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BUSINESS ARCHIVES: THE 'SUPPLY CHAIN' CHALLENGE

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Introduction

The subject of what those in the business world would call the 'supply chain' of professionals who are prepared for, interested in or committed to becoming business archivists is one in which we at Winthrop Group take more than a casual interest. So far this year for instance, we have concluded five personnel searches for Winthrop clients and of these, three of the positions are for corporations. Indeed, the preparedness and capabilities of the archivists Winthrop hires is nearly as important to us as the for-profit, non-profit, institutional, high net worth family and individual clients we work so diligently and constantly to secure and retain over time.

Since 1989, corporations and business ventures have constituted an average of 52% of our clients and have provided 60% of our overall income. Moreover, a considerable number of the non-profit organizations with which we work, entities such as the Ford Foundation, Knight Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, the United Nations, New York City Ballet, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the ASPCA, and the Municipal Art Society, operate at least in part like business corporations.

So, as you can imagine, staffing for our client work constitutes a vital interest for us -- one that has resulted in our searching for, interviewing, and employing over time more archivists than organizations considerably larger than Winthrop. In addition to seeking professional archivist colleagues who become Winthrop employees, we have worked with companies and organizations that have engaged us solely for the purpose of conducting personnel searches for, or specifically recruiting, professional archivists and managers. This aspect of our work has added up to what is a somewhat uncommon 'cat bird seat' opportunity to evaluate the credentials of, interview, and check references for a significant number of early and mid-career professionals over a period of more than 30 years and we have gotten to know a considerable amount about the capabilities, experience, talents, educational preparation, and personalities of many archivists. According to my calculations, in fact, my colleagues and I have reviewed more than 1,200 resumes and have interviewed in person, by phone, or on Skype more than 390 archivists since the formation of Winthrop's Information & Archival Services.

There are a few among Business Archivists who have been both fortunate and wise enough to be able to implement seamless succession – Phil Mooney, the wonderful and insightful 'Music Man' of business archives, who identified and hired the multi-talented Ted Ryan and with whom he then attracted their equal, Jamal Booker at Coca-Cola, and the insightful, gracious, and business intuitive Ed Rider who professionally 'cloned' himself when he hired and mentored Greg McCoy for Procter & Gamble.

These, however, are the exception rather than the rule and so Winthrop's experience perhaps has sensitized us more than some to the 'supply chain' challenge. And in recent years it has led to a growing number of conversations that include

- a) concern about whether we in the community of business archivists are being active enough in communicating with, training, and directly fostering the interest of talented early and mid-career professionals, and
- b) questions about how to cultivate and/or tap into that composite of professional capability, training, educational preparation, curiosity, creative thinking, and even personality that seems to help archivists succeed in a business environment.

Some of you, tired of my wanting to talk about this and just a short time in advance of the ICA's Section on Business Archives meeting here in Atlanta this past Spring, figuratively tossed me a challenge (and besides, you unexpectedly found there was an unfilled slot in the program) -- Could you talk about the 'supply chain' at the ICA-SBA meeting? So I conducted what, I want to emphasize, was an **informal** survey on the SAA Business Archives list. The numbers I've included today are drawn from the responses, therefore, of a self-selected group of members of our Section. They range from early career archivists working in archives for no more than one year to career-long archivists who have dedicated their careers to establishing and successfully running archives programs in corporations. The questions I posed are on the hand-out and my accompanying email text invited additional and unlimited length comment.

Knowing that more bright minds and a larger number of people engaged in the conversation are likely to bring better outcomes, the purpose today is give you a brief overview of the informal survey results and encourage thought about this subject.

Survey Results Overview

I received a total of 23 responses, 17 of which arrived prior to my tabulation for the ICA meeting and not as many as I had hoped. The numbers I'm providing today include all 23. Of the 23, 7 respondents are early career professionals and 16 can be classified as mid- to advanced-career professionals.

Of respondents,

- 75% identified a broad educational preparation, including demonstrated, well developed writing capabilities, as being one of the top three elements. And the same percentage, 75%, identified archives training, and experience in a business environment as being among the top three components for potential success as a business archivist.
- In terms of overall professional capabilities,
 - 84% identified adaptability and flexibility (including the ability to interact with others comfortably and under a variety of circumstances) as important.
 - 100% identified communications skills and
 - 66% selected time management and a capacity for effective multi-tasking.

- Interest in business history, the subject of business, and/or in adapting archives to a business environment was viewed by 85% as an important component for a business archivist.
- 40 % of the respondents indicated that strategic thinking was a very useful element in success.
- In terms of singular elements useful in preparation for work in business archives, experience specifically in a corporate or organizational archives was noted by 100% of the respondents and participation in a professional organization and entities such as the SAA Business Archives Section was identified as especially useful by 75%.

And far from least,

- A commitment to information and customer service, a ‘can do’ attitude, and personality together were noted by a total of 92% of the respondents.

Other bits and pieces of the results are interesting, but because of the small number of particular mentions, cannot be considered statistically definitive.

These are:

Five people indicated that they thought having an already developed understanding of business concepts such as being able to accomplish a ‘return on investment’ is important for those interested in entering business archives.

Four people mentioned that adaptability expressed in a willingness to identify and implement practical approaches to regular archival responsibilities such processing, was a fundamental element in being able to succeed in business archives.

One person noted that specific coursework in marketing and business methods had contributed to her success as a business archivist.

Conclusions – or perhaps I should say ‘Observations’

So here are some of the observations I have drawn from the responses received and the range of resumes we at Winthrop review regularly when searching for early career archivists prepared to work in business archives:

- Candidates’ overall preparedness, including having strong writing and communications skills, is neither as deep nor as broad as is required in most business archives settings.
- Any kind of previous work in business or organizational environments, what one might call ‘social experience’, too frequently is missing. That is, it would be helpful if more early career archivists’ exposure and training extended beyond educational institutions.
- Probably too few early career archivists have exposure to archives in varied or complex organizations and/or knowledge about the history and role of business in our society.
- Our pool of qualified potential applicants for business archives positions is lower than it should be given the number of archivists being trained today.
- To help ensure that we have talented and well prepared successors and archivists who can establish new archives, those of us in the archives of corporate and organizational entities need to do a better job of helping aspiring and early career archivists understand the wide-ranging and varied work that archives in company environments can provide.

Potential Solutions

- Business archivists should actively seek out and to talk one-on-one early career archivists so that we can tell them about a) the fulfilling aspects and intellectual challenges of company environments and b) the reasons why working with collections that are not necessarily open to the public nevertheless are exciting and rewarding.
- Educators and business archivists should help to introduce Master's degree students to the specific aspects of preparation that lie behind successful business and organizational archives. That is, we need to work to establish internships or fellowships in corporate archives and/or collaborations with specific archives management programs.
- Graduate work should include more targeted assignments that incorporate business concepts and, what I'm going to refer to as honed skills in "practical adaptivity" in archives-related training.
- The SAA's Business Archives Section can help by gathering and sharing information and stories of those who have been successful in establishing and/or managing on-going business archives.
- Among the things about which we should try to gain better understanding are: "What has brought enthusiastic and successful archivists to corporate archives in the past?" "What has changed that has made the prospect of a career in business archives less appealing or even daunting?" "How can we better share with new archivists the purposes, strategies, and potential business conditions and elements that foster strong archives?" "What tools can we use to convey the problem-solving knowledge, creative and broader

thinking, and the requirement to be more risk tolerant?” “What would help others in our profession develop the commitment to business archives that we know is required for success?” In other words, what are the vital professional elements that have given many archivists the unmatched satisfaction of working in business environments and serving as corporate information stewards, heritage curators, and historians?

THANK YOU