

Re-evaluating archival records and their place in history can open the door to new awareness, promotion, and publicity for any organization.

Whether in a private, public, or government setting, all information professionals interact with their institution's history on a daily basis. Positive or negative, those legacies are vital to the future of any organization. Research projects often fall victim to limited access, poor arrangement of the collections, and little support for an archives program. But institutional history has enormous potential for beneficial internal and external uses. Opening the doors of the archives to researchers is a careful balance between access and risk management; however, the positive benefits of making use of existing historical records far outweigh the negatives.

Identifying Initial Challenges

In most organizations, archives consist of inactive official records and other historically significant material that document an institution, its people, its places, and its things. Archives should not be confused with "active" records that are still used to conduct business. Archival materials have enormous historical and secondary value that can be harnessed for a variety of purposes. The challenges of using these archival records are finding, accessing, and then understanding the material.

In the fast-paced world of corporate mergers and reorganizations, finding historical material on a business or institution is not as easy as looking in the online departmental directory, but there are some general rules to follow. If an official archives program exists, it is likely a designated person is responsible for protecting and providing access to historical material. More frequently in a private business setting,



Making the Most of Your Historical Assets

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there is only a records management program, and any archival material emerging from the life cycle is often sent to an obscure location for safekeeping. Getting to know the people responsible for these collections is the key to accessing that material.

Another fount of historical knowledge comes from veteran employees, who may in fact have boxes full of material collected during their decades-long tenures or have inherited those collections from mentors of long ago. Simply put, even the most historically oblivious organizations have some archival material available.

Although archives may exist, corporate culture and tradition often make

access to these materials a difficult endeavor. Sometimes, access is a privilege and not a realistic expectation. Past legal issues and protecting the institution from outside criticism are often reasons that access to archival records is limited. However, employees or contractors have the advantage of being seen as trustworthy insiders. With a strong plan for research and approval from the necessary levels of authority, these insiders can gain access to a wealth of information.

Make no mistake, research is hard work. Even if a collection is organized logically, indices or other access tools may be non-existent. The sheer magnitude of some archives is a further de-

terrent to research. Electronic records present the challenge of locating compatible software or hardware to view or search for information. Once persistent researchers locate relevant material, they must then understand its context. So often, original documents contain no information about the larger forces involved in their creation. Digging through dozens of boxes may be required to understand the reasons behind institutional decisions. It is also crucial to be aware of larger historical factors (from stock market crashes to politics to new laws to social upheavals) when undertaking research. Despite such challenges, historical research can be extraordinarily rewarding.

Evaluating Historical Assets

The first step of a research project is the survey. Like a journalist searching for the “who, what, when, where, why, and how,” researchers want to know more about the collections, their content, and how to answer questions. While organizing the survey, evaluators should also digest any other reliable sources of institutional history, such as published histories, journal articles, or interviews with veteran employees.

If no archives program exists, a large-scale survey of institutional archives can be organized by a small team of stakeholders. Those parties can undertake the survey or even hire outside consultants to assess what archival materials exist. Eventually, those materials need to be collected and moved into an appropriate space for storage and access purposes. The result of a good survey of historical assets is a detailed report describing the collection’s historical range of subjects, span of dates, and names of important figures. The report should also mention the kinds of formats (e.g., documents, images, audiovisual, objects), the physical condition of the material, their current storage location and any environmental concerns, and an estimate on the size of the collection (e.g.,

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cubic, linear, or shelf feet). Although these first surveys are at the macro level, they provide a good basis for later examinations.

If an archives program does exist, it is likely that access tools are available for use. Researchers need to examine all finding aids, indexes, or databases. Having a general knowledge of the entire collection from the beginning, instead of just searching for specific topics at random, is crucial to launching effective research projects. Many times, these surveys reveal documentation of certain, but usually not all, areas of the institution’s history. Some documentation trends may include:

- Periods of stability are better represented than periods of great change.
- Upper levels of management are better represented than the mid and lower levels.
- Voices of women and minorities are harder to find.
- Most images lack identification of people, places, and dates.
- Electronic files are difficult to recover and use.

When examining historical materials, it is important to follow general archival practices. Careful handling of fragile material or using cotton gloves to sort photographs will prolong the lives of the material. Keeping material in its original order provides researchers clues about its creation and makes later retrieval much easier. If materials are later selected for scanning or duplication, it is imperative to create some kind of tracking system (such as simple paper pull-slips) to keep items from becoming lost. Usually the most heavily used documents are the ones that get misplaced, with

missing government files on “Area 54” as the best example. Creating a database or finding aid for the most significant historical pieces and their physical location may be the most reliable way to avoid misfiling and ensure retrieval. Simply put, original documents can prove or disprove institutional lore and, without them, the institution has less historical standing.

Developing Manageable Projects

After the survey is complete, researchers should begin a manageable project that will yield historical content for multiple, ongoing uses. The project should support current institutional directives and be based on available original sources. Oftentimes, the need to support an upcoming anniversary or event results in a required trip to the archives. Some multipurpose projects that require exploring or re-exploring historical assets include the following:

■ **Moving through time:** Using available original sources to support the information, compile a definitive list of important dates in the institution’s history. First, look for dates of founding, mergers, expansions, contractions, important projects, and tenures of important leaders. Create different historical “eras” (e.g., the first years or decades could be considered the “Golden Era”) while paying attention to watershed national events such as World War II, the tumultuous 1960s, and even presidential elections. This timeline can be updated and altered for numerous purposes.

■ **Firsts of the many:** Search for material to document the important “firsts” or uniqueness of institutional history. Examples can include how a

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company developed an innovative product that consumers use every day, or how an agency improved working conditions, or how a nonprofit launched an internationally recognized program. Internal contributions to institutional culture, such as union organization, diversity efforts, and employee safety, are also parts of the past to highlight. Research may also uncover negative firsts or noteworthy events, which are important to know alongside the other segments of institutional history.

■ **Visual power:** Images of people, facilities, anniversary celebrations, and groundbreaking ceremonies have enormous power. A well-organized photographic collection can be a goldmine for historical research and multiple uses. However, clear copyright, not based only on ownership, must be established before reproducing any visual materials. Remember that photographers own the rights to their pictures, unless the photographs were created for the institution. Building an electronic photographic archive optimizes the long-term use of visual materials. A small scanning project related to a specific focus (e.g., early leaders, different buildings, or product advertising) creates electronic derivatives of selected images and an internal database for easy retrieval. The proliferation of successful subject-focused scanning projects will result in a comprehensive database of the most significant images of institutional history.

■ **Many voices:** Conducting well-planned oral history interviews with veteran employees or retirees has distinct advantages. Targeting a wide

range of employees, from the board room to the mail room, creates a fuller picture of the institution. Devise a short list of questions related to a basic theme (e.g., work on a specific initiative or experiences during a specific era of institutional history), but let the interviewee lead the direction of the session. Always secure signed, written permission from the participant before conducting the interview, provide a typed transcript to the interviewee afterward, and upon his or her approval obtain a second signed release form. The employees' actual words can be used to describe and connect segments of the institution's history that are not available in the archival collection. The role of memory and how it changes over time is an important component of oral history projects. The greatest expense of conducting oral history interviews is the time invested in arranging the interviews and transcribing the results. Retirees may shed the most light on sometimes difficult subjects, but nearly all interviewees are honored just to have an opportunity to recount their experiences before a captive audience.

Spreading the Word

Such a research project will result in much more information than can possibly be used. But a well-devised research plan will answer the questions that it set out to answer and harvest information for future projects. There are countless outlets to showcase the results of historical research projects.

External audiences can be reached through creating online exhibits of selected material, simple brochures and pamphlets, press releases, exhibitions

of material, and public announcements through blogs, websites, and listservs. The result will be increased public awareness for the institution, its history, and its archival collections. Promoting a specific part of the collection or highlighting a period of institutional history often results in outside scholarly attention and visits. Some private institutions may prefer to avoid this kind of attention, while others can benefit immensely from the patronage.

The projected internal uses of the information may, in fact, be the sole reason that supervisors approve historical research projects. A visit to the archives can support strategic planning, litigation, advertising, research and development, and public relations. An archival collection that upholds the overall mission of the institution and its various components stands a good chance of becoming or remaining a permanent fixture. Demonstrating that archival collections are an inexpensive and limitless information resource, and not a legal liability to carefully handle, is crucial to convincing others of the real value of an institution's historical assets.

Support for historical research and an archives program reflects institutional respect for its past, its employees, and its future. By using original sources such as images and documents, myths can be challenged, accomplishments and anniversaries can be celebrated, and new initiatives can be promoted. A methodical approach to research and respect for institutional information is a requirement for any project. Open access to historical records many not be possible for all institutions, but cracking the doors enough to shed light on the past is a good way to share your history with others. **END**

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See references for this article at www.arma.org/imm/jan09/historical.pdf.