

Chapter 5

Business Archives in France, A Tool Serving Management: The Saint-Gobain Case

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Saint-Gobain Archives

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Saint-Gobain Group (France)

Saint-Gobain was established in 1665 by Prime Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert under order from Louis XIV. Their goal was to challenge the supremacy of Venice's glass makers on the European stage. Over the centuries the company was transformed through numerous mergers and takeovers and expanded from glass manufacturing to other fields as well as expanding geographically throughout Europe and beyond. Saint-Gobain is now one of the top 100 most innovative companies in the world and employs nearly 190,000 people in 64 countries across four main sectors: construction products, innovative materials, building distribution, and packaging.

The Saint-Gobain Archives is the hub of the Saint-Gobain Group for the management of records and archives. The Archives is based in Blois in the Loire Valley in central France. The Blois Centre has two sections, one for records and archives (about 70 linear kilometres) and the other for documentation (movies, pictures, books, etc.)

Image 1 – Exterior of the Saint-Gobain Archives (Photograph: Alain Dovifat)





Image 2 – Interior of the Saint-Gobain Archives (Photograph: Alain Dovifat)

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Business archives have less than a century of history in France. The Business History Society was already in existence in the United States when the French historian Marc Bloch wrote to Lucien Febvre on September 20, 1929 about the urgent need to begin a study of the archives of private companies. The study would be published as “The Rational Organization of Businesses: Private Archives and History” in the first issue of 1930 of *Annales*. The article included an introduction by Lucien Febvre and a note by Charles Schmidt, Inspector General of the Archives.¹

In 1949 the Department of Economic Archives was created in the National Archives by the General Manager Charles Braibant. This was done to safeguard economic archives, both private and public, under the control of the administration. In 1957 the first inventory was published by Bertrand Gille to give a list of the historical archives thus saved.

It was not until the 1970s, however, that there was real movement in the creation of archives in private sector companies. The subject of business archives in France was taken up at this time and a large number of studies have appeared since.² This article attempts to demonstrate the original and pioneering role of the Saint-Gobain Archives; how it stimulated the creation of archives within a large number of major French companies early on and, even more, how it continues to be influential today as the Blois Centre is one of the only archives in the world to be organized as both a profit centre and a service company.

1. The Pioneering Role of Saint-Gobain

Companies make history. It is simple reciprocity that historians help them in their constant quest for the future.³

Roger Martin, the first Chief Executive Officer after the merger of Saint-Gobain and

¹ Febvre, Lucien, and Schmid, Charles. “L’Organisation Rationnelle des Entreprises: Les Archives Privées et l’Histoire,” *Annales d’Histoire Économique et Sociale*. 2.5 (1930): 64-66.

² For example: Hamon, Maurice. “Les Archives d’Entreprises en France.” *Rassegna degli archivi di Stato*. 44.2-3 (1984): 480-487.; Nougaret, Roger. “Overview of Business Archives in France.” ICA/SBL, December 2006.; Zuber, Henri, and Nougaret, Roger. “Les Archives d’Entreprises en France.” *Gazette des Archives*. 204 (2006): 171-186.

³ Martin, Roger. “Le Président Directeur Général et l’Archiviste.” *Revue Française de Gestion*. (Sept-Oct, 1988): 122-126.

Pont-à-Mousson in 1970, used the above lines to conclude an article in the *Revue Française de Gestion* (French Journal of Management) in 1988. The title of the article, “*Le Président Directeur Général et l’Archiviste*” (The CEO and the Archivist), underlines the importance of the function of the archives within the large international group of which he was head. In the article he recounts all the contributions of history to his professional career, in particular the links between management and the history of the company, and also discusses the establishment of an original system of management for the archives.⁴

This system was made necessary by the merger of Saint-Gobain and Pont-à-Mousson in 1970 and was described in 1972 by the following:

Our Group has two sets of important archives... The time has come for us to rethink the question of our archives in order to avoid excess clutter and above all to improve the opportunities for use of the very rich collections they represent. But the historical value of these holdings obligate us to call on people of great ability.⁵

In July 1973, accompanied by Roger Fauroux, Roger Martin met Guy Duboscq, the Director General of the French Archives, and expressed to him their hope that “one of his archivist-paleographers might be willing to leave the administration to bring their expertise to serve Saint-Gobain-Point-à-Mousson.”⁶ On April 1, 1974, Mr. Hamon joined the company.

A note written the very next day makes reference to a document by Mr. Hamon that established “the duties of the company’s archives.” From this note Roger Martin drew two main principles, that: 1) “it is necessary first and foremost to treat the day-to-day and very real problem of the impact of the archives on the company’s overhead costs, the archive’s contribution to history will be an added benefit,” and 2) “the proposed pragmatic approach corresponds well with the structure of the Group and the complexity of the problems.”⁷

In these few lines can be seen the spirit of the organization that was just beginning to be formed at the time, an organization that has continued to develop over the course of the past quarter of a century in response to the evolution of the scope of the Group.

In his introduction, Maurice Hamon discussed the three stages of records and argued that the role of an archives can be summed up as follows:

- 1) “Monitor the production of current records,”
- 2) “Ensure the collection and management of intermediary records,”
- 3) “Develop access to historical records for historians.”⁸

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Letter. May 17, 1972. CSG 00426/22, Saint-Gobain Archives.

⁶ Martin, Roger. *Patron de Droit Divin*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984, 447.

⁷ Note. April 2, 1974. CSG 00426/22, Saint-Gobain Archives.

⁸ Ibid.

Consequently, he proposed that the Archives should present itself to the Group “as a true service company with the facilities and qualified staff to deal with all archival problems.”

In April 1976, Maurice Hamon took stock of his first two years with the company, during which time three tasks had been undertaken:

- 1) The preparation and dissemination of a manual of business archives,
- 2) Studies of the problems posed by new types of media (microfilm, digital technology, etc),
- 3) An archival exhibition accompanied by historical commentary within the framework of the company’s management and economic training sessions in Menars.⁹

Having organized an archives, the next step was to examine the issue of a dedicated archives building. It was necessary to “build, somewhere in France, a specialized building where the historical and semi-historical records of the companies of the Group could be centralized.”¹⁰ It was thus decided to locate the archives in Blois, at the center of the Group’s French activities. The goal was realized in December 1979 with the inauguration of the distinctive building of the Blois Centre, which would become a model for business archives throughout France.

2. The Development of Archives Since 1980

In 1981, the coming to power of François Mitterrand and a leftist government led to two important events in arena of business archives in France. The first was the nationalization of the banking sector and of large industrial companies in 1982. Their archives thus came under the scope of the Archives Act, established in 1979. Then in 1983 came the project to create 5 regional centres for labour archives. Over the course of time and due to budget constraints, the scope was reduced to one single centre in a former textile mill in Roubaix in northern France, in the heart of an industrial region affected by global developments.

Inaugurated only in 1993, this political tool of the national archives was named the Centre des Archives du Monde du Travail (Centre for Archives of the World of Work, CAMT). “The name, ‘Archives of the World of Work,’ tries to cover the entirety of documents be they public or private in nature, born of activities economic or social, from the archives of industrial, commercial, craft, or agricultural companies; or those of banks, insurance companies, professional organizations, employee or miners unions, or organizations created as part of working life.”¹¹

⁹ Martin, *Patron*. 447. Along with Neuilly in Paris and Ars Castle (Château d’Ars), Menars was one of the three locations for archival storage.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

While the privatization movement in 1986 reduced somewhat the state's influence on the private sector, the management of business archives had already gained momentum. Other initiatives further reinforced this situation. In particular, was the creation in 1983 of the Centre Rhénan d'Archives et de Recherches Économiques (Rhine Centre for Archives and Economic Research, CERARE) in Mulhouse to safeguard the archives of industrial businesses of the Upper Rhine as part of a tripartite undertaking between the city, university, and chamber of commerce. At the same time in Lyon, Paul Berliet, following the sale of his truck business to the Renault Group, founded the Marius Berliet Foundation to promote the work of his father in the history of French trucks. In 1985 in Creusot, the cradle of the Schneider family, the François Bourdon Academy was founded to conserve the history of the region's steel industry.

True business archives began to develop in parallel from 1990. It consisted in the first part of managing the issue of intermediate archives but also to manage historical legacies as a central function of the archives.

Most large French companies now have an in-house archives. Examples cover a wide range of activities including:

- Aerospace: European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS), Safran Group;
- Automotive: Renault, Peugeot-Citroën, Michelin;
- Banking: Bank of France, Caisse des Dépôts Group, Cetelem, Crédit Agricole, Banque Nationale de Paris (BNP), Société Générale;
- Construction Materials: Lafarge, Saint-Gobain;
- Pharmaceuticals: Sanofi-Aventis, Laboratoires UPSA, Quintiles;
- Energy: Charbonnages de France, Atomic Energy Commission, Compagnie du Rhône, Électricité de France (EDF), Gas de France (GDF);
- Services: Assurances Générales de France (AGF), France Telecom, La Poste, Maïf;
- Metallurgy: ArcelorMittal;
- Transportation: Aéroports de Paris (ADP), Air France, Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens (RATP), Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français (SNCF);
- Other Sectors: Altadis (tobacco), Veuve Cliquot Champagne, Martell Cognac, Louis Vuitton, Canson (paper), Société d'Emboutissage de Bourgogne (SEB);
- Chambers of Commerce: linked with the business world, they are also a source of information on economic history

The situation varies depending on activities and covers the entire scope of archives and heritage. Only the Saint-Gobain's archives is organized as a profit centre, an example that

is nearly unique throughout the world.

The attachments of the archives are very different: general services, administrative and financial management, legal... The business culture also considerably influences the scope of activity.

In the oil sector Total merged with Fina and Elf Aquitaine. Banks were not spared either as the Banque National de Paris took over Paribas and Crédit Agricole took over Crédit Lyonnais. Major industrial activities also unified their markets and the steel industry followed suit. Usinor merged with its principal competitors to become Acelor, which then became the property of the Indian Mittal. The aluminum manufacturer Pechiney fell under the influence of the Canadian company Alcan. Through its successive acquisitions of Synthelabo and Aventis, Sanofi has become a leader in the global drug market.

In each case, the archives adapted to the new configurations. The development of records management within companies has contributed for a number of years to the understanding of management in the use of archives. In some cases archives have become true tools of management. The strategic role of archives no longer needs to be proven especially in large private companies.¹¹

This visible face of archives hides the activities of medium-sized companies, who manage their archives as best they can and often rely on archiving companies for assistance. A large number of such providers have developed since the 1970s. The services they offer are often limited to the handling and storage of records but the market tends to focus on and is moving towards the global management of a business's information resources. The principal archiving companies came together to form an association, PAGE, to share suggestions and work together on how to improve their activities.

To support their development, business archives professionals created a sub-section within the Association des Archivistes Français. Currently more than 300 members strong, the sub-section's dynamism has allowed for the development of some important reference materials, in particular a guide to the retention periods of common business documents.¹² A system of professional standards is also currently being developed with the goal of outlining the role of the business archivist in the context of the information profession.

¹¹ Bondue, Didier, and Boisboissel, Olivier de. "Les Archives au Service du Management et de la Strategie de l'Entreprise: Les Approches Innovantes de Saint-Gobain et de Sanofi-Aventis." *Comma*. 4 (2005), CITRA.

¹² Association des Archivistes Français. *Les Archives dans l'Entreprise, Guide des Delais de Conservation des Documents Communs aux Entreprises*. Paris: Association des Archivistes Français, 1997.

3. The Organisation and Function of the Saint-Gobain Archives Today

The Blois Centre is not only a place where archives are conserved, it also operates as an Economic Interest Group (EIG). An EIG is a French legal structure, created by ordinance number 67-823 dated 23 September 1967, enabling individuals or companies to assemble to manage a common objective – in this case an archive service. This service, covering archives from living to historical, is offered to all subsidiaries of Saint-Gobain in France.

As far as the international stage is concerned, the Saint-Gobain philosophy has turned towards decentralisation and respect for the different cultures within the Group. Degrees of storage exist; not everything attracts the same interest at a central level. What is important is to preserve documents that have real historical value whilst creating an international network to manage archives at a local level.

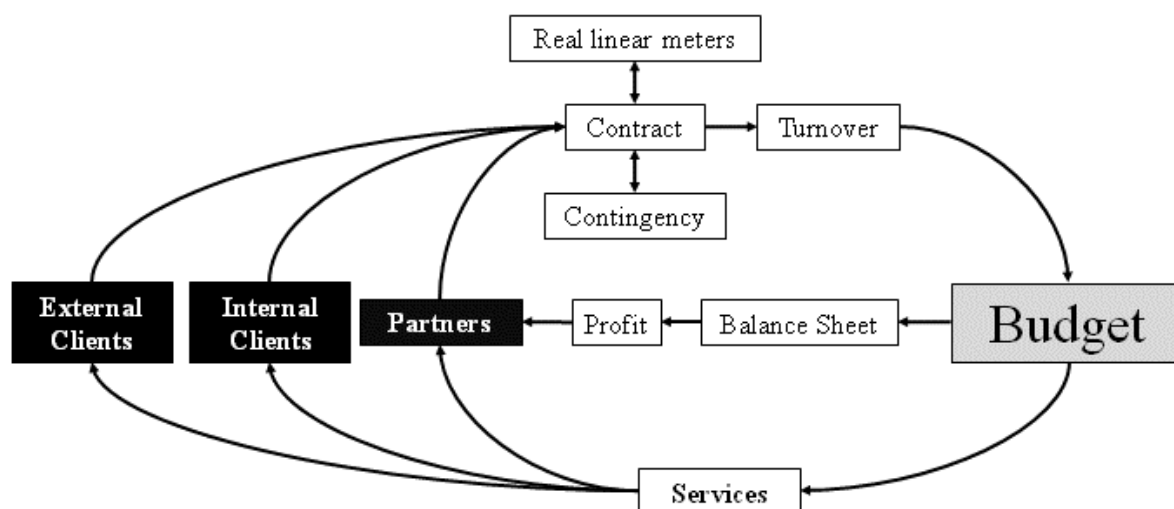
It is essential for the Blois Centre to break-even or make a profit financially. To do this, a budget must be worked out each year. This is approved by an AGM of the partners. The Blois Centre is thus organised around the double concept of a profit centre and service company.

A) Profit Centre

Who are the clients ?

They can be represented in three major categories (illustration 1) as follows:

Illustration 1 – Clients of the Saint-Gobain Archives EIG



- **Partners** – pay for an annual contingency in linear metres at a maximum price fixed at the A.G.M. However they also share the profits in relation to the size of their contingency.
- **Internal clients** – are invoiced at an lower rate than partners but do not receive a share of the profits.

- **External clients** – may be companies that are no longer members of the group but who want their archives to continue to be managed by the EIG, or other unrelated companies that want to have their archives managed by the Blois Centre for an agreed-upon price.

In all cases, agreements are signed and the fee charged covers all services offered by the Saint-Gobain Archives. The turnover generated from all clients allows the EIG to operate and produce a financial result. Each year it is necessary to prospect new business either from existing clients or newly-acquired ones.

B) Service Company

The services that Saint-Gobain Archives provides to its customers can be separated into two categories: simple searches related to everyday management and strategic or complex searches. The former are mainly financial, human resources, or legal searches. In the case of a simple search, the Blois Centre can reply within 30 minutes. In 2004, the Centre responded to 2690 such searches. The latter type of searches are more varied and complex and can be related to environmental issues, intellectual property and research and innovation, human resources, legal issues, fixed assets and patrimony, corporate management, sales and marketing, or corporate culture.

A few examples of strategic or complex searches are as follows:

- **Environmental issues:** Who is the last owner of a factory ?
In the 1930s Saint-Gobain ran a few chemical factories. These ventures were sold in 1970 but, as the site has since been discovered to be polluted, it is important to know who was the last owner.
- **Intellectual property and research and innovation:**
A competitor thought they had invented a new type of coloured glass but the Blois Centre was able to provide a photograph proving Saint-Gobain use of the glass many years prior.
- **Legal issues:** The collapse of the Berlin Wall
After the collapse of the Berlin Wall it was necessary to very quickly research Saint-Gobain plants in Eastern Europe before 1945 in order to recover lost property.
- **Legal issues:** The Saint-Gobain flirtation with nationalization
When Saint-Gobain was privatised in 1986 after only 4 years of public ownership, it was decided that every employee of a subsidiary where Saint-Gobain was the main shareholder should have the right to buy shares. Very important research was conducted to satisfy this objective.

- **Corporate management:**

When Saint-Gobain decided to build a new glass factory in Romania, the Blois Centre provided files on the Saint-Gobain presence in the country before the Second World War.

In addition to performing both simple and more complex searches for clients, the Blois Centre also carries out various other services as follows:

- **Doctrine**

At the hub of the Saint-Gobain Group is the Doctrine Department, where the legal rules governing the parent company and subsidiaries are prepared. Archives management is an integral part of the formation of Group doctrine.

- **Records management**

Records management, in all its traditional aspects, is the principal activity of the EIG.

- **Organising archives**

A team is sent from the EIG to each new client to organise its archives and to establish a management table for each department, in particular for legal, finance & accounts, marketing and human resources functions. Saint-Gobain has set up its own conservation limits for certain types of documents.

- **Training and provision of services**

These activities also include those that the Centre carries out either for subsidiaries of the Group or for outside companies, such as maintaining archives or producing films.

- **Research**

As a result of the long history of Saint-Gobain, the Blois Centre is a considerable database of industrial history. A large number of university theses and student dissertations have been based on the Centre's collections. Each year, the Centre welcomes researchers who can even be lodged in the purpose-built bedrooms on-site.

- **Exhibitions**

The production of exhibitions also constitutes an important activity for the Centre. Themed exhibitions on the history and representations of the work, publicity, and international image of Saint-Gobain are offered to Group subsidiaries. These exhibitions often play a centralizing role in a group which is not only growing rapidly but also encompasses different cultural backgrounds. The latest such exhibition was on the history of logos within the group. This theme was the result of a campaign in the international press in 2002 and aimed to place the present-day message alongside those that had preceded it.

The Centre has also collaborated on a third-party exhibition. In 2006 Saint-Gobain held an exhibition devoted to business at the Musée d’Orsay.¹³ The exhibition chronicled the period from the creation of the Manufacture Royale des Glaces in 1665 up to the 1937 Paris International Exposition. The exhibition was visited by more than 100,000 individuals and was honored with the top prize at a festival for communication devoted to businesses in everyday life.

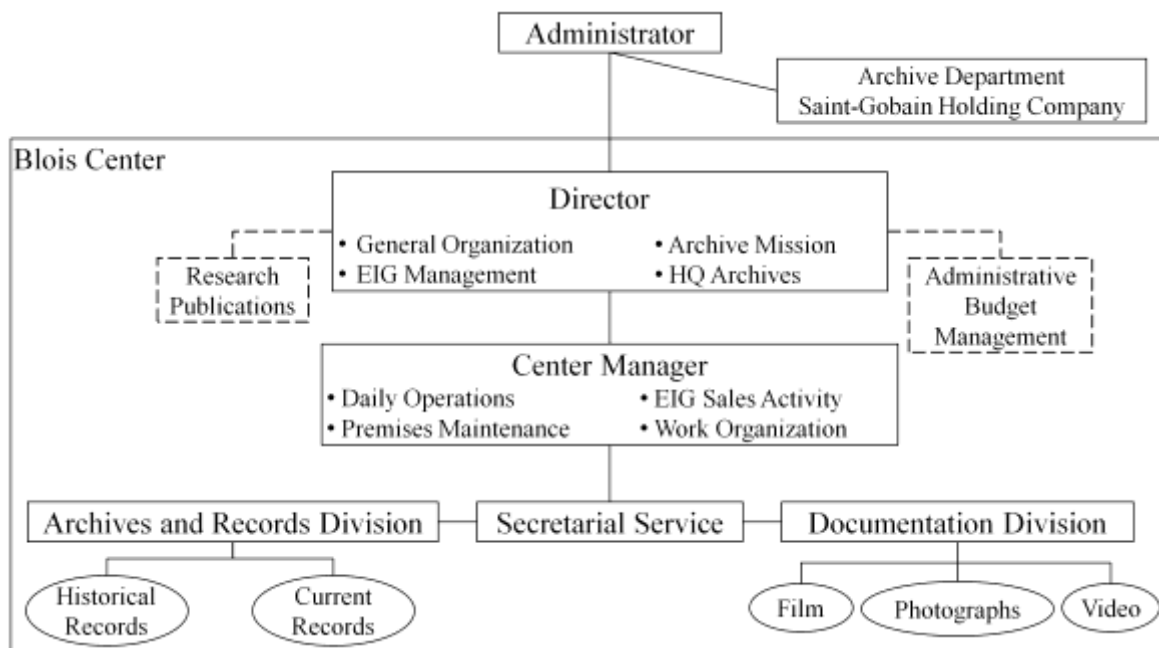
- **Publications**

The Blois Centre also produces various publications, an important source for communication and company culture.

C) Organisation

The Centre’s sole administrator is connected to the holding company, the Compagnie Saint-Gobain, at the highest level. The Centre’s director is responsible for general, administrative, and budgetary matters as well as heading research and publication activities. The centre manager, meanwhile, manages the daily business of the Centre including the organisation of the work and the sales activities of the EIG. The Centre’s thirteen professional staff are divided into two sections. The first section manages the intermediate and historical archives while the second is engaged in documentary management such as that of photographs, films and videos.

Illustration 2 – Organization of the Saint-Gobain Archives EIG

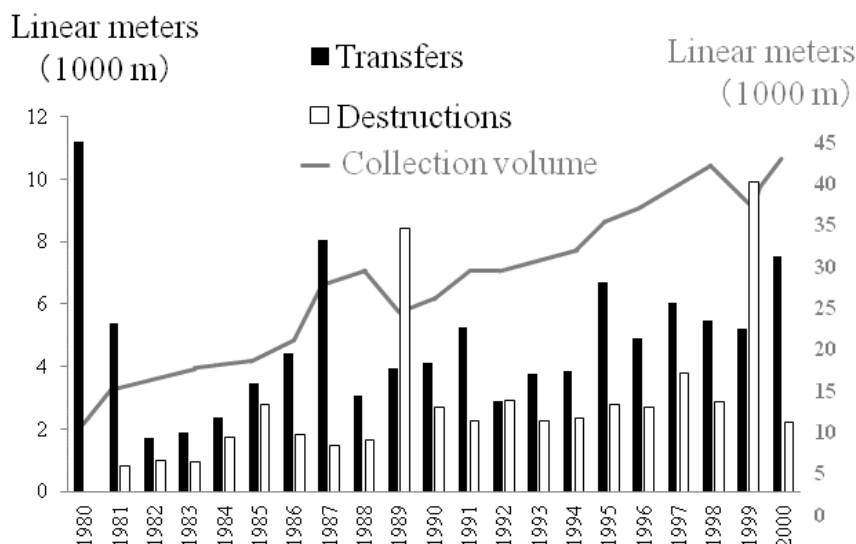


¹³ *Saint-Gobain, une entreprise devant l’Histoire, Musée d’Orsay, Paris 6 mars-4 juin 2006. Catalogue, Editions Fayard.*

D) Policy

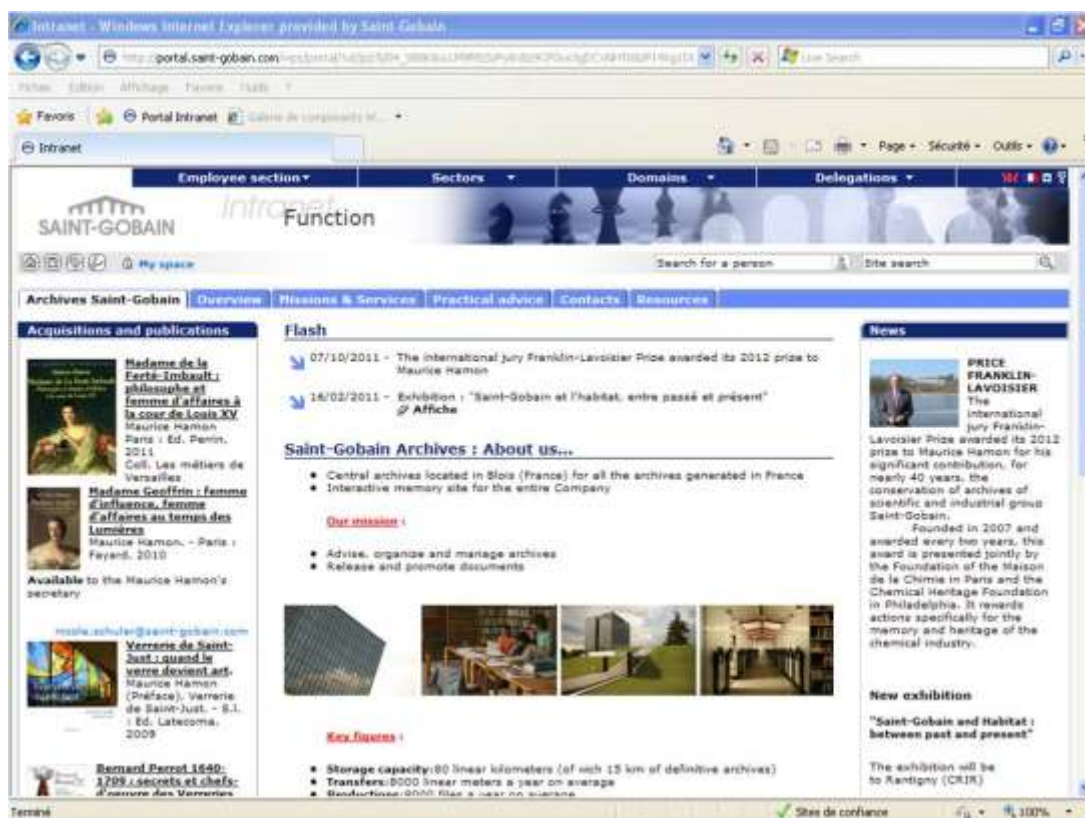
The EIG's policies have been adapted as a result of changes in the size of the Group and developments in the technological context. For example, the evolution of linear-metre contingencies since the creation of the Centre is very revealing (illustration 3).

Illustration 3 – Evolution of Linear Meter Contingencies



The Centre has also developed software known as Gobana for the management of archives and documentation, as well as use as a portal in the Group's intranet. (image 3).

Image 3 – Intranet Portal



In conclusion, the economic interest group has proved to be a very efficient method of managing archives as a whole. The profit generated provides for both its clients and for its own activities. This allows the Blois Centre to be constantly developing and working on new projects. One such focus is on the management of electronic archives. A working party has been set up by the computer department management to this end. The Centre is also looking to respond to a newly emerging trend that involves applying various memory resources to help shape corporate social responsibility. Despite all of these changes, however, as image 4 illustrates, the “Sun King” still watches over the Saint-Gobain Archives.

Image 4 – The Sun King, Louis XIV (Saint-Gobain Collections)

