

CORPORATE AND BUSINESS ORAL HISTORY: SOME THEMES AND CHALLENGES

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Oral History/National Life Stories

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Business archives and oral history

- **Business archivists and historians have not used oral history extensively or critically (with some notable exceptions esp in the banking sector)**
- **Still tends to be seen as ‘supplementary’ or (today) as ‘alternative’ rather than embedded in everyday practice**
- **British oral history has not engaged with the study of business/corporate culture. Perhaps because...**
 - **its radical origins have tended to make it ideologically averse to business and corporate oral history**
 - **oral history has primarily been a methodology of the marginalised, the dispossessed, the powerless and the oppressed in British society**
- **Notable differences between UK and US...**

What oral history can contribute to corporate/ business history

- **‘More history’**: minutiae/everyday, disappearing practices, relationships, hierarchies etc, absent from the documentary record
- **Hidden voices**: women, ethnic, junior/support staff
- **Discordant voices**: multiple views, subjective opinion
- **Myth and the role of story in organisations** (eg invented traditions)
- **Business ethos and atmosphere** (power; technology and change)
- **How work narratives are constructed** (individual agency)
- **The work-life (home) balance**



What oral history can give businesses/organisations themselves

- **Tool for capturing organisational memory and oral knowledge before ‘it walks out the door’ (Kransdorff); employee induction + training**
- **Change management and corporate cohesion: restating goals and company ethos**
- **Employee recognition**
- **‘Learning the lessons’: testimony and management training (eg Piper Alpha disaster)**
- **Brand building: history + longevity = trust**

Oral history in a business/corporate environment: the challenges

- **Practical challenges: workplace interviews, busy diaries, life story v career history**
- **Who's in control? Manipulation and timing: negotiating working agreements and ethical best-practice**
- **Shared or divergent objectives: the archive v the product**
- **A balanced sample? Getting access; including the critics...**
- **Insider/outsider interviewers: what's best?**
- **Tackling self-censorship, commercial sensitivity, 'corporate line'**

