

Where have all the archives gone?
A symposium on the fate of business archives in the 21st century
Friday 24 October 2003, 9am-5pm, Common Room, University House, ANU

Issues, hardships and opportunities : why a company should be interested in maintaining an archives

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I rise with some feelings of inadequacy to speak on this topic, having only joined the ranks of the corporate archivists 8 months ago. Before that, I spent my whole working life as a government archivist of one kind or another. Some people I know have asked “why did you do it?” As if taking up this line of work requires some kind of explanation. I read in the paper the other day that there is a new term – “downshifting” – which might apply to the case (it means people of my age and background taking a cut in salary and responsibility as a deliberate career move). I don’t think of it in those terms. To me it was a job when I needed one and no different really from what I had done previously.

Perhaps changing one’s job, home, and country in one step leaves little time for reflection. On top of that my first task as CBA Archives Manager was to relocate the archives to new premises. In the time I have had to consider my new position, I have reached the conclusion that working as a corporate archivist, despite superficial differences, is not substantially different from working as an archivist anywhere else. So, for me, the title of this presentation might just as well be : Why any enterprise should be interested in maintaining an archives.

With this attitude, it is perhaps surprising that they employed me at all. Shortly after applying I was ‘phoned up in New Zealand (where I was still living) by the Bank’s HR people. Owing to the time difference it was already dinner time for me and I was taking a pre-dinner nap. When I groggily took up the ‘phone I found myself talking to a woman in Sydney who asked me why I wanted to work for the Commonwealth Bank. Half asleep, I said “Well, I don’t really, I just want to be an archivist somewhere”. The people who chose me said they had to do a lot of talking to get me appointed after that.

Another reason I may not notice any significant difference is that the CBA doesn’t have any archives to speak of. From that point of view, the theme of this symposium (where have all the archives gone?) is especially resonant for me. When the old Commonwealth Bank divided in 1960 into the new CBA and the Reserve Bank both the archivist and the archives went to the Reserve. I’ve heard of records following function, but not of records following the archivist, but perhaps it was the other way round and the archivist, in this case, followed the records.

Be that as it may, the CBA Archives at present contains few business records. We have acted for many years as a sort of secondary repository for records of the Board and Secretariat and we hold some important property records because, I suppose, in 1960 the CBA held onto most of the real estate and along with it, the associated records.

For a period after 1960, long-life business records from head office were transferred to the CBA Archives in Sydney. Then a decision was taken to get suitable accommodation. The result wasn’t quite what you might expect. Most of the business records would not fit into the new, upgraded, but smaller premises, so they were sent out to secondary storage – where most of the Bank’s business records have been gathering ever since.

The present operation was initiated as a result of a merger – with Colonial First State. The Bank inherited and decided to take responsibility for a well-formed archive of both the Colonial Mutual and the Rural/State Bank of NSW. That meant constructing new premises,

employing new people, launching a new Archives Policy, and commencing operations to start transferring business records to the Archives once again.

The Archives' main role hitherto (and it is one which continues to be very much a staple of our existence) is twofold. First, we act as a sort of deposit library for the Bank's publications, promotions, and publicity material. Second, we keep all kinds of historical information about the Bank and its activities derived from internal communications – printed and digital – as well as memorabilia and artefacts.

The deposit or documentation programme is critically important to the Bank because the material we hold includes the Terms & Conditions statements relating to the Bank's products and services. In any legal case or dispute involving the Banking Ombudsman, the Bank relies on us to provide the relevant version of terms and conditions governing the relationship with the client. For the moment, and until technology starts capturing both the acknowledgment and the terms and conditions into a single transactional record – which is already happening – this remains our most important and most frequently used service to the Bank. It is also one which ensures that the Archives is valued for the contribution it makes.

Our second traditional role as custodian of the Bank's history also brings us appreciation and support. We can supply facts and figures as part of a presentation (an Area Manager, for example, talking to a Rotary Luncheon), to include in a media release, as part of an advertising campaign, to help make up an award for retiring staff members. These services also are well known within the Bank and appreciated.

But I don't think either of these activities would ensure the survival of the Archives (or, at any rate its immunity from cuts) should the atmosphere become chilly. I can attest to this with some authority even after so short a sojourn with CBA.

The Archives moved, as I say, to new premises shortly after I took up duty. A few months later, we had an official opening of the new premises. We were fortunate to have the Bank's CEO, David Murray, to perform the ceremony. We provided notes and background material, but he largely ignored them. By way of background, I should say that the decision to keep the inherited archives from Colonial/First State, of which the new archives programme and the premises being opened that day were a direct consequence all resulted from a decision taken by Mr Murray personally.

Let me tell you the tenor of his opening words. We have an exact record on video tape but this is the sense of what he said. He began by saying something like this : If I am asked whether it essential for the Bank to have an archives, I would have to say "no" it is not essential. He then went on to say why he thought the Archives mattered and why he had decided to maintain and upgrade it and how corporate memory contributed to better customer service.

These are all reasons why any enterprise should have an archives. They are not reasons, however, why an enterprise must have one. The CEO's opening remarks made that brutally apparent. Archives is a non-essential service in the sense that our documentation work could be done by someone else if the historical program was disbanded. This from a CEO who put good money into re-establishing his corporate archives and had given us his personal support. Imagine what those who don't offer such support think!

And, let me say, out of no craven subservience I would assert, that I agree with him. In the end, as David Murray said on the day, amongst all the other nice things he said about us, the Bank could continue to function without us. By that test, no responsible CEO – whether in the public or the private sector – could say that an archives is a business imperative. If I stopped now, the answer to the question posed by the title given me would be : there are no

reasons why any enterprise should have an archives (in the sense that it is imperative for the survival of the enterprise). An archives is not essential, it's a nice-to-have.

I would be prepared to mount a case that an archives is more than a nice-to-have : that it is useful in mission-critical ways, that it ensures efficiency and effectiveness (to recall some old fashioned terminology of the past), and that it is indeed essential to survival of an enterprise apart from questions of efficiency and effectiveness. But I cannot mount that case around the concept of an archives which David Murray had in his head that afternoon.

This is no criticism of him. I have spent the best part of my life trying to dislodge the picture of what an archives is from the minds of senior executives – without any success to speak of. I am now convinced that nothing will change the connotations which the word “archives” has in most people’s minds – including many archivists. What are those connotations? They were summed up for me about ten years ago in a presentation I heard David Gracy give in The Hague. I was most impressed and I have unashamedly, but with acknowledgment, used his presentation ever since. There are two connotations of the word “archives”, he said, which work to our detriment. They are –

- ◆ “Non-current” and
- ◆ “Old”.

My friend, John Cross, used to say that many people think an archives is the closest the modern world has to a mediaeval monastery. They come to us seeking employment so they can escape from the world. And, he said, gritting his teeth, it's our job to keep them out!

We (archivists) have no one to blame but ourselves for this. We have verified and amplified this view of what we are and what we do. Sometimes, we glory in it. The preservation and promotion of heritage and memory are unquestionably part of the archival mission. But not all of it. For the 40 or so years of archival discourse with which I am personally familiar, we have been receiving important messages about the broader recordkeeping mission from inside the profession (Peter Scott) and outside it (David Bearman). These messages do not (as is sometimes claimed) threaten the cultural mission, but they do reduce it by putting it in the perspective of a larger recordkeeping role and reducing its relative importance by showing it to be a smaller part of a larger whole.

Resisting those important messages has come to be seen by some of us as a totem for protecting and upholding the tradition of heritage and memory. Ignoring them, however, has imperilled our future. Those prophets have been widely ignored. Looking around upon my return after 7 years in New Zealand, I see custodial values and collection management methods in the ascendant. I find that (like some of my colleagues) I have been misrepresented and misquoted by critics such as Paul McPherson and Terry Cook, trying to make out that we who articulate a broader mission for the archivist devalue and dismiss the cultural component of the archival mission.

The case which I think could be put that any enterprise should have an archives, not as a nice-to-have but as an essential, can only be made using this broader, more all-encompassing meaning of archives and its roles and functions. The Bank's Archives is part of a unit called “Information Management”. We have taken a conscious decision not to make use of the CEO's opening speech because we want to be regarded as an essential service to the Bank, not just a nice-to-have.

When I left work yesterday, I was engaged in business analysis and that is what I will take up when I get back to work on Monday. As far as I'm concerned, in a career now spanning more than 30 years with a strong orientation towards archival description, I've always been involved in business analysis. What I'm doing now for the Bank is what I have always done (for preference) and what I enjoy doing most. But again, this is not the view of the world. Real business analysts, if I may call them that, earn about twice as much as archivists. And

any canny enterprise will be in no doubt that they need business analysts. They're essential, not just a nice-to-have.

I once posted to one of the lists outlining alternative "paradigms" – ugly word – for archival arrangements. I pointed out that transferring old and non-current records out of the business environment into a custodial one was not the only possible means by which over-arching archival purposes could be achieved. Our American colleague, Richard Cox, whose passionate interest this has long been, agreed with me. Why should we expect an enterprise to take an interest in its own archives, he asked, if our single strongest message to them is that they should be handed over to someone else?

The connotation of old, non-current, and (from an enterprise viewpoint) non-essential is now so deeply ingrained into the word "archives" that I doubt it can ever be rectified. So, at best, I would have to rephrase my brief – an enterprise must have the skills that an archivist brings to the carrying out of the work of the enterprise. That involves preserving and facilitating the use of old and non-current records incidentally, not as its prime justification.

How can archival skills be mobilised to support the essential work of the enterprise?

The primary role of any archives is to preserve records as evidence once they have left the environment where (undocumented) their provenance was known and understood by the users of the documents (their original creators). The custodial approach is to arrange and describe the archives in front of you and primarily to document the records you hold, rather than the context from which they come.

Peter Scott's great message was not, as many suppose, that we can do this best by ascribing multiple provenance, it was that we can do this best by describing the context completely and not just in respect of what we hold in a collection. The dumbing down of Scot's system into a collection management tool is a seriously retrograde step back into irrelevance. The way forward for archivists is not pull back out of the enterprise, but to advance into it. Our mission, if we chose to accept it, is to document the business. This includes, but is not confined to, collection description.

Let me conclude by assuring you that the world of networked recordkeeping in cyberspace, predicted nearly twenty years ago by David Bearman, and given a theoretical expression in the SPIRT Project has now arrived. In the beginning, we had records management software and information management software. RM software managed paper stuff, while IM systems managed digital stuff. Then the functionality merged and applications, sometimes called "electronic document and records management systems" - EDRMS, emerged. We could tell a whole story about that merger, but it is becoming a matter of historical interest only.

What we are now seeing is the merger of EDRMS and business applications. That is no longer a prediction, it is happening. If you compare the functionality of stand alone archives software with that of top of the range information systems, you will see that 90% of that functionality (discovery, reporting, management of relationships, and so on) is common. We don't need stand alone archival description or management tools any more, least of all inside a business enterprise, except for that last 10% of functionality - in essence, if I may be technical for a moment, for the management of relationships with characteristics through time.

Now, I believe, top of the range information systems, already being deployed to support all aspects of a business can also deliver on the last 10% of the functional requirements for archival management and description. We don't need stand alone archival systems any

longer and, if you're working inside the enterprise, why would you want to? Why replicate outside the enterprise, functionality which, for the most part, is available inside it?

The next frontier, and I think our greatest opportunity, is to embed our archival data inside the enterprise system – just as the SPIRT model provides for. Imagine that. Objects inside the system corresponding to agents, business units, business functions, and even the enterprise itself.

Instead of archives systems needing to document the otherwise invisible participants in a recordkeeping process, we now have business systems capable of binding entity/objects representing those contextual ideas not into a description of the record but into the very record itself. Just as Bearman and the SPIRT Project predicted. No longer a prophecy, a reality. Anyone who can create and manage such entity/objects (something that archivists, if they realise it, have always done) could aspire to becoming an essential to any business.

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