

Communicating the Value of Business Archives to Business Archives: The Shibusawa BA Project and Corporate Archives in Japan

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Unlike many of you here today, I do not work for a corporate archives. I am the Business Archives Specialist at the Shibusawa Eiichi Memorial Foundation. Because of this I have what I imagine to be a different outlook on who exactly I consider to be a stakeholder. Let me explain by giving a brief overview of the Shibusawa Eiichi Memorial Foundation.

Shibusawa Eiichi (1840-1931) was an entrepreneur and philanthropist who was at the forefront of the modernization of Japan. In 1886 a study group was formed by young boarders at the Shibusawa home who wanted to learn from Eiichi. The group developed over the years; becoming incorporated as a foundation in 1924, dedicating itself to memorial projects after Eiichi's death in 1931, and finally realizing a long-held goal and opening the Shibusawa Memorial Museum in 1982. The appointment of a new president in the late 1990s provided an impetus to the Foundation to grapple with fundamental issues of how to be relevant and meaningful in the 21st century. As a result, the Foundation dedicated itself to becoming internationally oriented and embracing digital technologies.

Today the Foundation is a small charitable organization with two missions: to honor the accomplishments and ideals of Shibusawa Eiichi and to improve ethical standards and corporate culture in business based on Eiichi's philosophies.

The latter of these two is particularly important given what has, until recently, been a sad state of affairs for business archives in Japan. It has long been common for business men and women in Japan to worry that their career was ending if they were

transferred to the department within their company that was in charge of old company records and other materials for the compilation of company histories for special anniversaries. Right up until the end of the 20th century few active corporate archives programs existed in Japan and there were almost no professional archivists employed by Japanese companies.

Given these circumstances, the Shibusawa Eiichi Memorial Foundation began cooperating with groups such as the Business Archives Association (BAA) of Japan on an innovative project called the Business Archives Project that aimed to promote awareness of corporate archives, especially in regards to the value that archival records and artifacts can contribute to a range of functions within a company, and the important role of staff running archival programs as the active providers of heritage information.

I have managed the project since its inception in 2004. The first stage of the project was to build a directory of business archives in Japan. While such a directory exists in North America and similar information may be available from professional organizations in many countries around the world, in Japan, however, no such directory existed. We cooperated with the members of BAA and spent some time to gather information on business archives in Japan and the directory was made public on the Foundation's website on July 22, 2008.

In 2007 the Shibusawa Foundation collaborated with the SAA and others to hold a joint seminar in Tokyo on archives in Japan and the US. The seminar not only increased understanding on corporate archives in Japan but also led to the development

of valuable professional and personal contacts such as with SBA member Becky Tousey, which ultimately led to the Shibusawa Foundation joining the ICA in 2008 and me becoming a member of the steering committee of the ICA SBA.

These developments improved the information dissemination portion of the Business Archives Project particularly through content for an e-zine newsletter and website. The e-zine, *BA Tsushin*, or “The Business Archives News,” was launched in beta form in 2007 and officially on February 15, 2008, in order to share resources in Japanese on foreign business archives. Content includes summaries of events or new publications on business archives, primarily in English-speaking regions. Since its launch, the e-zine has been published roughly every month with subscribership rising gradually over the years. All issues are now available on the Foundation’s website, providing access to back issues and allowing non-subscribers to read the e-zine.

Longer articles, particularly Japanese translations of presentations or articles by SBA members as well as Japanese and English versions of many of my presentations are shared directly on the Foundation’s website. The first uploaded was a Japanese translation of an inspirational presentation by Elizabeth Adkins and there are currently nearly a dozen articles available. The next to be added is a Japanese translation of an important article by the SBA’s very own Paul Lasewicz. Both these articles and the e-zine not only offer free access to what I feel is important information but also support the goals of the Business Archives Project.

The SBA symposium held in Tokyo in 2011 further increased international

networking and information sharing in Japan. The publication of a book with the presentations in Japanese translation made the symposium's valuable content available to a wider audience. This type of sharing obviously benefits business archives communities, but from the Foundation's standpoint it is the reason for starting the Business Archives Project in the first place, as I believe that an increase in knowledge and recognition of business archives will further the Foundation's goal of improving ethical standards and corporate culture in business.

The Foundation believes that proper recordkeeping and the effective use of archives can play a vital role in increasing corporate accountability – concept that is still relatively new to Japanese companies. A survey of the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, a daily Japanese business newspaper, for the 41 years from 1976 until 2016 shows neither the loan word “accountability” nor a Japanese term created to express the same sentiment, *setsumei sekinin*, appeared with any regularity until the late 1990s. Usage increased as a rise in foreign investments led to demands for improvements to Japanese business practices in these and related areas. The graph shows the number of times the two terms were used in the newspaper and thus cannot act as an indicator as to whether corporate accountability itself has increased within Japan, but I feel that it demonstrates an increased awareness of accountability and a chance for corporate archives to demonstrate their value.

In preparing for my presentation today I reached out to my contacts at corporate archives throughout Japan and other subscribers of the e-zine, those that I would consider to be the stakeholders of the Business Archives Project. I asked them for

their comments on the Project and recognition of corporate archives within their companies. The director of one corporate archives & museum commented that although he was interested in learning about issues related to business archives around the world it was too difficult for him and others in the field to find such information themselves. The e-zine, he said, provided this valuable information and the project as a whole is inspirational for archivists in the field. This latter sentiment was echoed by a number of others. An archivist with another company commented that she has used specific case studies she has gained from the e-zine as examples when discussing strategies with coworkers. Other comments included numerous requests for more information and case studies on business archives within Japan.

This shows that while the Business Archives Project, in particular the e-zine *BA Tsushin*, has become a recognized and trusted resource in the archives community in Japan, there is still much that it can accomplish. I am heartened by the fact that changes can be seen in various companies throughout Japan. More companies are establishing specialized divisions for archives management and increasingly these are being staffed by younger employees, by women, and, especially importantly, by those recruited from outside the company with expert knowledge and skills. There is still a long way to go, but in the context of the current business environment in Japan, I feel our emphasis on the value of business archives, especially that of corporate accountability, is a source of trust for our corporate archive stakeholders such as the Toyota Archives, with whom we have cooperated for the last few years.