

Challenges in the Archives

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As a partial outsider, a researcher who has used business archives here and in Europe with great profit to my historical work, the opportunities but also the responsibilities in maintaining business archives strike me as extremely important.

The issue of organizational memory looms large, admitting that at one level the needs are obvious. Organizations must have well-structured, accurate and accessible records of past policies, to guide future decisions and to contribute to a sense of identity and cohesion. Needs here have increased in recent decades not only because of the heightened pace of change, but also because of the growing rates of executive arrival and departure. As recently as the 1960s, far more top offices in organizations were filled by promotions from within than is now the case. The twin "overs," turnover and takeover, make it far harder for current managers to know what a company was about even in the quite recent past. The result can be unnecessary errors, mistakes once made are simply repeated, because the precedent is unavailable; needless duplication, with constructive policies that might still apply simply forgotten; and a great deal of reinventing the wheel. One reason for the recurrent managerial faddism of contemporary organizations involves the simple neglect of earlier procedures which, perhaps under another, less flashy name, are mainly being revived amid the drums and trumpets of the latest guru. Organizational records, and the good sense to use them actively, assure against a number of errors and delusions.

But archives and their keepers must also remain in touch with larger

disciplinary issues. Here I mean more than the latest techniques of cataloguing and digitalizing, significant as these may be. I also mean contact with responsible, critical scholarship in organizational history.

Organizations often, quite understandably, seek to draw from the records of their past a congratulatory self-portrait. Archives are combed for previous successes, as a basis for advertising or the kind of slick company history that can be handed out at shareholder meetings or used for fundraising. Well and good: kept within bounds, this is an appropriate as well as inevitable use of archives. (The impulse, in fairness, is also encouraged by a legal and public opinion climate too often ready to assume that past mistakes, once admitted, require ongoing opprobrium, which reinforces timidity in probing the full organizational record.)

Current enthusiasms for selective nostalgia now add to the desire to mine archives both selectively and superficially. It's obvious that, with an ageing baby boom generation and amid a number of anxieties about the present that are surprising given peace and prosperity, the impulse to reinvent the '50s or the '70s runs strong. I stress reinvent: nobody (or almost nobody; I'm not sure about Pat Buchanan) wants to revive McCarthyism or the blatant racism of the '50s, but rather its imagined family values. We want elements of the past, sugarcoated at that. And again, no problem up to a point. The mood allows businesses to seek past advertising symbols from their archives, to play on myths or memories of warmer childhoods, tighter families, bigger cars.

What's happening here involves uncertainties resulting from the end of the Cold War, a change that has yielded fewer tensions but also less clear targets for national identity, along with worries about the pace of technological change and the question of which controls what, man or machine. Add to this the pervasive (and disputable, by the way) sense of moral or character decline, and the desire to paint a brighter picture of the past can become almost overwhelming.

The result is a welcome spur to interest in archives of various sorts, but some obvious dangers as well. Whether for organizational self-promotion or nostalgia, highly selective uses of archives to create a past without warts or problems is extremely deluding and dangerous. Past problems and failures are at least as illuminating as achievements and a rosy glow. Here is where the link between archivists and other kinds of historians concerned with the organizational past becomes vital. Collectively, we must encourage organizational leaders to face the past as honestly and rigorously as (we hope) they intend to face the future indeed the two faces are intimately linked. The desire of the archivist for the whole record, and of the historian for interaction with the whole record, are essential counterweights to excessive selectivity. Together, we must seek to promote a more frequent, analytical and sophisticated use of a vital source of organizational planning and evaluation.