business records, since all archivists face similar challenges and problems. This is true, but in straining to make the point he overreaches, advising the reader to substitute the word "academic" or "religious" or whatever term applies to your own setting whenever the word "business" appears (p. vii). I tried this; it simply doesn't work all the time. Many of the issues presented here apply only, or principally, to a business context. After all, that is the presumed rationale for a volume devoted to business records. That said, it is true that many of these techniques can be adapted to fit other types of institutional settings, and the volume will be useful for all archivists, and it should find a wide audience.

In his introduction, "Business and American Culture: The Archival Challenge," Francis X. Blouin, Jr., director of the Bentley Historical Library at the University of

Michigan, provides the context for the essays that follow. Quoting Calvin Coolidge's famous dictum, "The chief business of the American people is business," Blouin writes that, despite the enormous impact of business institutions on American life, relatively little is known about them. Blouin blames this in part on trends in academic history, which has not focused much attention on business institutions, and in part on the fact that, compared to political, religious and educational institutions, "there is very little documentation with which to work" (p. 1). Blouin discusses the narrow definition of business, as "a set of organizations that have structure and purpose focused on the delivery of goods and services," and the broader sense of the term, as "an institution that defines culture and values" (p. 3). Both senses should be considered in reading the diverse articles in this volume, he says. Blouin then provides a succinct overview and interpretation of the essays to follow, showing how they relate to three major challenges facing archivists dealing with business records: appraisal, use, and technical issues. This volume presents a variety of perspectives, Blouin states, and this pluralistic approach appears necessary to meet the needs of a diverse group of users. The fundamental divergence represented here is between corporations that establish their own internal archives and "external" repositories, such as universities, historical societies, and research libraries, which collect records from many different business firms. Although archivists generally encourage businesses to maintain their own archives, over the past decade there has been "a downward trend in the creation of business archives programs in corporations" (p. 351), and several major corporations have closed well-established and apparently successful archives programs, according to Winthrop Group consultant Karen Benedict. Benedict, formerly corporate archivist for Nationwide Insurance, provides an analysis of the choices facing company officials in deciding between maintaining an in-house archives program or placing company records in an outside repository. Although arguing strongly for the first option, Benedict acknowledges that many companies will prefer contracting out for archival services. This, at least, is preferable to destroying caches of significant historical documentation, which is all too common among corporations worried about disclosure of sensitive information.

Many of the reasons for this concern for corporate privacy are implicit in the essay by Philip F. Mooney of Coca-Cola, who is curiously the only contributor actively employed as an in-house business archivist. Mooney contrasts archival myths about business archives with the corporate reality he sees daily. He contends that cor-

porations are "ahistoric by their very nature" (p. 60), and that in-house "archival professionals need to develop more precise tools to measure bottom-line contributions" (p. 61) and must "constantly seek new opportunities to market [the archives] resources and service to its constituents" (p. 63). Although a few business leaders might appreciate the value of history for institutional memory, decision-making or maintaining corporate culture, Mooney counters that they are rare exceptions. Corporate archivists will have a difficult time justifying their contributions to the financial well-being of the company.

Despite these difficulties, Marcy Golstein depicts in-house business archives moving from a narrow traditional focus to a more flexible approach emphasizing a variety of business uses for archival records. A former archivist for AT&T, now working as a consultant, Golstein emphasizes corporate archives as "the repository of the corporate memory" (p. 41) and as "knowledge management centers and not historical warehouses" (p. 54). Such arguments sound persuasive, but the declining numbers of corporate archives suggest that fewer business executives are convinced that the costs and potential liabilities of in-house archives justify their continuation.

To demonstrate that some corporate executives have championed the establishment and development of in-house archives, the volume presents brief excerpts from oral history interviews with three such business leaders. These statements repeat some of the traditional arguments in support of in-house archives, but there is not much context or background with which to form a clear perspective on their comments. It would have been more interesting to hear comments from different viewpoints, such as an executive who opposes funding for archives or one who was converted from a skeptic to a true believer. This would help us understand the challenges faced by corporate archivists.

The other side of the debate, comprising most of the essays in this volume, is framed by archivists who do not have direct ties to in-house archives. While corporate archivists seem to be waging a battle for survival and attempting to adapt to ever-changing corporate climates, several major archival institutions have been developing significant research collections of business records. Many of these collections result from business closings or corporate takeovers, with surviving records often being spotty or coming to a repository without opportunity for the archivist to determine in advance which records should be saved. The challenges faced in such circum-

stances involve selection and acquisition, appraisal, and filling documentary gaps. These are the themes explored in the remaining essays.

The “complex relationship between historical scholarship and the keeping of archival records” is the theme of the lead essay, by Michael Nash of the Hagley Museum and Library. Writing more for archivists than for business historians, Nash provides an historiographic survey from the founding of the Business Historical Society in 1925 to recent studies that focus on trends in American economic, political, and social life, and the impact of gender, race, and workers on business. From a citation study of more than 67,000 footnotes in fifty major business history monographs and five leading journals, Nash concludes that “over time, there appears to be a declining reliance on archival sources” from business firms (p. 35). Nash offers only a few observations based on this finding, principally that archivists should make a more systematic effort to collect records from industry trade associations, lobbying groups, political action committees, and other entities that “can potentially provide the sources that scholars are seeking in order to document the relationship between business, culture, politics, and society” (p. 35). Unfortunately, this recommendation is the final sentence of his essay, so there are no specific suggestions for how this can be accomplished.

The most ambitious effort to answer the questions raised by Nash comes from Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, both archivists at Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), who first proposed the RAB Project. Their essay presents a lengthy case study of the MHS effort to develop a pragmatic approach to selecting modern business records for archival preservation. The “Minnesota Method” they developed is based on the assumption that “all archival appraisal is local and subjective” (p. 162), but that, through careful analysis of both records creators and the records themselves, archivists can establish appraisal and selection criteria that are “rational and efficient relative to a specific repository’s goals and resources” (p. 162). The strategy they propose includes: defining a collecting area; analyzing existing collections; determining the documentary universe, including relevant government records, printed and other sources; prioritizing industrial sectors, individual businesses, geographic regions, and time periods from which records will be sought; defining functions performed by businesses and the collecting levels needed to document major functions; connecting documentary levels to priority tiers; and updating this process every three to seven years. They outline priority factors used in making these decisions, documentation levels, and decision points to

refine the priority levels. This Minnesota Method combines features of archival approaches to collection analysis, documentation strategy, appraisal, and functional analysis. Complete with eight flow charts, as well as other outlines and charts listing various procedural steps and criteria, the essay presents a detailed explanation of this strategy. Despite the authors’ statement that this “pragmatic method of selection ... may seem a modest goal on paper” (p. 206), many archivists would find it a daunting task to adapt the Minnesota Method to their own repositories. The essay’s greatest value, however, is in outlining the complex issues that must be addressed in making appropriate and effective decisions regarding archival selection and acquisition. This is one essay that clearly suggests applicability to other types of historical records beyond the sphere of business.

Whereas Greene and Daniels-Howell focus on documentation for entire industries, Christopher T. Baer examines appraisal of records within a single firm. Baer draws on his extensive experience at the Hagley Museum and Library to explain four parameters that shape his approach to appraisal of business records. Baer’s approach reflects a number of influences, including Alfred D. Chandler’s seminal work and Michael E. Porter’s “Five Forces” of competitive strategy. The four parameters he posits for evaluating business records are function (actions required to achieve elemental purposes), structure (i.e., external structure), strategy (referring to both strategy and tactics), and detail (level of specificity and completeness for a particular record). In explaining the application of such criteria, Baer reviews much of the business management literature of recent decades and provides detailed analysis of factors affecting appraisal of business records. Ultimately, however, he concludes that the parameters he describes are “at best a kind of mental road map” and that the efficacy of appraisal decisions rests “in the archivist’s ability to use them in practice” (p. 120). The archivist is not a scientist searching for abstract truths but “a technologist who must occasionally work in the absence of or in advance of theory and who must use a variety of tools to produce a useful product in response to conflicting and often irreconcilable demands” (p. 121). Baer’s model, not quite as complex as the Minnesota Method, provides a useful starting point for any archivist facing the daunting task of analyzing and appraising voluminous records of a modern business firm. Following a detailed model may not make the work easier, but it should improve the quality and reliability of appraisal decisions.

Compared to the lengthy essays just considered, Bruce Bruemmer’s essay on functional analysis in the ap-

praisal of business records will seem either a welcome relief for harried archivists or a simplistic solution to a complex problem. Bruemmer, archivist of the Charles Babbage Institute at the University of Minnesota, focuses on the documentation needs of individual companies. Borrowing from earlier work by Helen Samuels, Joan Krizack, and others, he applies the concept of functional analysis to business records. This appraisal method concentrates on documenting the most important functions of an organization, rather than its structural hierarchy. Instead of selecting records based on their relationship to the offices that generated them, functional analysis examines the underlying functions performed by the organization as a basis for records appraisal. Particularly as electronic records replace traditional means of communication, archivists must define the documentary needs of the organization at the middle or even the beginning of the records cycle. As Bruemmer argues, "Functional analysis is one of the few tools at the command of archivists to help guide archival practice in the electronic environment because it dictates documentary requirements before records are analyzed" (p. 155). In addition to the proximate goal of ensuring adequate documentation of business, he posits the further goal of strengthening the role of business archivists: "If we rise to the challenge, we may discover that the archive itself has become an essential business function" (p. 158). Although less sweeping in its purview and less complex in its design, functional analysis provides another useful model for documenting modern American business.

As historians well know, the history of business is not told entirely through the records generated by business firms. The forms of "external documentation" that supplement corporate records, according to Timothy L. Ericson, include a broad array of sources created by an individual or agency outside the company. Ericson, archivist at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, examines the types of records that document businesses, including printed materials, newspapers, government records, personal papers of business founders or former employees, photographic and cartographic records, oral history, electronic data bases, and the World Wide Web. In some cases, these external sources may be the only records available for studying certain companies, either because official company records have been lost or destroyed or because of access restrictions placed on such records. In some situations, Ericson contends, such limited documentation might be all that is needed for companies that have limited national or even local impact. In other cases, external documentation may provide "a more appropriate level of information" (p. 319) than detailed records of

every action taken within a corporation. This approach will be especially useful for small or defunct businesses, for businesses subject to extensive government regulation, to fill documentary gaps, or when only general or summary information is required.

Several essays in *The Records of American Business* examine specific types of records that are important for business archives. Richard J. Cox examines the impact of electronic records on corporate archives, emphasizing the internal value of business records as evidence and the role of archivists in protecting intellectual property, transaction security, integrity of data, and privacy. James E. Fogerty makes a strong case for the value of oral history in filling gaps in the documentation of business and in explicating corporate culture. Oral history "allows the creation of documents that cut through the formal record of organization to the internal and dynamic record of everyday operation" (p. 264). Ernest J. Dick, another former corporate archivist now working as a consultant, likewise argues for the importance of sound and visual records in providing a more complete documentation of corporate memory and a clearer understanding of corporate culture.

Most of the essays in this volume address the concerns and needs of archivists, scholars, and corporate officials. An important counterpoint is provided by John A. Fleckner, chief archivist at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Starting from the paradox of the public's dislike of history as an academic subject despite its fascination with history outside the classroom, Fleckner discusses the popular presentation of business history. Drawing examples from history museums, historical sites, corporate depictions of history, and a variety of popular history publications, Fleckner distinguishes three distinct purposes served by popular history of business—to educate an audience; to contribute to business objectives; and to entertain. He urges archivists to look beyond their traditional audiences for business records—scholars and business executives—and to recognize the broader potential for some business records to become "the grist for journalists, public affairs staff, and other popular writers who unlock the history of business to much wider audiences" (p. 345). Given the public's fascination with old products and advertisements, for example, and the boundless allure of nostalgia, this may well be a valuable approach for archivists to take. Many business advertisers have already discovered this.

The final essay in the volume, "Business Records: The Prospect from the Global Village," by Michael S. Moss and

Lesley M. Richmond, seeks to broaden the perspective beyond the United States. The title is a bit misleading, since the essay deals mainly with the United Kingdom and only tangentially with other European countries, and, after 368 pages of detailed discussion of American business records, this brief essay seems more an afterthought than an integral part of the discussion. Still, the essay does afford a few comparative insights. Reporting that throughout Europe use of business records for research “remains disappointingly low” (p. 381), the authors conclude, “Although a few family historians occasionally consult certain categories of business records ... the majority of users seem to be enthusiasts seeking information about a product or service that has captured their imagination” (p. 382). The latter type of use is barely hinted at in other essays in the volume, though for many types of business records it holds true equally in the United States. For example, the majority of researchers in certain collections of railroad records consist of model railroaders and other hobbyists. Moss and Richmond also point out that public sector archives can earn revenue by providing research services for distant researchers, and by selling copies of items in their collections. Particularly significant are their comments about the relationship between historians and archivists. “Throughout Europe there is

a complaint, echoing North America, that the archival community has lost contact with historians” (p. 386), they conclude, citing criticism of appraisal methods and demands that more records be preserved for research use. “The historians, for their part, need to understand the issues that confront the archivist and to be aware that they no longer (if they ever did) represent more than a mere fraction of the user community; the records they need for their research are very vulnerable to deaccessioning programmes,” they write (p. 387). Finally, due to the growth of a global economy, they argue that archivists from all countries need to exchange ideas about documentation, appraisal, and use of business records. This call for international collaboration and joint projects is, perhaps after all, a fitting conclusion to a volume of essays about American business records.

The Records of American Business will not be the last word on the subject. But it is a significant step forward in providing broad coverage of a wide range of issues, concerns, and perspectives regarding the selection, appraisal, and use of modern business records. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the process and outcome of archival efforts to ensure adequate documentation of American business in the coming decades.

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