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Bureau of Personnel

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Memorandum by the Director of Personnel conc. Question
of "accretion" in personnel files of staff members

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MEMORANDUM FOR CONSIDERATION AT A FUTURE PRIVATE MEETING OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Question of "accretion" in personnel files of staff members

Memorandum by the Director of Personnel :
Contents of Personnel Files

1. In 1955 a new system of personnel files went into operation, following prolonged and detailed discussions between the Office of Personnel, the Office of Legal Affairs and the Staff Representatives. The new system provides for a personnel file to be maintained in four separate parts :

- a) Official status file
- b) Financial file
- c) Travel file
- d) Confidential file

2. The official status file is the basic file containing all the documents depicting the career of the staff member and all the information which normally is required for the main personnel actions and for consideration for permanent appointment, transfer or promotion. All adverse decisions or appraisals of staff members are to be filed on the official status file after communication to the staff member concerned. However, facts and reasons why staff members are not selected for particular jobs or for promotions are not, as a matter of policy, communicated to the staff member concerned and are not recorded in the official status file. The official status file is open for inspection by staff members, in principle once a year, but more often if the staff member concerned considers making an appeal against an administrative decision, is going to appear before the Review Board, etc.

3. The travel and finance files contain only material relevant to these subjects. They have been instituted for the convenience of officials dealing with financial matters and with travel who, however, are not concerned with the career or status of the staff members. Both files are also open for inspection by the staff member concerned.

4. The confidential file : The confidential file is divided, in turn into two parts :

In the part containing privileged matter are filed such documents as confidential communications from governments, letters of reference and a certain number of documents pertaining to internal consultations relating to administrative decisions and which consist of advice and arguments that a particular action should or should not be taken. Quite recently the directives governing the filing of documents in the privileged part of the confidential file have been amended so as to allow more freedom for administrative officers to decide which particular documents pertaining to

internal consultations should be marked "confidential" and placed in the privileged part of the confidential file and which should go to the official status file. The change was motivated by the wish to keep the confidential file as small as possible and it is hoped that the majority of papers concerning internal consultations will find their way to the official status file. The privileged part of the confidential file is not available to persons dealing with ordinary routine personnel operations and its accessibility is strictly limited. Access is authorized by the Secretary-General, the Director or Deputy Director of Personnel and the Under-Secretary in charge of the Legal Department. Making privileged matter more generally available, for instance to members of the Review Board or the Appointment and Promotion Board, involves a waiver of the privilege with the consequence that the material must, at the same time, be shown to the staff member concerned. An exception to this rule is being made with respect to reference letters which are available for inspection by the Review Board, but not by the staff member.

The non-privileged part of the confidential file contains material which need not be privileged against disclosure but which should, in the interest of the staff members themselves, be kept from circulation. Such documents include, for instance, complaints, charges or unfavourable reports from sources outside the Organization or from other staff members, not officially concerned with advising on the action to be taken. A reasonable time after the receipt of such material is allowed for consideration of possible action. Whenever action is contemplated or it is intended to place the document in the file, the instruction provides that it should be shown to the staff member who may make an oral or written rebuttal within a fixed period. If no action is contemplated and the document is not to be filed, it is destroyed. Anonymous letters fall within this category of documents. As a rule they are destroyed unless they give rise to an investigation or action, in which case the staff member concerned is entitled to see them and is shown them. The non-privileged part of the confidential file contains also various communications of a highly personal character as, for instance, enquiries by organizations from whom a staff member is seeking a loan, correspondence concerning confidential family and health matters, etc.; all these are matters known to the staff member.

5. The revised policy concerning the organization of personnel files has been announced to the staff by an administrative instruction, dated 24 February 1955, which explains briefly each part of the personnel file and informs the staff of their right to inspect the personnel file except the privileged part of the confidential file.

6. In addition to a reform of the organization of personnel files there took place, in 1955, an innovation in the system of filing all correspondence pertaining to the filling of vacancies by recruitment, transfers, promotions and other movements of staff. A series of files has been organized, identified by the functional title of the group of posts to which they refer. While the main purpose of this innovation was to facilitate the work of the Office of Personnel and of other interested offices by grouping into one series of files all documents and correspondence concerning all movements of staff, an incidental result is that some papers, bearing on that subject, which previously found their way to personnel files, are filed in this new series of folders.