



A Guide to Company Archives

Setting the standard for archival management

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HISTORY FACTORY

When organizations come to History Factory to use their history to support a business imperative such as a rebrand or a leadership transition, we typically start our research in their corporate archives.

Sometimes we're pleasantly surprised that the organization has a securely housed, searchable and accessible archives with a coherent archival policy, dedicated professional resources and a passion for history and the company.

More often than not, however, we're directed to storage closets over-flowing with messy boxes and servers crammed full of ambiguously named files in no particular order.

If your company is anything like the former, congratulations. Please keep doing what you're doing. If, on the other hand, you're like the majority of companies and your archives resembles the latter example, it's not too late to transform your boxes and drives of memorabilia, memos, photos, films, artifacts and the like into something accessible, usable and valuable—something that can help your organization save money, spark innovation, protect IP and drive its future.

This guide can help you move from disarray to order. It provides context for the important role that archives play in contemporary business. It will also cover some practicalities that might not be obvious when creating and maintaining an archives, as well as future trends in archiving.



Purpose & Role of an Archives



Archives are not valuable to an organization simply because they exist. Today's corporate archivists maximize their value by making the archives accessible to their users for ongoing application and business value.

Archives are unique heritage assets that distill the ethos of a company and preserve its institutional memory. Thus, they can be drawn upon for any number of business objectives, allowing an enterprise to leverage the value of its past to strengthen its future. As such, an archives is an important tool for any organization that can help perform the following functions:

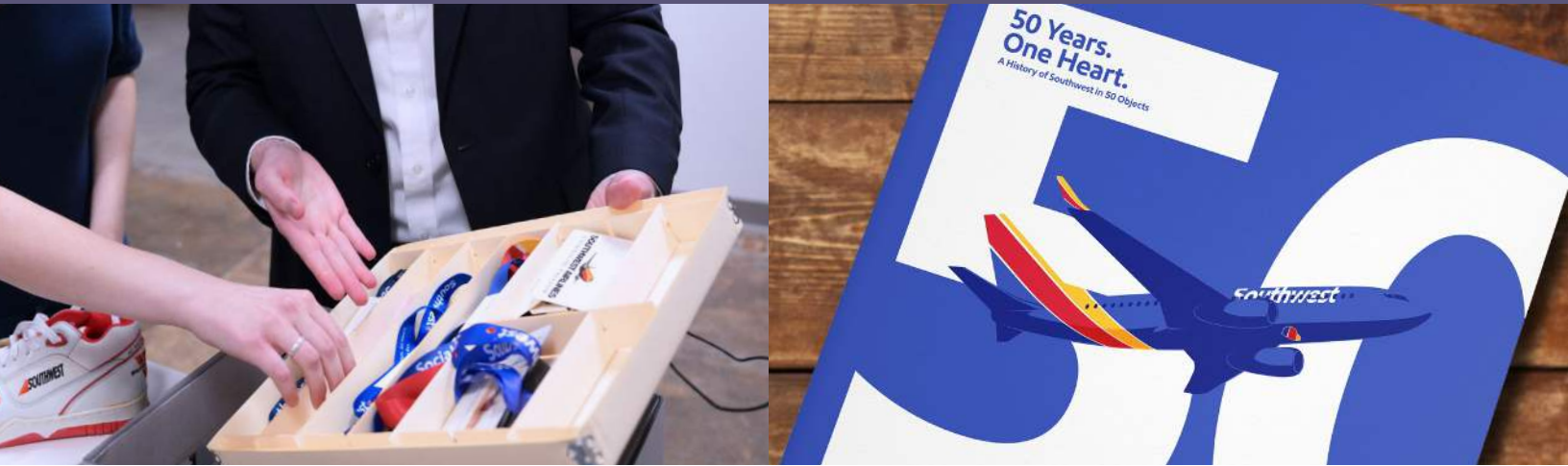
- Preserve corporate memory
- Boost recruitment
- Support litigation on multiple topics
- Affirm company character amid leadership transitions
- Inspire product development or inform rebranding exercises

- Provide source materials for a corporate exhibit or history publication
- Authenticate a milestone anniversary
- Underpin corporate purpose, values, and culture efforts

These are just a few examples of the value that a corporate archives can provide to an organization—but how can you measure that value?

In a 2020 study with corporate archivists and archives users, 59% of archives users feel hindered by the accessibility and searchability of their archives system. Yet, 41% reported accessing or requesting their archives at least once a week. That's a lot of users who encounter frustration daily—for a number of reported reasons.

Determining ROI



Organizations are often pulled in many directions, with different departments competing for finite resources. When funding any business initiative, it's critical to affirm that it will provide an adequate return on investment.

An effective corporate archives should be no different. In addition to the benefits outlined in the previous section, heritage assets stored in your corporate archives have the ability to inform collective memory, strengthen corporate culture and:

- Drive organizational change
- Reduce product development cycle time
- Monetize heritage assets through licensing and other means
- Fuel product or service innovations
- Reduce costs of duplicating lost materials
- Strengthen employee alignment and engagement
- Support and advance brand identity and customer loyalty

All of these are very real benefits of having an archives that can be measured using the basic metrics of saved time and money. There are also less measurable but still very real benefits of having a corporate archives. For instance, brands built on authenticity and heritage, such as Levi's and Harley-Davidson, rely on their archives in order to build brand messaging and differentiate themselves from competitors.

Creating & Maintaining an Archives



It's never a good idea to build a corporate archives in a vacuum. History Factory urges clients to Start with the Future and Work Back™—begin with your desired business outcomes and then build your archives program for those end uses.

When choosing a partner to help with your archives program, always consider:

PEOPLE

- Alignment – Consensus and collaboration among decision makers on archives and organizational memory and strategy
- Expertise – Skill and knowledge in specialized areas of archival practice

DATA

- Identification – Information about archival assets that allows them to be located, evaluated and compared
- Risk – Data necessary to assess and mitigate the likelihood and severity of losses of original material and organizational memory
- Usage – Statistics that help measure the use of archival content to determine value, relevance and ROI

INFRASTRUCTURE

- Environment – Facilities and systems that provide storage conditions suitable for the protection of archival resources
- Access – Tools and services that enable the process of searching for and obtaining archival material

PROCESSES

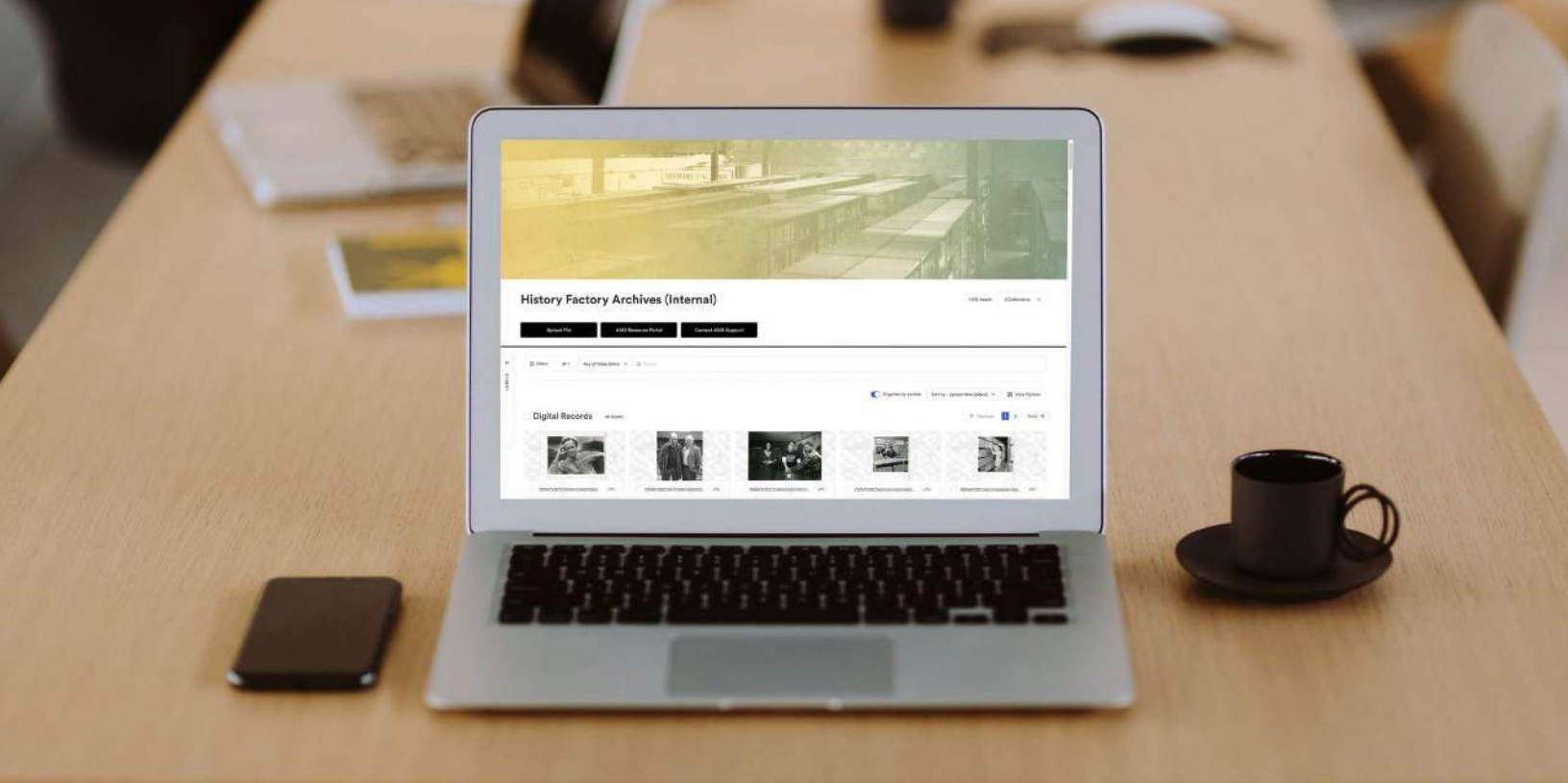
- Policy – Developing protocols to guide preservation decisions and to reconcile the need for access with the need to safeguard information
- Life Cycle Management – Taking Care of archival assets and organizational memory from their creation throughout their use
- Engagement – Communicating the meaning and significance of archival content to provoke interest and create opportunities for learning



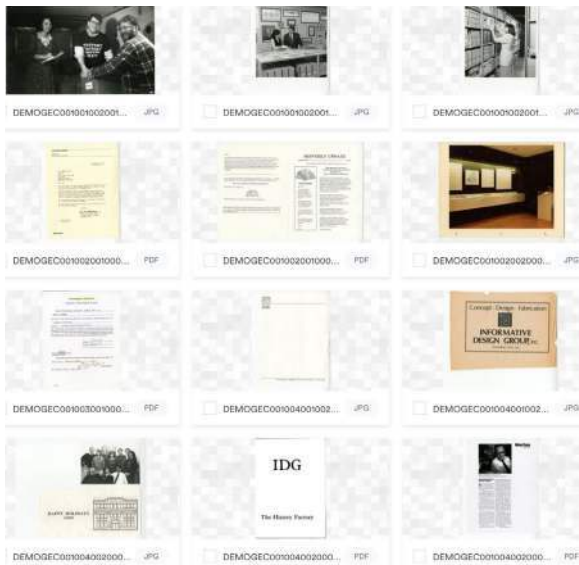
An enduring archives should have a pragmatic and strategic archival policy. This may require adapting the principles of organization and maintenance governing traditional academic archives to better serve contemporary stakeholders and diverse use cases. Get started by:

- Outlining intended use in a mission statement
- Surveying and documenting your collection
- Creating taxonomies and related hierarchies
- Applying detailed descriptions and associated metadata
- Identifying gaps in your collection and filling them through third-party repositories, discovery initiatives and oral history programs, among other techniques
- Creating acquisition and deaccession policies (adding to the collection and getting rid of the “stuff” that you don’t need)
- Outlining access policies and procedures
- Creating digitization plans and executing them over time

The next step is to determine where the collection will be housed and begin building it. If you’re starting from scratch, we highly recommend involving a credentialed archivist who has been formally trained in the art of archiving.



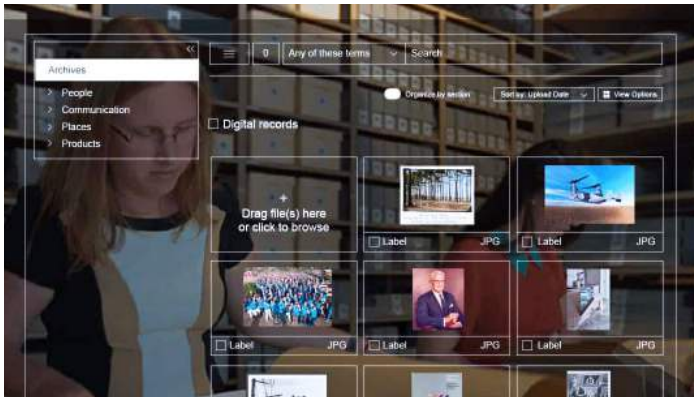
Even if you've completed all of these steps in the past and have a fully functional archives, it's still possible to improve your corporate archives' usability and accessibility and refine, expand and update the collection.



Remember, your archives might contain physical assets as well as digital ones, such as email records, social media posts, websites and audiovisual assets. If your collection is primarily made up of physical assets, it might be necessary to plan to digitize those materials. If most are already digitized or born digital, as can be the case with younger companies, even more emphasis should be put on intentionally capturing history as it is created due to the sheer explosion of content generated in the digital age. Digital assets have a shorter shelf life than you might expect.

Trends & the Future of Archives

Archives are not just focused on the past. They contain documents, images and artifacts from bygone days, but they should contain assets from the contemporary era as well. History is happening all around us constantly, and if we are too focused on the past, we may miss recording the present.



Emerging trends in corporate archives include:

- Better and more reliable purpose-built storage solutions that bridge the gap between the physical and digital
- A shift from passive research to interactively curated collections
- The increased use and sophistication of technology to access materials
- Automation to accelerate professional processing
- The use of blockchain to verify authenticity and provenance
- The ability to capture born-digital assets at scale
- Branding and promotion of the collection; collection policy to include born digital and recently created content

Items created in the past and in analog formats have a much longer shelf life than those that are born digital. Technology moves at such a fast pace that storage devices and other hardware become obsolete after a relatively short amount of time. This phenomenon is what we refer to as the digital black hole.

Remember how VHS tapes were ubiquitous 30 years ago? When was the last time you watched one? How about a DVD, for that matter?

Meanwhile, physical documents from the past are on display at countless museums. Now is the time to recognize where your organization's digital black hole might be and implement a plan to retain and even create current history in a meaningful and lasting way.

Before you start planning, explore the [Archives Management Capability Model](#) (AMCM), which focuses on developing and measuring the capability of an organization's archival program. This will allow you to use a set of indicators to help assess your current state and what is necessary for program progress to leverage your historical assets and memory.

The Bottom Line

Creating a comprehensive corporate archives can seem like a daunting task. A lot of expertise goes into surveying, organizing and creating a digital catalog of archival assets. Although a professional archival program may necessitate a significant upfront investment, it can pay substantial dividends.

We have defined the purpose and role of an archives, how to support an investment in one, and how to build and maintain a collection, as well as trends for the future of corporate archives. Contact us to find out how History Factory's archival services can help your organization achieve its business goals.

HISTORY FACTORY

Headquarters

1255 23rd Street, Suite 320
Washington, DC 20037

Archives & Digitization Lab

14290 Sullyfield Circle
Chantilly, VA 20151

historyfactory.com
info@historyfactory.com
703.631.0500