CORPORATE AND BUSINESS ORAL HISTORY: SOME THEMES AND CHALLENGES

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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 vs career history
- Who's in control? Manipulation and timing: negotiating working agreements and ethical best-practice
- Shared or divergent objectives: the archive vs the product
- A balanced sample? Getting access; including the critics...
- Insider/outsider interviewers: what’s best?
- Tackling self-censorship, commercial sensitivity, ‘corporate line’