

# **THE STAFF OF THE ARCHIVES: TRAINING, SKILLS, CONTINUITY**

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This paper aims to sketch the characteristics of the ideal archival staff for a bank, describing the various positions to fill and the skills needed to staff them. We will focus on historical archives, as that is the field with which we are most familiar, but with appropriate adaptations the analysis also largely applies to current and semi-current archives as well. Then we will describe the actual situation we know best, that of the Historical Archives of the Bank of Italy.

The topic is challenging. The question of archival staff, recruitment, training, and proper evolution over time is one of the greatest importance, however; indeed, it is probably the key question for those responsible for managing an archive. The reason is self-evident: adequate human resources in number and quality are essential to any organizational measures whatever, in all types of organization. The issue is also delicate, because it is in this area above all that one can gauge the difference between the ideal and the real state of our institutional archives, or the difference between one central bank and another in their management and operation.

The organizers of this workshop call for reflection on the consequences of the change in the framework in which central bank archivists operate. Three “formidable circumstances” have been highlighted: the enlargement of the European Union, the relationship between the ECB and the NCBs, and the never-ending introduction of information technology.

In our view, of these three changes the one that has had and will continue to have the greatest impact on the role and organization of central bank archives is certainly the revolution in information and communications technology. The changes have been so substantial as to modify the work processes and indeed the whole labour process in archives (as in practically every other sector); and they have also altered the staff positions present within archives, adding new occupational figures previously unknown. With the introduction of IT, the old jobs and positions were perforce redefined, to the point where virtually all of them now consist of activities that differ greatly from those of the past, performed in offices or reading rooms. Without going into the substance of this aspect, which is beyond the scope of the paper, we can say that archival management, as a result of information technology, is now naturally broader and more modern in outlook, a daily question, instrumental even for the handling of current affairs, a useful tool in decision-making. In a word, at least in theory an organization’s archive is now an acknowledged strategic resource.

Archival staff has always embraced a widely articulated multiplicity of professionals, each responding optimally to specific requirements of the job. In recent years this array has been further enriched with new positions, turning into a “multiplicity of know-hows”, an interweaving of skills

and abilities. In fact, it would be good if these various abilities and skills – to varying degrees, to be sure – were all part of the cultural, professional and educational background of each archival worker. In other words, to take just the most obvious examples, today a good archivist must have more than merely formal computer competence, while an information technician who wants to do archival work must necessarily be familiar not only with the specialized language but always with the main principles governing the different phases in the handling of an organization's documents. I am sure that all of us who have had been involved in planning computerized document handling systems have experienced the difficulties but also the synergies that can arise from cooperation between archivists and computer experts.

Now let us describe the ideal characteristics of the various professionals within an archive, and especially what their training should be. We shall naturally be referring to the situation of an historical archive, but with a few adjustments these remarks also hold for current and semi-current archives.

### *The manager*

The staff is headed by the manager of the archives; for an historical archive, the position is especially complex, a composite that must combine a whole diversified series of specific skills that are indispensable to directing what is certainly an anomalous unit within the organization of a credit institution and that reflect its synchronous operations. The top manager of a major historical archive in a central bank must possess at least five fundamental features.

First, of course, he or she must be a good archivist, with the technical know-how needed to grasp problems as they emerge. The manager must also have a long-term strategic vision – necessary to any managerial activity, of course, but especially in archival work, which by nature must plan activities taking account of effects and time limits very far in the future.

Second, the manager must have full command of national and international economic history, the history of firms and financial institutions, corporate economics, banking technique; he or she must be the principal source on the history of the institution that has generated the papers. Obviously, this competence is not easily acquired: it takes a good deal of time and study.

Third, the head of the archives must have good contacts and relations with the national and international archival community so as to be always up to date on theoretical and practical developments. And he or she must be able to construct fruitful relations with the academic world,

again both nationally and internationally, with a view to designing programmes of study to make the most of the archives. To our mind, this is one of the most important of all the activities of a good archive manager.

Fourth, there is a need for thorough, regularly updated IT competence, because the manager must oversee the planning and operation of an ever-growing and diversifying range of technical instruments for the handling of the documents conserved. Certainly he or she does not necessarily have to be a technician, a computer specialist, but must be able to understand computer language and the basic problems that arise.

Fifth, the manager must be a good administrator, capable of directing the work of the various employees to a single goal. He or she must be a capable organizer, must motivate and manage the various members of the staff, must respond to the needs of the top management of the institution cooperating actively in carrying out its strategy. The archive is not a self-contained unit but an integral part of a broader organization and functional to implementing its programmes. Like any manager, the head of an archive must also be capable to imparting impetus to the execution of the various projects in which the archive is engaged.

Clearly, training for such a highly specialized position is long and complex. More important, there is a need for career-long updating in all the fields just mentioned. The archive head, that is, needs a very high, and highly specialized, set of professional skills, going beyond strictly economic competence to include the protection and exploitation of the cultural heritage. These skills differ profoundly from those ordinarily found in the credit sector and are not readily interchangeable.

### *The senior archivist*

The tasks of the senior archivist, the top manager's main collaborator, make up an ample job description: conserving, ordering and cataloguing, making available and making the best use of the document collection; scientific research on archival issues, study, consulting; providing technical and scientific assistance to outside scholars (if the archives are open to the public); drafting notes and memos; defining policies for the selection and disposal of documents.

To perform these tasks the archivist needs a first-rate background, with post-graduate training. Clearly, this constitutes a rich, composite cultural and intellectual baggage comprising a sound grasp of history and literature, continually updated mastery of archival techniques and rules, and a

certain artistic culture and sensitivity. The archivist must also have thorough knowledge of the history of his or her organization.

However, this is not enough. Apart from these skills, generically required of any archivist, those working in a highly specialized archive such as that of a central bank need additional know-how. They must be capable of handling the principles and subjects of banking technique and general accounting, the rudiments of the history of economics and world trade, foreign exchange, banking supervision and so on. The basic training of an archivist almost never covers these fields, not even where the preparation of business archivists is envisaged. This is highly specific knowledge that is almost always acquired on the job. Finally, a historical archivist (more than a current archivist) would be very well advised to have more than a superficial acquaintance with the economic and financial history of the country and if possible also of the foreign countries with which his own country has relations.

Today, moreover, not even all this wealth of training and education will suffice. Now one must also be competent in the field of integration of digital technological and historical disciplines. This is simply indispensable to all those working within public and private cultural institutions and who in one way or another take part in the conservation, processing and transmission of historical memory and knowledge. The senior archivist must therefore always be up to date on methods for the conservation, inventorying and accessing of archival materials and in general on how to make the most of this resource. Foreign language skills, finally, are a great help.

In view of the above, it is clear that the training of a central bank archivist must come in a number of stages. A first, pre-work phase is needed to provide basic professional skills. A second, at the beginning of one's career, must give one more specialized knowledge and know-how. And this knowledge must be kept constantly up to date in a process that we could well call "life-long learning". Of course, it is only in this second phase that the archivist can acquire thorough familiarity with the history of the organization that has produced the papers, essential to an archivist working in a structure like a central bank. This too is a learning path realized over time, in a lengthy, gradual process of refinement of information on the organization, its evolution over time, its internal culture.

### *The junior archivist*

The senior archivist should have an assistant, someone to collaborate in accessioning, cataloguing of records, preparation for reproduction, making of lists and other supplementary materials. This job should be assigned to an employee especially well qualified, including personal traits, for the needs of this particular sector within the bank. Assistants, or junior archivists, also need good general education, preferably to university level, and an inclination for history and historical research. They also need adequate IT and language training and must understand the meaning of the technical economic, financial and banking terms with which the records retained in a central bank's historical archive are replete.

### *Information technology expert*

For years the role of the computer technician in archival work has been under discussion, and the consensus is that the viable application of computer technology to archives requires total synergy between archivists and IT technicians. The inclusion of computer experts in archive staff is the main effect of the rise of IT, which is one of the three challenges set out in the guidelines for this workshop. The ideal situation is of course the inclusion of an IT expert in the archive staff itself, but often staff limits and organizational policy prevent this. But it is utterly essential that the IT expert be brought into play to contribute to the planning of effective record management, in cooperation with the archivist.

The IT expert has delicate tasks. Collaboration in planning record management systems requires considering all the stages in the life of records: production, validation, conservation, accessing, possible discarding, consultation for historical purposes. The IT expert's job is to manage all the hardware and software available and the operations of the system administrator. He or she must also suggest changes and innovations to management systems and periodic changeover to more advanced products. The IT expert also has the task of providing support, including didactic support, to the entire staff and should thus show special capacity to face and solve problems as they arise and to foster the spread of knowledge.

The IT expert's training is mainly technical. Regular updating in this rapidly evolving field is simply indispensable, especially given the steadily expanding application of IT to historical archives. His field of action extends well beyond the products created for internal operative needs to

cover products designed to facilitate on-line access to records and publications. The expert's work thus ranges from management and organization of current records to the computer processing of texts, spreadsheets, database, the creation of web pages, multimedia technologies for making the most of the bank's historical records.

### *The administrative staff*

Administrative support in a historical archive has special features. The staff need to be sensitive to the quintessentially cultural purposes of their work and to the usefulness of the internal record-keeping function, which is sometimes actually strategic. The typical tasks of correspondence and keeping the archive's own current records, office work and personnel management, handling data and statistics on the office's work are flanked by the duties of maintaining relations with a highly educated set of users, nearly all university professors and researchers, especially as regards the release of and accounting for reproductions of documents. Clearly, therefore, this staff too must be recruited from among the employees with the right qualifications, chiefly good general education and sensitivity to the historical issues, plus reasonable computer competence. The latter is especially useful in that the processing of data and internal statistics now certainly requires IT products.

### *Document reproduction technicians*

When an archive opts for document reproduction on anything other than paper (digitalization or microfilm, for better record recovery and usability), the problem is how to carry out the reproduction. If it elects outsourcing, its only task – not always an easy one – is checking to make sure that the work meets the contractual standards. If it opts to do the work in-house, then it will need a capable group of technicians. Finding suitable staff is perhaps easiest in the case of microfilming, which requires no specialized training but just manual skills and general training.

For digitalization, however, matters stand quite differently. New technology has affected this area profoundly, so that today's operating procedures and machines for digitalization demand special training and skills. Unlike mechanized microfilming, it cannot be assigned to workers with only generic know-how and skills. Specially and continually trained technical workers and IT technicians are needed. Every day, these workers must operate advanced information systems, often

highly sophisticated devices (scanners, CD-burners, printers); if possible they should have some familiarity with the functioning of the software.

Digitalization technicians have an important job. They handle the records selected for permanent conservation, which are often in far from excellent state. This is a challenging, delicate job requiring great sensitivity, the awareness that you are handling material that will form an integral part of the cultural heritage of the nation, hence of its historical memory. These are the qualities required of this technical staff, as well as the ability to make the best possible digital copies of the originals, making the most of the possibilities of scanning software, which in some cases can actually improve on the readability of the originals.

### *The archive keeper*

The last position described here, namely that of the archive keeper, is crucial, with responsibility for the custody and safekeeping of all the records and documents and oversight on any movements of this material, even tiny, daily ones.

The requisite skills include organizational capability, which is needed to plan and coordinate the handling of records for conservation, often a complicated matter indeed. The archive keeper also needs to know the basics of how archives operate and what the costs of various operations are, plus a full, detailed grasp of the logistical structures of the facilities where records are kept, all the technical structures and security systems, and the security rules. Since the keeper is generally responsible for the actual, topographical mapping of the collection, which is now much more readily attained by IT instruments, some computer literacy is also useful. Finally, like the rest of the staff, the keeper should be aware of the cultural value of the archival goods stored and conscious that what he is handling is not mouldy papers but a unique, irreplaceable heritage.

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Now let us turn to some more general considerations on historical archive staff.

First, over and above the requisites for the various positions, some common traits can be found. Above all, there must be the technical skills needed to handle the records and act in synergy. An archive functions if the various functions cooperate smoothly, especially when the archive is highly



computerized and engaged in a plan of digitalization. In this case it is simply indispensable that the work proceeds in a harmonious, efficient series of stages. This requires that the different staff members speak the same technical language, which can only be the fruit of a shared cultural background and training.

Second, the training for the various positions is clearly lengthy and complex, and directly correlated with the individual position within the hierarchy and with the skills and responsibilities involved, and the training of managers and senior archivists is therefore the longest and most complicated, comprising general, basic preparation (archival, historical, IT) and the acquisition of specific know-how on the job (the history of the organization, the technical language needed to grasp the records being kept, etc.). And this preparation must be kept constantly up to date.

Accordingly, a prime requirement in the operation of archives is **continuity**. The positions of head of the archive and his or her closest collaborators are complex. These figures cannot be improvised but must emerge from long and complex training, and for this reason they cannot be readily replaced. This kind of complex staff cannot be changed without severely hampering its operational capabilities, so personnel stability is of the essence, transfers of duties must be planned and carried out as scheduled, generational turnover must see to the gradual integration of younger staff members. In short, we must guarantee the safe handing down of that small heritage of knowledge and know-how created by archival work, the dispersion of which would be a saddening loss. In this field, therefore, succession is a particularly delicate question and cannot be left to improvisation.

Of course, the need for continuity characterizes all positions of responsibility and complex duties. But in an archive it is of special importance, rooted in the fact that knowledge of the organization's own history is essential. We must do everything we can to make sure that this wealth of knowledge is not dissipated but distributed over time and between people.

Continuity does not mean paralysis, lifelong staffing, but effective planning for the effective, progressive transmission of skills and knowledge from generation to generation.

One thing we can glean from our examination of the ideal makeup of an archival staff is the strategic importance of training. The preparation of the persons needed to fill the many positions, especially the top ones, requires substantial resources both financially and in terms of personal commitment and time. Personal experience, familiarity with records, and good long-term recall of past work all contribute greatly to the acquisition of skills and competence. But experience and background need the constant support of new information and refresher courses.

Thus in archival work the element of continuity has a particular importance, which differentiates it from the other sectors of the central bank, where rapid turnover can sometimes be useful to operational efficiency and to the professional and career growth of individual employees.

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The Bank of Italy's Historical Archive is part of the Historical Research Department. Our staff fits the ideal sketched out here fairly well. It includes practically all the necessary positions. At present we have a staff of twenty-six, working together perfectly for many years now and also collaborating fruitfully with the research area.

With the help of the Bank's IT experts the staff has developed the complex information systems that handle the records conserved and seen to their progressive refinement and periodic migration to new software in line with technical progress. Specifically:

- Electronic cataloguing, which to date has generated a database of 150,000 highly detailed file "cards" permitting finely targeted search of the records. This work is performed by six senior archivists and a number of junior archivists.
- Digital reproduction of all the records by technicians from the Historical Archive staff assisted by IT experts. We now have 10 million images reproduced, or a quarter of all our records.
- The merger of these two projects, which arose at different times, into a single record system with which the scholars who use the Archive on a daily basis can access the database and the images via PC.

We have described these systems in the course of earlier meetings organized by the EABH, most recently last year in Zurich. They are complex systems, making the Bank of Italy a leader, and not just in Italy, in the use of information technology applications for historical archives. Just now we have brought onstream a new set of scanners, a mass memory to retain images, and a new version of the software for access to the database and images up to ISAD and ISAAR standards.

We are at an advanced stage in the project to extend the cataloguing system at the head office Historical Archive to the Bank's branches. This is an articulated, far-reach project that will involve, in addition to the entire staff at the head office Archives, at least one employee in each of the provincial branches throughout Italy. The aims are to preserve and exploit the historical value of the Bank's holdings, and accordingly to increase knowledge of the records, make the branch archives

more readily accessible both to outside scholars and to those engaged in research within the Bank, and finally to achieve full integration of all the historical collections of the Bank of Italy. The project is in two stages. The first stage, i.e. the survey of holdings, has already been completed, bringing to light a decidedly large and significant body of records and documents, so that we can safely say that the Historical Archive of the Bank of Italy is the most important source for the study of Italian economic and banking history and international economic relations over the last 150 years.

The Historical Archive's daily work consists in research concerning archival methods and in assistance to the scholars who come to the reading room, whose have grown more numerous in recent years as the number of studies based on Archive records has increased.

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We have dwelt at some length on the effects of the introduction of information technology because we consider that this is the central challenge for archivists in the near future. This does not mean that the other two "formidable circumstances" named by the organizers many not affect the work of central bank archives.

Indeed, let us hope that the enlargement of the European Union will enable those working in archives in Eastern Europe (and North Africa) to link in with us in mutually rewarding collaboration. The experience of countries with an ancient archival tradition could be put at the disposal of archivists in the new EU members with support and consultancy that could capitalize on the concentration of expertise found within the EABH.

The enlargement of the Union could also provide a good opportunity to create generally useful tools, to launch research and operational projects in partnership with all the EABH's member institutions. In turn the EABH could adopt the mission of in-career training in banking, with a diversified programme of courses for staff updating and retraining, possibly also with new on-line communication systems.

Finally, as regards the new relationship between the ECB and the NCBs, we might consider preparing a contribution, or better still designing a project for international archival cooperation to be presented at the European conference of the ICA in Poland in 2005.