

## **The International Records of Corporations**

**Anne Van Camp**

Archivist

*Chase Manhattan Corporation*

Much of the history of international business written to date has concentrated on the history of specific institutions. Most of this history has been limited by the nature of available information, that is, the information created and retained by institutions engaged in international business. It has often been difficult, if not impossible, to find similar or comparative information for more expansive study.

However, international businesses currently are seeking more common ground on information issues. They are increasingly interested in: information creation and retention requirements and standards; records and information processing (including storage and retrieval); and information handling, including access, restrictions, utilization and publication. This will have an impact on how these firms can be studied historically, and on what their historical image will be.

### **HOW DO WE KNOW THAT THERE IS MORE INTEREST IN COMMON GROUND?**

There has been a tremendous increase in the last 20 years in US corporations, many of which are international, in developing programs of an historical nature, including the production of company histories, and the creation of archives and museums. It is estimated there are now over 200 business archives in the US and more than half of them were created in the last two decades.

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There has been a similar increase in non-US corporations, many of which are older, and most of which have international concerns.

An increasing number of inquiries about archives and records handling have come from other international corporations, many from outside the U.S. The Chase archives and other corporate archives across the country have received requests for information on records management and archival preservation from our counterparts throughout the world.

There is a rise in the number of organizations dedicated to international records and archives. One example is the International Council on Archives which created the Business Archives Committee ten years ago. The committee now has representatives from 37 different countries. Its purpose is to promote preservation and access to business records and to contribute to the development of archives, especially in Third World countries.

Increasing amounts of literature on international business records provide further evidence of more interest. There are several projects underway world-wide to identify business records and to make their availability known. Standards for describing records in an international format are also being investigated.

## **WHY ARE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESSES SEEKING MORE COMMON GROUND ON INFORMATION ISSUES?**

One reason is the great concern over the proliferation of information. The rapid media in use, the volume of data to manage, the use of multiple storage sites world-wide, all can lead to a lack of control over information.

And there are already major pressures to standardize some kinds of records and information:

In the financial field, we see the greatest standardization of information and recordkeeping in areas from international audit standards to World Bank/IMF requirements, which are global.

In business communications, the emphasis is on *international* communication, for example the use of global marketing and consistent world-wide advertising. Businesses are attempting to establish self-regulations applicable internationally. The broadcasting industry has been attempting for many years to establish standards for satellite programming.

The internationalization of many markets, resulting in greater flow of goods and services, leads to the need for agreed documentation, and standard definition of risks and responsibilities.

International organizations such as the United Nations and its related agencies, the EEC, and others spend considerable effort finding common ground in communications and business standards of interest to international corporations.

And the computer has had a democratizing effect in information technology. A chip is a chip world-wide.

#### **WHAT ARE THE AREAS OF COMMON INTEREST IN INFORMATION CREATION AND RETENTION?**

There is a great need for documentation on organizational relationships. Ownership, partnerships, associations and interactions must be clearly understood and easily demonstrated.

For management to successfully operate, measure progress and demonstrate change over time, the documentation of the business internationally must be consistent and available in compatible format.

Policies, plans and decisions must be communicated and understood internationally. Programs and activities, to be successfully executed, must be clearly defined in terms of intentions, expectations and results.

Transactions require careful documentation of expectations, fulfillment, payment and residual feeling (quality of transaction.)

Regulatory requirements must be complied with internationally; including financial reporting, trade restriction compliance (e.g. blocking accounts of restricted nationals), personnel measurements (hiring and promotion standards ala South Africa), privacy protection and mandatory disclosure. It is essential that this information be managed properly and in a consistent manner world-wide.

#### **WHAT ARE THE AREAS OF INFORMATION PROCESSING THAT OFFER BENEFITS IN A COMMON APPROACH?**

Records inventories can provide information on who has what data, who uses it, and where it is located. They are also useful in standardizing the definition of records so that similar records can be identified and located as needed.

Storage standards provide security and quality control and can ensure exchangeable formats and media.

Backup information, vital records programs and contingency plans are essential in protecting against disaster and assisting in unwinding (as in Money Transfers) or in evacuation situations.

#### **WHAT ARE AREAS OF INFORMATION HANDLING THAT OFFER BENEFITS IN A COMMON APPROACH?**

Access to information is an area that needs clear standards and definition. Ownership of and responsibility for information must be determined. Information must be handled with respect to confidentiality and privacy. It must also be available on a business need to know basis. And it must be handled in compliance with legal and regulatory restrictions and national policies on cross border information flow.

Restrictions to information should have common understandings on what must, could, should or may be denied. Limitations on use of information should also be clearly articulated.

Replication of information and the use of third party carriers are other areas that would benefit from common agreement and policy.

## WHAT IS THE MEANING FOR THE ARCHIVIST IN THIS?

Each of these issues has consequences for the business archivist in an international corporation. While business continues to become more global, decisions about documentation must be made at that level. Although business archives in the US are currently as diverse as American industry, increasing movement toward and interest in standards and common forms of documentation will make archival decisions more consistent and more valuable for the users of information. It is hoped that documentation in the future will be less institution specific and that it will be more reflective of the business environment and the society in which the institution was operating.

## WHAT IS THE MEANING FOR THE HISTORIAN IN THIS?

Obviously, decisions in any of these areas will help shape the kinds of questions that will be askable and the kinds of answers that will be attainable in the future. Therefore, the historian and the historical professions should:

Remain interested in these matters and keep informed on issues relating to business information.

Make an effort to contribute their special perspective to discussions on these matters, particularly in studies on appraisal of business records like the project the Hagley has recently proposed.

Make the case for the historical importance of records through continued investigation and contributions to the literature.

Speak out for the pan-institutional value of business information, that is the value of documenting an industry, the economy, the society and the world at large.

Always exemplify the highest standards in handling of information.

It has taken a long time for the U.S. to realize that business records merit long term preservation. There has been tremendous growth and interest in these issues over the last twenty years and currently, there is increasing interest in finding documentation standards, common ground for international business information and conventions for doing business internationally. I have touched on a number of issues very generally, but I believe that each of

these areas requires further analysis. Business archivists and historians should have many of these issues on their future research agendas.

## **DISSERTATION SESSION**

