

## Appraisal of Business Archives: General Approaches and Suggestions, Including Greek Practices and Facts

ARATHYMOU, Spyridoula, **Appraisal of Business Archives: General Approaches and Suggestions, Including Greek Practices and Facts**. Atlanti, Vol. 18, Trieste 2008, pp. 265-267.

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*Business archives have several issues and problems of appraisal. These are due to their size and the series of duplicates, triplicates etc. of documents which can be found in this type of archives. There are a series of questions about which documents should be preserved in a business archive. The answers cannot be simple and immediate. The criteria are mixed and one can never be sure if the appraisal decisions for a business archive are right or wrong. The historical value of documents is not an easy issue in this case. So, which criteria should exist for the appraisal of business archives and after which archival works should a business archivist adopt them? What can be done to improve the current situation? Also, how business archives are appraised in Greece? In my paper I intend to answer to all the above questions and suggest some practices for a more efficient and faster appraisal of business archives.*

ARATHYMOU, Spyridoula, **La selezione degli archivi d'impresa: approccio generale e suggerimenti, con esempi della pratica in Grecia**. Atlanti, Vol. 18, Trieste 2008, pp. 265-267.

*Gli archivi d'impresa presentano parecchie problematiche concernenti la selezione. Esse sono dovute alla mole ed alle serie delle duplicazioni, triplicazioni, ecc. di documenti che si possono trovare in questo tipo di archivi. Sono queste una serie di questioni a proposito di quali documenti debbano essere conservati in un archivio d'impresa. Le risposte non possono essere semplici ed immediate. I criteri di valutazione sono svariati e non si può mai essere sicuri se le decisioni prese in materia di selezione per un archivio d'impresa siano giu-*

The appraisal is one of the most challenging and interesting procedures which take place in an archival institution. It is challenging because archivists have to decide which material has long term importance and should be kept and which material should be removed. Of course, it is not easy, even for the most experienced archivists, to make such decisions and the procedure is usually affected by various factors, which are not stable in every case. The more these factors are, the more difficult the procedure gets. These factors usually are the archive's type, its size, its creator, the time period the archive covers, the functions of its creator, if its creator still functions or is alive- in the case of personal records-, if the archive was previously appraised by its creator or if it was damaged by various reasons. There are other, less major factors, as well. The only thing an archivist can tell for sure is that not everything can be kept both for the reasons of importance and of space, as well. Fortunately, as far as it concerns space saving, digitization has been a successful solution over the past years. So, the remaining question is the importance and value of material to be preserved. If the material seems to have perennial importance, it should be kept. This statement is not as simple as it seems, due to all the above mentioned factors.

In the case of business archives, these factors seem to be multiplied and appraisal becomes a headache for business archivists. Business archives belong to a category of archives which is characterized by big or very big sizes and a big number of duplicates and triplicates of documents such as invoices, bills, receipts and sales checks. An archive's big size can be a major issue for archivists when they have to work on the material. Also, the appearance of computers during the last decades, had a severe impact on the production and appearance of business archival material. New forms appeared in the place of traditional documents. But, before panic takes place, a business archivist should take into consideration the following.

First of all, he/ she should know if the archive, which is due to appraisal, comes from a company that still functions or not. In the case it still functions, he can benefit of it because he can collect important information about the company's history, details about its functions through time and the use and importance of the documents it produced. He can create questionnaires to be completed by the company, so as to get this useful information. Of course, he should not rely only on this information so as to evaluate the archival

material because probably he will miss other important information which derives from the material's thorough study. In the case, the creator company has closed down, the archivist should try to collect information about the company from other sources such as the commercial and industrial chambers, press archives and relative bibliography, if exists. Also, a business archivist should also have a good background in business and financial history, tax, labor and social security legislation, so as to be able to understand and evaluate the contents of business archives. Also, he/ she should study the change of format on which business documents appear due to computers' appearance and evolution. This knowledge is quite important as it is one of the factors, which ensure an effective appraisal.

In addition, a good business archivist should know the kinds of documents, which can generally be found in business archives, the way and the reason they were produced by companies. Of course, business archives contain various document types in big numbers, usually. Big issues are the documents which are considered of "secondary importance" such as: receipts, bills, invoices, sales checks, vouchers. These documents, which can be thousands in a big business archive, are not considered as important as other documents, such as a company's commercial correspondence. This is a mistaken approach to the material's evaluation and its further appraisal and that is because a document's value can be defined only by users. Archivists cannot and should not remove any material they think that is not as important as another. Their work is to preserve the knowledge for the public and not to hide it from it. The same problem exists with the multiple accounting books and other book categories of business archives. Especially when, series of an archive cover time periods when there was no use of computers these books can be found in big numbers. Of course, the same criteria, as above, should exist for the books, as well.

But the real problem is when they have to deal with a big number of documents which have several copies. They have to decide which or how many copies they must preserve and these decisions cannot be easily taken. The first reason is because if copies of a document are found in various entities of an archival series, their removal would mean non respect to the well known "respect de fonds". But if there is not such case, the remaining problem is the number of copies which should be preserved. Various archival institutions which preserve business archives have set down the number of copies which should be preserved, in such cases.

All the above decisions cannot be made if archivists do not know in depth the contents of the business archive they deal with. Appraisal is an archival work which should take place when archivists have become familiar with the material and be ready to decide what to preserve or not. Unfortunately, there are cases of appraisals which occur quite roughly and valuable information is lost.

In Greece, business archives are not considered as important as the rest of the archives<sup>1</sup>. The banks which have preserved their archives and have an organized archives department are the institutions where one can see the practices of archival works on business archives, in Greece. The Greek bank archives do not only hold banking archives but also historical archives from various companies. Each

*ste o sbagliate. Né aiuta in questo caso il valore storico dei documenti. Così, quali criteri di valutazione dovrebbero esserci per la selezione degli archivi d'impresa e dopo quali lavori archivistici dovrebbe un archivista d'impresa adottarli? Cosa si può fare per migliorare la situazione attuale? Inoltre, come vengono selezionati gli archivi d'impresa in Grecia? Nel mio contributo vorrei fornire una risposta alle domande di cui sopra e suggerire alcune pratiche per una più efficiente e veloce selezione degli archivi d'impresa.*

**ARATHYMOU, Spyridoula, Vrednotenje dokumentov v arhivih podjetij: splošne ugotovitve in priporočila v okviru Grške prakse in dejanskega stanja. Atlanti, Zv. 18, Trst 2008, str. 265-267.**

*Arhivi v podjetjih imajo kar nekaj postopkov in problemov za vrednotenje arhivskega gradiva. To se nanaša predvsem na pojav kopij (dvojnikov, trojnikov) dokumentov, kar se v podjetjih pojavlja v kar največji meri. Zaradi tega nastaja vprašanje, kaj in kako zavarovati to velikansko dokumentacijo. Odgovori na to zagotovo niso enostavni in ne preprosti, saj kriteriji uničevanja dokumentarnega gradiva lahko prinesejo nepravilne odločitve, ker so merila za vrednotenje lahko dobra ali napačna. Pri tem tudi ne pomaga kakšna zgodovinska vizija, kaj vse naj bi hranili. Tako nastajajo vprašanja, kakšni so kriteriji za vrednotenje dokumentarnega gradiva, ki jih naj arhivist upošteva in kako so vrednoteni arhivi podjetij v Grčiji. V pričujočem prispevku odgovorjam na ta vprašanja in predlagam nekatere rešitve iz svoje prakse z namenom, da bi lahko komu koristili, ko gre za vprašanja vrednotenja dokumentarnega gradiva.*

1. See: Spyridoula Arathymou: *Historical Industrial Archives. The Greek case*. In «Atlanti Review for modern archival theory and practice», No. 17. International Institute for Archival Science of Trieste and Maribor, University of Maribor, State Archive of Trieste. Trieste, 2007. pp.247-260.

## SUMMARY

*Appraisal is one of the most challenging and interesting procedures which take place in an archival institution. Of course, it is not easy, even for the most experienced archivists, to make such decisions and the procedure is usually affected by various factors, which are not stable in every case. The more these factors are, the more difficult the procedure gets. The only thing an archivist can tell for sure is that not everything can be kept both for the reasons of importance and of space, as well. In the case of business archives, appraisal becomes a headache for archivists. Business archives belong to a category of archives which is characterized by big or very big sizes and a big number of duplicates and triplicates of documents such as invoices, bills, receipts and sales checks. An archive's big size can be a major issue for archivists when they have to work on the material. Also, their complex nature requires a lot of theoretical and technical knowledge on behalf of archivists, which can be acquired in various ways. All appraisal decisions cannot be made if archivists do not know in depth the contents of the business archive they deal with. Appraisal is an archival work which should take place when archivists have become familiar with the material and be ready to decide what to preserve or not. There is not a specific appraisal policy for business archives in Greece. This is due to several reasons, as: rusty mentalities, lack of specialized professional training, not adequate personnel at archival institutions.*

bank has its own policy concerning business archives, but one can say that all of them try to keep up with international practices and standards. There is not much information about their appraisal practices, if there are any. The known facts are that they have established a document preservation period and they destroy some duplicates.

There are not organized archives' departments in big enterprises, the so-called "in-house" archives. So, there is not information about them, as their owners keep everything in secrecy, are not in touch with the archival community and vice versa.

As far as it concerns the business archives which are preserved in the Greek State Archives and other institutions, state or private, the only element relative to appraisal is that all of them have a certain document preservation period, which is followed by appraisal. But the fact remains that business archives are neglected in comparison to other archival kinds and as a result, not a lot of work has been done on them.

The problem about the appraisal of business archives in Greece is mainly based on the fact that the people who deal with these archives are not specialized in this kind of archives or do not have a theoretical background<sup>2</sup>. There is not a special course for the training of business archivists in Greece, so it is up to the archivists to obtain the needed knowledge. Apart from this, another problem is that until previously not specialized archivists worked in state and private archives as the first university school for information sciences was established in 1993. So, there are many people with a non archival education, who still work in the Greek archives and carry a different mentality, which considers business archives as "not very important".

In conclusion, what one can say about the appraisal of business archives is that it has to be done by qualified business archivists with a real interest for their job. Interest cannot be taught at any university but the archival schools and archivists' unions should try and give to archivists the adequate skills so as to work efficiently on business archives.

2. See above: "Also, a business archivist should also have a good background in business and financial history, tax, labor and social security legislation, so as to be able to understand and evaluate the contents of business archives".

