Archiving Lessons from the World's Wealthiest

In 1935, Otto Bettmann sneaked out of Nazi Germany with a couple of steamer trunks of photographs. In the years since, it has grown into a collection of about 17 million photographs which document the people and events of the 20th century. It has proved to be an important source of images for historians and for the press, as well as famous images for public consumption (such as Albert Einstein sticking his tongue out).

6 years ago, in 1995, the company called 'Corbis' purchased the treasures of the Bettmann Archive. Corbis is owned by Bill Gates, chairman and founder of Microsoft.Corbis has been purchasing images from many sources (including the UPI archives), with the intention of digitizing and cataloging them for easy reference and recovery. Corbis has access to the best technology and technologists in the world to bring them to bear on the noble persuit of preserving these millions of photographs.

Not all of the photographs in the collection are worth preserving, but it is impossible to determine which of the images are extraneous. Historians recently stumbled on a 1959 photograph of jazz great Miles Davis, presumably unrecognized by the hundreds who may have flipped past the photo in the last 40 years.

Many AEC firms face a similar challenge. Most are storing hundreds or thousand of paper drawings and plots either off-site or on-site. In my experience, these documents are easily misfiled or lost. In addition, it can take from one to several days to get a tube of drawings out of off site storage and into the hands of the team that needs it. Just like the Bettmann archive of photographs, it is impossible to tell which of these documents are important, and which will never be needed. When a prospective client calls requesting information or services for a building your firm designed years ago, those documents become the most important ones in your archive. A week before that phone call, they might have been likely candidates for the bottom of a bird cage.

Back to our lesson. With all of the financial, technological and technical resources available to Bill Gates' Corbis, how much of the important Bettmann archive have they been able to digitize and catalog over the past 6 years?

Less than 2 percent.

Yes, just 225,000 of the estimated 17 million photos in the Bettmann archive alone have been scanned and cataloged over the 6 years the archive has been owned by Corbis. Historians needing to peruse the archive have had to sort through stacks of photos in open shelves. Corbis will be moving these archives to an environmentally controlled limestone mine in Pennsylvania (their own off-site storage).

So what chance does an AEC firm have to scan and catalog it's past paper drawings? Slim to none! What can you do about it? Two things:

1) Ensure that all drawings and documentation from this point forward are electronic in nature (CADD, Spreadsheets and Word Processor generated, or web-compatible).

DocuPoint is capable of scanning documents on your network to provide a searchable database using web technologies.

DocuPoint:
http://www.docu-point.com

Others provide a strict database oriented document management approach to projects:

Synergis:
http://www.nfm3.com/

AutoEDMS
http://www.acssoftware.com/

Cadmandu
http://www.automate.net/

AutoManager WorkFlow
http://www.cyco.com/

Kruse Control/kWise:
http://www.kruseinc.com/

RxIndex:
http://www.rasterex.com/

2) Ensure that files are stored in the proper directories and properly named using office conventions for easy searching and retrieval.

When historical information is needed for new work, it has become an important, active document. Scan or convert it for your new work per the guidelines above.

There are several tools based on web-search technology which will regularly scan all the documents on your network for easy searching. These can be a boon to mining the information on your firm's network - but most will catalog only the files that are currently available on your network. Some product like kWise can write a completed project to CD for off-line management.

Web search engines have evolved to search and index over a billion web pages (Google claims to have cataloged 1,346,966,000), so they should be quite capable for the hundred thousands of documents on your network. Products like Docu-Point make use of this quick indexing and easy search technology perfected on the web.

These document searching and document management tools have a lot going for them in terms of managing live, current projects. To make full use of them for historical information, you have to accept the idea of making those files available on your network well past the conclusion of each project.

You will be stuck with the paper archives of the past until you are convinced they are useless enough to dispose of, but with careful organization and naming conventions you can build a knowledgebase of reusable information for your firm to improve both the quality and the efficiency of your work.

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