

2023

Review of Managing Business Archives

Erin M. Louthen

Diocese of San Jose, erin.louthen@dsj.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Business Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Louthen, Erin M. (2023) "Review of Managing Business Archives," *Journal of Western Archives*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol14/iss1/5>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Western Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



Review of *Managing Business Archives*

By Sarah A. Polirer. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2022. 182 pp. Softcover. \$112.00. ISBN: 978-1-945246-61-8

In *Managing Business Archives*, the new book edited by Sarah A. Polirer, CA, CRM, a Fortune 100 archivist, both the editor and its expert contributors have created a book that has the potential of becoming a modern classic in the world of information professionals. Placing an emphasis on practicality and real-world situations that will be useful to archivists in any field, business or otherwise, the book offers an incredibly resourceful and comprehensive look at the ways a wide variety of business and organizational archivists tackle both day-to-day issues and long-term (or legacy) problems with creative, pragmatic strategies and solutions. In short, the book lets us know we're not alone in the numerous records management predicaments in which we often find ourselves, and provides many helpful roadmaps to assist in navigating the complex issues confronting archivists today.

The book is divided into an introduction and seven sections: the Introduction; Part 1: Selection, Appraisal, and Acquisition: Understanding Records' Value; Part 2: Arrangement and Description: Balancing Use-Based Arrangement and Description; Part 3: Reference Services and Access: Making Collections Relevant to Business Needs; Part 4: Preservation & Protection: Keeping Your House in Order; Part 5: Outreach, Advocacy, and Promotion: Marketing the Archives; Part 6: Professional, Ethical, and Legal Responsibilities: Dealing with Professional Ethics, Copyright, Access and Privacy, and Accountability; and Part 7: Managing Archival Programs: Steering Your Craft Within a Sea of Change. Solidly rounding out *Managing Business Archives* is the generous use of graphics, guides, tip sheets, and case studies throughout out the book, as well as detailed bibliographies at the end of each section for further resources, reading and reference.

The Introduction gives a concise definition of what a business archives is, including descriptions of its organizational structure, what business records are, and the role and skill set of the business archivist. The core idea presented here is that "what ties all types of business archives together is that each supports its parent organization in its mission" (pp. 5).

Part 1 begins with the importance of "Understanding Records' Value" by identifying key concepts such as enduring and sufficient value; primary and secondary value; evidential and informational value; and so forth. Beyond theoretical terminology, however, the authors in this section point out that archival records are rarely one or the other, especially when it comes to digital records. Thus, the archivist's job of determining how to select, appraise and describe records that are

often “blurry” (somewhere between enduring and sufficient, for example) can be a daunting task.

Part 2 focuses on “Balancing Use-Based Arrangement and Description” by offering a traditional definition of A&D (Arrangement & Description) and then turns it on its head by positing that the old ways of A&D are no longer sufficient for today’s user-driven society. In effect, the idea of the archivist as gatekeeper of an archives’ records is beginning to fade, as she/he/they are now increasingly called upon to retrieve information for their users in as many formats as possible with as much context and relevance as possible as fast as possible.

Part 3 follows up the A&D discussion with the idea that “Making Collections Relevant to Business Needs” is the next, natural step in the process of creating user buy-in and interest in an archives’ holdings. For example, an archivist adept at both remote and in-person reference can create the atmosphere and attitude that the archives is meant to be used in many different ways by many different people – and is not locked away for the edification of a select few—thereby fostering an inclusive environment for all.

Part 4 provides an excellent primer on “Keeping Your House in Order” by outlining the internal and external specifications needed to create a professional-level archives repository. Critical issues such as the building’s physical structure; internal environment (i.e., climate control); office and work space; proper maintenance; disaster preparedness; collection storage space; etc. are discussed, making this a valuable chapter for archivists planning a new repository, as well as those who find themselves in existing facilities that need work. In fact, it may even be useful to employ this section of the book as a punch-list when approaching leadership for repairs or maintenance funding in order to help explain “why” an archives needs such items as reinforced shelving, temperature and humidity control monitors, and the like.

Part 5 offers detailed tips and strategies for “Marketing the Archives” such as the importance of understanding the business’ or organization’s mindset, culture and history before beginning an outreach and advocacy campaign for the archives; studying the founder’s expressions of values, as well as the company’s traditions and rituals; being creative and thinking outside the box when describing or promoting a particular milestone or event when there is a distinct lack of information about it in the archives, and so forth. A particular highlight of this chapter promotes the value of assessment, planning and collaboration, which can directly and positively create advocacy and agency for the archives by working alongside other departments such as marketing and communications.

Part 6 tackles the often-complex issues of “Dealing with Professional Ethics, Copyright, Access and Privacy, and Accountability” by breaking them down into easily understandable subsections such as codes of ethics and core values; acquiring and owning corporate records; copyright ownership, transfer, and infringement; fair use; access policies and privacy; constitutional and legal privacy; legal records; risk

assessment, management and liability; and so forth. Combined with straightforward examples that offer a deeper understanding of problematic issues such as these that tend to confound even the most well-read and experienced archivist, this section is invaluable to archivists in all stages of their careers.

Part 7, the concluding section of the book, offers sound advice regarding “Steering Your Craft Within a Sea of Change” with such relevant topics as advocacy and developing relationships; collection development; prioritization; managing staff; and using change as an agent of transformation. As contributor Jamie Martin remarks, “Managing a business archives collection requires an ability to navigate those waters. It takes capability to utilize and apply archival science but improvise when necessary.... It certainly takes a readiness to compromise and react swiftly to differing circumstances as business needs and priorities flex continuously.... I may manage an archival collection but, in reality, what I manage is change” (pp. 136). Though the author is speaking specifically about corporate archives, in truth these words could attributed to any one of us in archives field today—which is why *Managing Business Archives* is a book for all of us.

Far from a dusty read focusing primarily on theory over practice, *Managing Business Archives* is a valuable, boots-on-the-ground resource for all archivists. Polirer’s skillful editing allows for a consistent, easy-to-read format throughout while retaining the unique writing style and personality of each contributor. While the emphasis on practicality is a constant theme, perhaps the most important point is that the books’ editor and its contributors—experts in the field, and some of whom are retiring, Polirer says—feel it “is important to pass on relevant, timely knowledge and experience to the current and next generations of archivists.” There is no doubt they have done exactly that.

Erin M. Louthen
Archivist & Records Manager
Diocese of San José Archives &
Records Center
San José, California