

Let's Keep Talking about Business Archives

By Giorgetta Bonfiglio Dosio

The second edition of Archeixpo in November 2007, organized by the Associazione Nazionale Archivistica Italiana (ANAI), was dedicated to business repositories – providing a unique opportunity for meeting and debate on pertinent issues. The intensive three-day conference included lectures, films and case studies as well as presentations of the most innovative products from companies in the sector. It was an appropriate moment to take stock of the situation for business archives, fully 35 years after the well-known round table organized by the archival administration. This time, the attention was focused primarily on the increasing number of pertinent events in the archival world over the last three decades.

Several reviews of archival initiatives have recently been published; those by Fabio Del Giudice and Gaetano Calabrese stand out in particular. It appears that business archives are continuing to develop and, despite various problems, are in better shape than many other archives created by private or public actors.

The exceptional work of the organization was carried out on both theoretical and practical levels, addressing such issues as defining the distinct identity of each records-producing enterprise, and the specificity in analysis of those records. Although few systematic solutions exist, numerous examples of excellence can be found that are not present at the same level in the public sector. Research on enterprises and their records has helped to expand knowledge of the entrepreneurial world among archivists and to create highly specialized professional functions. Archivists have become sensitive to the distinct nature of business archives and are developing the necessary methodologies for preserving, managing, and communicating business documentation, thus enhancing its intangible value.

A further positive element is the growing awareness of the historiographic value of business records, resulting in successful cooperation between historians and archivists. Compared to the experience of a few years ago, historians have greater respect for the importance of preservation activities, whether preparatory or concurrent. Moreover, in the field of business archives, preservation activity has always been strictly linked to that of valorization and communication, and I believe this newfound sense of collaboration between archivists and historians, together with the financial contribution of the companies, could and should be applied to other fields.

In recent years, a large number of research centers, institutes, foundations and associations have been created and are now working in many fields: analyzing the business world and its culture; studying business archives and ways to preserve them. Specific new publications such as newsletters, paper and on-line journals have also appeared. No other category of archives enjoys similar privileges apart from military archives. Recently several

relevant meetings have taken place: in addition to the wonderful trilogy offered by ANAI – Section of Friuli Venezia Giulia, I refer to the two recent conferences “Riforme in corsa” (held in Bari in 2004), with a specific session dedicated to business archives, and “Gli archivi d’impresa in Sicilia” (held in Siracusa in 2005) both of whose proceedings have been published.

Having mentioned the positive aspects, let’s look at the problems. Above all, the structural weaknesses of the Archival Offices has slowed down both the work of systematically surveying their own patrimony and the targeted corrective actions begun in the 1980s. Secondly, the situation is not uniform: many praiseworthy examples of innovative preservation can be found along with situations of negligence and carelessness that have led to the loss and the dispersion of a huge amount of archival heritage. On the one hand, we find various relevant safeguard initiatives employing state-of-the-art software; on the other hand, no *systematic* safeguard solutions are available that are supported by the Italian archival administration.

Another problem is the fact that the most relevant efforts are supported by large companies, some of whom have failed to sufficiently reinforce their archival organizations. Small and medium enterprises, who often have few resources and little understanding or ability to organize the preservation of their records, face many difficulties in carrying out this effort on their own. They need substantial public financial support-- an unlikely occurrence for two reasons: first the general shortage of funds in the current situation; and second, the unhealthy adversarial climate between public and private, which has become more acute in Italian society in the last few years.

There are other critical areas to examine. Practically all positive initiatives regard general historical archives; on the other hand, entrepreneurs rarely avail themselves of professional archival services to manage the construction of their company’s archives. Indeed, this step could contribute to an improvement in the general organization of the enterprise itself.

In addition, the initiatives on behalf historical archives are not coordinated among themselves; as a result, each project operates in isolation and remains disconnected from an authentic network. Amedeo Lepore, in his recent analysis of archival websites, has underlined the lack of coordination or common program that, in safeguarding the interests and the characteristics of each archives, provides a point of reference, a guide and a communication infrastructure for the definition of a common language. The challenge of working through a network implies a cultural project, not just a technological instrument.

The efforts towards preservation by the archival administration are inadequate to the real needs also because they come into effect *after* the declaration of the Superintendent. In other words legislation and action are uncoordinated; this issue is all well explained by Antonella Bilotto.

I am firmly convinced that national norms of archival preservation have little chance of success in the world of the global private enterprise, if entrepreneurs themselves are not convinced of the value of preserving their business archives as a cultural asset. This is another reason why the alliance with the historians is strategic, and that valorization and preservation activities go hand in hand. Moreover, young archivists require adequate specific training for employment in the entrepreneurial world. This means specialized knowledge regarding the management of archives under construction, whether digital or not.

It seems clear that the above-mentioned problems are linked: the lack of specific rules (when necessary) and the continuous reduction of resources (both private and public) jeopardizes the continuity of current initiatives and the expansion of future programs. The shortage of directives and insufficient knowledge of existing ones contribute to the persistent

lack of sensitivity on the part of most entrepreneurs with regard to the protection and preservation of industrial heritage. Consequently, there is a low demand for specialized archivists for the management of business records. This last problem is compounded by the lack of specific training programs (apart a few excellent exceptions), that are coordinated with the entire training system for archivists.

Industries have deeply significant relations with their geographic and social context, and if we consider this along with the most recent institutional innovations, we might speculate on a more relevant role of the local institutions to preserve the memory of a territory. A few attempts to do so have been made; however the results haven't always been satisfactory and there is still a lot of work to do. Two valid solutions could be to broaden the jurisdiction of the current State Archives network, or to join it with a similar network aimed at handling archives produced within the territory by juridical persons, public and private, other than the State. Of course, either solution would require that the necessary resources be found quickly.

Coordinating initiatives remains a key priority. It is equally urgent to discuss the methods and the quality requirements, to continue scientific research on business archives and, intensify efforts for their valorization; that is, the communication of the characteristics and values of the entrepreneurial society to a variety of publics. In carrying out these goals – and in this field more than in others – archivists will need to strengthen their relationships with other professions and cooperate in order to achieve widely usable intellectual products.