

Alone in the Stacks: Succeeding as a Solo Archivist

By Christina Zamon. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2024. 253 pp.
Paperback. \$69.00. ISBN: 978-1-958954-09-6.

Working as the sole archivist in an organization can at times be both exhilarating and overwhelming. In the book *Alone in the Stacks: Succeeding as a Solo Archivist*, author Christina Zamon navigates the challenges of a solo archivist, applying her own experiences and tapping into the wisdom of current solo archivists. Zamon's twenty-plus years of experience includes working as a solo archivist and as part of a team in a variety of settings, ranging from academic to cultural heritage to corporate. She is an active member of several archival organizations and is the founder of the Boston Area Archives and Records Consortium (BAARC). In 2024, Zamon was inducted as a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the profession. *Alone in the Stacks* is an update to her 2012 publication, *The Lone Arranger: Succeeding in a Small Repository*.¹

Alone in the Stacks is a collection of practical guidance on archival best practices for common work demands. It covers administration and management, collections management and related systems, digitization projects, born-digital projects and digital preservation, fundamental archival programs, facilities management and disaster planning, reference and outreach, and budgeting and financing. Most chapters include one or more relevant case studies provided by solo archivists. The two appendixes cover recommended readings and resources organized by topic. This is a focused, succinctly organized guide designed to provide best practices across archival work.

Updates from 2012 include new case studies and a significant expansion dedicated to digital materials. Zamon has expanded this topic from a single chapter on simply "surviving the digital age"² to three chapters on actively working in the digital age, covering collection management systems and digital asset management systems, digitization projects, and born-digital records and digital preservation.

The book is smartly organized into chapters focused on specific aspects of archival work, allowing readers to pick and choose the chapters that they need. The content does not require reading a previous chapter to understand the next. In fact, reading the book front-to-back in a short amount of time, as I did, may be overwhelming for a solo or new archivist. With each chapter, I was reminded of how much work I never get around to initiating, let alone completing, in my solo archivist role.

For experienced solo archivists, the book acts as a reference on how to approach specific types of archival work. This is particularly helpful if you are hoping to

enhance or improve the archives you manage, tackle long-term projects that require more planning, or have limited experience with certain workflows or processes. For instance, the chapter “Collections Management Systems” can help to alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty of how to begin the process of securing and implementing a brand new CMS.

In addition to the book’s organization, archivists with varying levels of experience will appreciate several other components. Each chapter includes a list of questions or a bulleted list to help the reader understand their role and the required work. For example, the chapter on collections management presents several considerations as part of the appraisal process, like identifying the potential users of a record and the cost of preserving the record. By thinking through these considerations, the solo archivist minimizes the potential for their archives to become an institutional dumping ground with a backlog of materials that do not support the collecting policy and may be better managed elsewhere. This presentation is useful for those new and unfamiliar with the work or those of us who need a refresher on why we do what we do. Knowing how you answer each question helps to keep the work from ballooning out of control and to identify issues that may make the work impossible.

The real-world sample policies and forms shared by the author’s contributors are a welcome inclusion. Requests to share institutional policies and forms are often the subject of messages in SAA’s online discussion forums. Solo archivists and new archivists starting an archives from scratch can refer to these examples and be reassured that they are on the right track, as well as save time looking for examples elsewhere.

In this updated edition, the multiple chapters on digital materials help to break down a complex, growing area. Separating digitization, born-digital materials, and digital preservation keeps these concepts digestible while informing the reader of the unique or additional work associated with these materials. Like the other chapters, the information here lays out basic principles. Solo archivists less familiar with working with digital materials will learn key terminology and general processes, enabling them to take the next steps in professional development in this area.

From a personal standpoint, I appreciated the focus on advocacy throughout the book. All archivists should advocate for their archives, but it is vital for solo archivists who may have no one else to lean on when it comes to securing support. The integration of advocacy into each chapter broadened my definition of success as an archivist. If you are the only person aware of the work required for your stakeholders’ benefit, then you are selling yourself short. Collections management, digitization, preservation, facilities management—some of these actions may be invisible to your users, but without them, their experience with the archives would be very different. Zamon encourages us to be more visible in our efforts.

Several aspects of the book could have been stronger. Zamon does a good job of incorporating the need for accessibility in some sections but fails to include it in

others where it would have been beneficial (for example, in the section on exhibits). She also touches upon diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in archives but could have made these topics more prominent. With the academic community and professional organizations like SAA expecting archivists to be able to communicate their responsibility to DEI in the archives, this is an opportunity for future editions of this book. An example of a DEI statement and a DEI case study would be useful to many solo archivists.

Overall, the book is an excellent resource. Its unavoidable weakness is that it cannot be everything to everyone. For example, I personally found the case studies to be the least interesting sections of this book and wish that the case studies from the 2012 publication were available either in the appendix or online in case one was more relevant to my experience. That said, other solo archivists may find similarities with their own situations in the included case studies and extract nuggets of wisdom that the contributors were kind enough to share. Zamon also acknowledges that every small repository or solo archivist shop is different, with unique challenges and priorities. The text provides a fundamental overview of each major aspect of archival work but cannot possibly address the multitude of issues or questions of every reader. It is up to the reader to interpret and transform the information in the book into actions that best suit their needs.

The extensive list of resources in Appendix B is a great starting point for additional information and support. The risk with lists like these is the potential for broken links or abandoned websites. Fortunately, information professionals will know how to find the information elsewhere. The other downside to this printed list is that some of the URLs are lengthy. Access to a digital copy of this appendix with hyperlinks would have improved this resource.

The trend for a single person to manage existing archives shows no signs of declining. Zamon points out that small repositories and solo archivist shops comprise a large percentage of archives in the United States but are underrepresented in archival literature. While solo archivists can benefit from reading most archival literature, our time is at a premium. Having a single resource is preferable to having multiple books on specific topics.

Interest is also growing in establishing archives in places they did not previously exist, relying on people with less formal training to create a plan. Easy-to-understand resources, such as this book, are essential to give solo or aspiring archivists tools for success. The combination of the text, definitions, and sample documents, along with the resource list, can provide solo archivists the foundation they need to make and implement plans and procedures when they have no structure to build from.

I seldom refer to books or lesson plans from my MLIS when I have a question about my current work as a solo archivist. I categorize this book as an essential resource for the solo archivist—the first stop to answering a question or getting a

sense of how to proceed with an archival task. It can be intimidating for someone new to the profession to reach out to a “real” archivist. This book lays the groundwork needed to understand the task at hand and either take the next step or reach out to any of the appropriate listservs or regional groups for additional support.

Whether you are a new archivist, a seasoned professional, a solo archivist, or part of a large team, one of the most important takeaways from reading *Alone in the Stacks: Succeeding as a Solo Archivist* is the mantra to do the best you can with what you have. Let this book be your guide to the continued growth and improvement of your archives and yourself.

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¹ Christina Zamon, *The Lone Arranger: Succeeding in a Small Repository* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2012).

² Zamon, *The Lone Arranger*, 39.