

Business Archives - European Experience

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Definition of Business Archives

Business archives should be considered to consist of any kind of document that has been created by any economical organized unit outside the governmental or public sphere of central, regional or local government.

The archives concept should as follows be considered to include for instance any physical item enclosing intelligent remnants of such activity independently of form, format and material. In a Business archives repositories one will accordingly find paper documents - loose and bound -, photos, videos, films, drawings, maps, CD-roms, Data files stored in various ways etc. etc, and even invoices with letter heads picturing industrial sites, factories and products.

Any Business Archives should have norms and regulations developed by professional archivists making it possible to evaluate the possible worth while saving for sensible use documents created by the Business at hand.

The making of such rules is of great importance in private corporations as it is a matter-of-course kind of guidelines in any National Archives Organization.

They can be put up within the single corporation as an element in the corporation archives policy - if it exists - and believe me there are examples to this for instance in the Ford Corporation in USA. They may be developed by a business archives organisation. Or they may evolve as suggested guidelines from a National Archives Department which is the case in Norway and Denmark.

As instruments in the formation of a professional archives, the value of having guidelines of this kind cannot be underestimated.

Use and Utility of Business archives

One can read books and articles by the dozens containing extensive lists of arguments advocating the use of business archives.

I restrain my self on this point to a few statements which should easily be conceived as evident by most people even the most economizing corporate leader.

1. The history of any society cannot be fully told without a profound understanding of the development of trade and industry.

2. Any corporation, company, plant or firm will exclude itself from the possibility to analyse and profit by the knowledge of its own activity if it does away with the documents verifying its own existence.

The sources for the full knowledge of the economic and also of the social and cultural history of society rests in considerable degree within the business archives as sine qua non research sources. The existence of such archives and access to them - either as archives within the corporation itself or as collections handed over from the corporation to archives institutions - should be secured as a part of a corporation policy and also as part of a regional or a national policy for saving the cultural heritage of the society.

Industrial development in Europe; some main lines of development

The course of industrial history in the European countries is not a homogenous story. The situation differs from country to country. While industry has been a major sphere of economic development and the creation of wealth dating back to the midst 1700-red and even further back in countries like England and parts of Germany and France, Norwegian economy was by large based on agriculture and 80 % of the population were dependent for their livelihood upon farming until the so-called “great shift” took place in the last decades of the 19th century, Norway being the youngest of the European industrial nations. Nevertheless it is true for every nation that despite of the history of industry running along unparalleled courses of time, industry has come to be the dominant factor in deciding in what ways nations should survive in terms of wealth, employment, social services and health care, educational standards, financial means etc.

Archives being the memory of the nation will then be a necessary supply base for knowledge of any essential development over the years in general and the story-teller of the various fields of society and the interaction between the more important sectors of activities vital for the national evolution.

A simple truth deduced from these facts of European history should be that the more industry the more weight should be put on preserving business archives and repositories accessible to economic historians and any other group of scientists and researchers.

However, this is not what has turned out to be the case.

Archives and archival work relating to industrial and economic activities in general

The situation at hand is extremely diversified. Four ways of contributing to the existence of Business Archives spring to the eye.

1. Companies preserve their own archives and make use of them for their own purposes and research, marketing etc. and they open them at least partly to external researchers. This is being done all over Europe. Ansaldo Archives is a good example. In France this is the case with St. Gobain archives, Elf Aquitaine, the Renault archives and the Credit Lyonnaise archives, Nestle in Switzerland, in Great Britain with BP Archives, in Germany with Krupp archives, Siemens archives and Daimler Archives, in Sweden with Volvo archives, in Denmark with the Moeller archives, in Norway with the Hydro and Statoil archives. Not at least in the USA and Canada you find many examples of corporate archives preserved in separate repositories inside the corporation itself, like the Ford Corporation, Rockefeller Foundation, Phillips Petroleum and many others.

In Europe, archives from banks and banking houses dating back through several centuries may be the most conspicuous examples of Business archives being preserved within the

companies themselves. Most older banks have preserved their own archives. The interesting by-product that follows from this is that Banking History is almost to be considered a discipline in its own right within the profession of Economic History and one might therefore argue that the more archives preserved the more research of importance is being performed.

2. Companies archives are preserved as a result of cooperation mainly due to priorities within the industrial sphere. Germany almost exels as to this kind of solutions where the industries themselves invest in a common pursuit of solutions based on cooperation. Most of this initiative is handled by the regional Chambers of Commerce. The first Business Archives was established in Cologne for Rheinland-Wesphalia as early as 1906. Follow ups have been established in Dortmund and Munich. In France the first centre for Business and Labor Archives was opened in Roubaix as late as 1993; in spite of much ambition there has been little practical results as of late.

In Italy, to my knowledge initiative to this end has been going on since the 1970-ties with much still to be done to create archives operating in their own right, but at least you have now succeeded in establishing Your first Business archives institution.

The use of the regional chambers of commerce to work as instruments for the formation of business archives has, however, not been of any obvious importance in the majority of the European Countries.

3. More success has come out of companies cooperating with local and central authorities and public archives and libraries whereby business archives are transferred to public repositories.

The National Archives and the regional branches of the National archives as well as city archives and local municipality archives institutions all over Europe receive in their repositories business archives and other “private” archives, i.e. archival collections having been created outside the public sphere of government. In Denmark one of the National Archives Departments works solely with preservation of Business Archives of any kind, the repositories containing more than 50 km documents with a content varying from Electricity companies through banking, railway and clothing industry to merchant houses dating back to the 1500-eds. In Switzerland the Swiss Business Archives is organized as a department of the Basel kanton Archives. In Great Britain one of the more reknown archives is the combined BP and Warwickshire University Archives in Coventry sharing their own large archives building and covering a wide range of information on industry covering coal mines, car factories, oil production and clothing factories etc. A major business Archives is the Glasgow University Archives in Scotland, headed by Lesley Richmond, secretary of the SBL section steering committee. In Finland the government refunds 80% of a separate institution for Finnish Business Archives. Both in Rotterdam and Amsterdam have been established combined libraries and archives for serving economic historical research. Examples of considerable number of various business archives preserved in public archives and libraries are to be found in most countries, as the Scandinavian countries, Tsjeckia, Israel, Spain and France. The situation leaves however much to be wished for in countries like Russia and most of the former Soviet republics, Austria and Yugoslavia.

4. Initiatives to establish, organize and finance business archives have to a certain degree been instigated by societies of business archivists making efforts to cooperate with businesses and government authorities to shape accessible business archives and working seriously in developing professional standards and guidelines for the use and preservation of business archives. Such societies have been successfully active first of all in USA where there is a very active American Business Archivist Society, but also in Europe in countries like Germany, Great Britain where there is a British Business Archives Council, to some degree here in

Northern Italy I presume, in Switzerland, in Germany and in Denmark. These societies publish important subject-matter periodicals that contribute to enhance the professional archival work both among researchers and within the businesses themselves.

Attitudes to the importance of the saving of business archives for posterity

A main obstacle for a faster development of Business archives in Europe and elsewhere has been the widely different attitudes as to the value and worth while investments in the preservation of such collections of documents. The cost involved has in many cases resulted in corporation management refraining from taken conscious action to preserve the corporation's own archives. And it is a paradox that just because the archives of the larger companies have a larger volume than is the case in smaller businesses and the costs involved in preserving and accessing them are accordingly higher, a high number of archives from larger businesses have been been done away with out of economical reasons. Furthermore one should add that it is also regrettably true that many company owners have wished to erase traces of their activity and in this way deny external use in order to hide vital information from being disclosed to the public and to the authorities.

Legal tools regulating business archives

As industry has come to dominate the economical sphere of most European countries, the national authorities have slowly come to take increased interest in the importance of Business archives being preserved and put to access for research. Laws on archives have been put into effect in most European countries. More and more of these laws include clauses aiming at preserving business archives, and in a number of countries the authorities also take upon themselves an increased financial responsibility to pay for costs involved in the endeavor of prohibiting business archives from being destroyed.

The Scandinavian laws are among the more recent in Europe, the Norwegian one was put into effect as late as 1999. In the case of Norway the National Assembly has accepted that the National Archives system receive any business archives considered to be of importance for research necessary to fully understand economic, social and cultural processes in the development of the Norwegian society. Even if the National archives leadership cannot force companies and corporations to hand over the archives to public repositories, the companies can be denied to throw archives away. This goes for both Norwegian companies and international companies residing in Norway, as for instance all the oil companies including the Italian Agip Oil Corporation.

The Archives Laws in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Italy, France and Israel comment in different ways on the value of business archives. Most European countries to my knowledge still have a long way to go to make law amendments that secure a public responsibility for business archives.

The situation in the European countries will therefore for many years ahead be characterized by widely different condition in this field of preserving the cultural heritage. Depending on the result of the work being done by authorities and private enterprise one can it seems talk about rich countries and poor countries as to what has been achieved in this field of cultural heritage preservation.

Conclusion

To sum up in brief this seems to be a fairly accurate description as to the situation at present:

1. Status.

There are considerable differences throughout Europe. This goes for volume, representativity, accessibility and professional handling of Business Archives.

2. Partners for cooperation.

During the last decades the most active partners in the endeavour to preserve Business archives are a selective group of corporations and companies - mainly larger ones themselves having reached a relative high consciousness as to the importance of having at hand their own archives - central and local authorities, public archives and libraries, Chambers of commerce, Archivist societies and societies of economic historians.

3. The Law Perspective.

There is an ongoing process of embodying clauses phrased in order to secure both public and private archives taking place in an increasing number of European countries. It seems like an archives law in every country shall turn out to be an absolute necessity if one shall succeed in stopping further waste of important archives in a number of European countries.

4. The Future.

There is still much to be wanted in this field. Huge piles of important documents telling the true story about the industrialization of Europe have been destroyed or have haphazardly disappeared. It is true, although regrettable, that the situation in many countries is rather chaotic. The present growing concern in Italy and other countries obviously depend on international support to alter the course of action in this field. Obviously a strong cooperation to find efficient solutions is needed in particular between cultural authorities and the businesses themselves.

In Italy considering all the recent activities in this field, I am confident that you will succeed in improving the the further structuring of Business archives and the interest in the cultural history in which the history of the business community is of such a tremendous importance.