

Introduction—Archives and Business in the International Age

IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE of the next millennium, archivists face few challenges that match those involved in documenting the operations of business. In an era in which even small companies have a global reach and electronic information rules the day, archivists have remarkable opportunities to expand their services and their clientele. Their primary challenge is to understand and deal with both the scope and rapidly changing formats in which that information is created and delivered, and to harness its potential value for a variety of users. That challenge confronts archivists within business and within large multi-level organizations as well. Archivists in Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Australia are as concerned with these challenges as are their counterparts in the United States. Authors in this special issue of the *American Archivist* explore the dimensions of the challenge and present their views of both challenges and solutions to issues facing archives and business in the international age.

The Records of American Business: A Discussion Continued

The Records of American Business Project, and the book it produced, launched an international discussion of issues surrounding the documentation of modern business. This special issue of the *American Archivist* continues and expands that discussion, and in fact provides considerable comment on a number of issues first addressed in the book *The Records of American Business*.¹ In particular, the essays contributed by Elizabeth Adkins and by Henrik Fode and Jørgen Fink explore issues raised by the Records of American Business Project in some detail. This issue may be regarded as a companion volume to *The Records of American Business*, and especially as a furthering of the international discussion the book engendered. Essays from leading archivists in Canada, Denmark, and the United Kingdom greatly contribute to the international perspective.

The Archives of Business and the Business of Archives

James O'Toole, writing in *The Records of American Business*, has noted the wider import of those discussions to the general business of archives. "These essays have a wider applicability and importance," and the authors, he writes, "explore issues that are of pressing, day-to-day concern to all archivists. The challenges of preserving adequate documentation of modern human activity and then of providing high quality access to that

¹James M. O'Toole, ed., *The Records of American Business* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1997).

documentation by a range of users may be seen in sharp relief by business archivists, but those same challenges are no less familiar to those who manage the records of, for example, higher education or cultural activities or even individuals and families.’’²

Beyond even that reality, archivists who work with the records of business must often be able to justify the utility of their work in real terms—a challenge faced in other venues by other archivists—and of increasing importance as archivists jockey for funding as one of a number of information professions. Lessons learned in building and maintaining business archives can be of critical importance to all archivists. ‘‘If business archivists can build support for their programs even in a world in which, because of the profit motive, archives seem a ‘hard sell,’ how much more easily will other institutions, for whom that motive is less critical, be able to build their own programs?’’³

The Essays and the Authors

This volume, then, both continues and expands the discussion of issues current and critical to the future of archives. And it lends international perspective to consideration of those issues, reminding us all that the world we work in is small indeed, and that we have much to learn—and to contribute—to a discussion of issues that affect us and our colleagues wherever they may happen to live.

In the first essay, Elizabeth Adkins provides an overview of the development of business archives in the United States. She reviews the uncertain beginnings of corporate archives programs in the 1950s and 1960s, the sudden rush of programs in the 1970s, and the harsh reality check caused by reengineering and downsizing in the 1980s and 1990s. She also reflects on the much-discussed interaction between corporate archives and repositories that collect business records, as a result of her participation in the Records of American Business Project. She also lists a number of unanswered questions arising out of the RAB project, requiring further research and writing by the business archives community.

Gord Rabchuk takes quite a different view, looking at corporate archives from inside and providing a hard, cold look at the realities of operating in a business setting. In addition to arguing that business archivists must revamp their image within the business community, he provides specific examples of value-added products and services developed by the archives at the Royal Bank of Canada.

The prickly reality of outsourcing and restructuring and their effects on archives is discussed by James Fogerty, who provides brief case histories of four major corporations whose archives are part of the business collections at the Minnesota Historical Society. If one believes that the records of business are an integral part of American history, and that the place of corporations in that history needs to be documented and accessible, then the fate of those business records and the archives themselves is a matter of some importance. This article explores the progression of events in the past twenty years, and reviews the results that downsizing and outsourcing have actually produced, and their import for archives.

In the world of corporate archives, few events have provoked as much discussion as the transfer of the J. Walter Thompson archives to Duke University. Ellen Gartrell, who now manages the JWT archives and related advertising collections, explores the contro-

²O’Toole, *The Records of American Business*, vii.

³O’Toole, *The Records of American Business*, xvi.

versial transfer, the realities of the arrangement with the company, and the subsequent administration of this complex transaction. She pays special attention to the costs and benefits, and to the ongoing relationship between the university and the company. Gartrell describes the agreements made with donors, the management of a fee-based information service for business users, and outreach to the scholarly community. The article's title derives from a series of portfolios published by the J. Walter Thompson Company in the 1950s.

Henrik Fode and Jørgen Fink present the widest-ranging essay in the volume. The authors are (respectively) the director and a widely-published historian/archivist from the Danish Business Archives Centre, which is one of the largest business archives in Europe. They begin with an institutional overview of archives in Denmark, followed by a review of the ways in which Denmark has developed a national program for dealing with the records of business. The article also includes an overview of the development of the Danish Business Archives Centre and its programs, including its research and publication functions and its attempts to deal with the issues of volume, electronic information, and work regarding appraisal, inventorying, research, and national and international cooperation. The authors' comments on the "Minnesota Method" of appraisal, presented in *The Records of American Business*, is the first European response to that approach.⁴

The essay by Laura Linard and Brent Sverdloff represents a much-needed update on the operations of one of the oldest business collections in the United States. Since its founding, Baker Library has collected rare and unique materials to support the curriculum of the Harvard Business School. Today, Baker Library holds one of the pre-eminent collections of historical materials on business history and economic philosophy. Harvard Business School students and faculty as well as leaders in the field have used this resource material to learn from the experiences of the past and to understand the historical development of business functions. More recently, however, the material has also drawn ever-increasing numbers of international students and scholars from a broad range of disciplines, such as cultural anthropology, ethnic and gender studies, industrial archaeology, sociology, fine and decorative arts, maritime history, and engineering. Linard and Sverdloff present an overview of the Harvard business collection, trace changing uses and users, and review current plans for the future of the collection and its place within the Harvard Business School and the wider world of American business history.

Edwin Green brings a highly developed international perspective to complete this journal as he explores issues affecting the archives of modern multi-national enterprises. Taking examples from the recent experience of the giant HSBC Group, whose member companies include the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Midland Bank, the British Bank of the Middle East, and other long-established providers of financial services, he reviews critical decision points in the management of such archives. Among the issues reviewed are those affecting centralization, location, relocation of archives from national jurisdictions, and the relationship of a multi-national corporation's archives to other repositories that hold records of its constituent companies. He concludes with a look at the challenges of reaching and responding to an international user base.

⁴Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Documentation with an Attitude: A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records," in O'Toole, *The Records of American Business*, 161-229.

Meeting the Present and Preparing for the Future

This volume provides a critical look at issues and answers in the world which archivists live and work in today. And, taken with SAA's recently-published volume, *The Records of American Business*, it goes quite some way toward providing a blueprint for the future as well. Only by recognizing common issues can we address them, and only by working together can we ensure that the investment in solutions receives a maximum return.

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