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Staffing Challenges in Rail- Related Memory Institutions



Introduction

In a paper titled “The Staff of the Archives: Training, Skills, Continuity,” Sergio Cardarelli (Department Head, Historical Archive, Bank of Italy, Rome) and Isabella Cerioni (Archivist, Historical Archive, Bank of Italy, Rome) have set out the ideal archival staff, “describing the various positions to fill and the skills needed to staff them.” [1] This paper asserts that “The question of archival staff, recruitment, training, and proper evolution over time is one of the greatest importance” and is “probably the key question for those responsible for managing an archive”. [2]

It goes on to describe seven key roles which must be filled if one wishes to successfully manage an archive: a manager who is a good archivist with strong knowledge of the subject history, links to the archival community, IT and administrative skills; a senior archivist responsible for “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” [3]; a junior or assistant archivist who can “collaborate in accessioning, cataloguing of records, preparation for reproduction, making of lists and other supplementary materials” [4]; an information technology expert; administrative staff; document reproduction technicians; and an archive keeper “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.” [5]

This list suggests that the ideal archive will be managed by seven individuals – ideally more, with multiple administrative, IT and technical staff. It is worth noting that this paper describes the structure of an Italian archive, and differences are likely to exist between this structure and that of an archive in the UK or Ireland.



The Archives Sector Workforce Development Strategy provided by The National Archives simply states that an archives workforce should be developed “so that managers and staff are equipped to deliver sustainable, resilient and forward-thinking archive services that foster trust, enrichment and openness by reflecting the communities they serve, meeting their needs and engaging with wider society.” [6]

It comes as no surprise, then, that in a field where organisations with just one archivist can count themselves lucky, 60% of survey respondents listed a lack of staff capacity among their main barriers to effective archive management and outreach. Interestingly, however, this percentage is only slightly higher than the percentage of archives in general whose lack of staff capacity acts as a barrier for operational development, which was reported as 56% in 2015. [7]

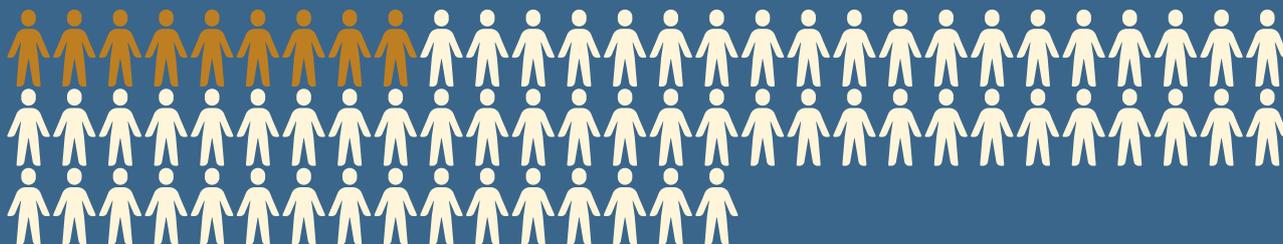
“Sadly the media still slights railway enthusiasts and volunteers as ‘nerdy train spotters’ [and is] blind to the social, commercial and engineering insights that its archive offers. Moreover, volunteering in such a realm gives proven all-life skills in team work and task management, and real personal achievement in the outcomes.”



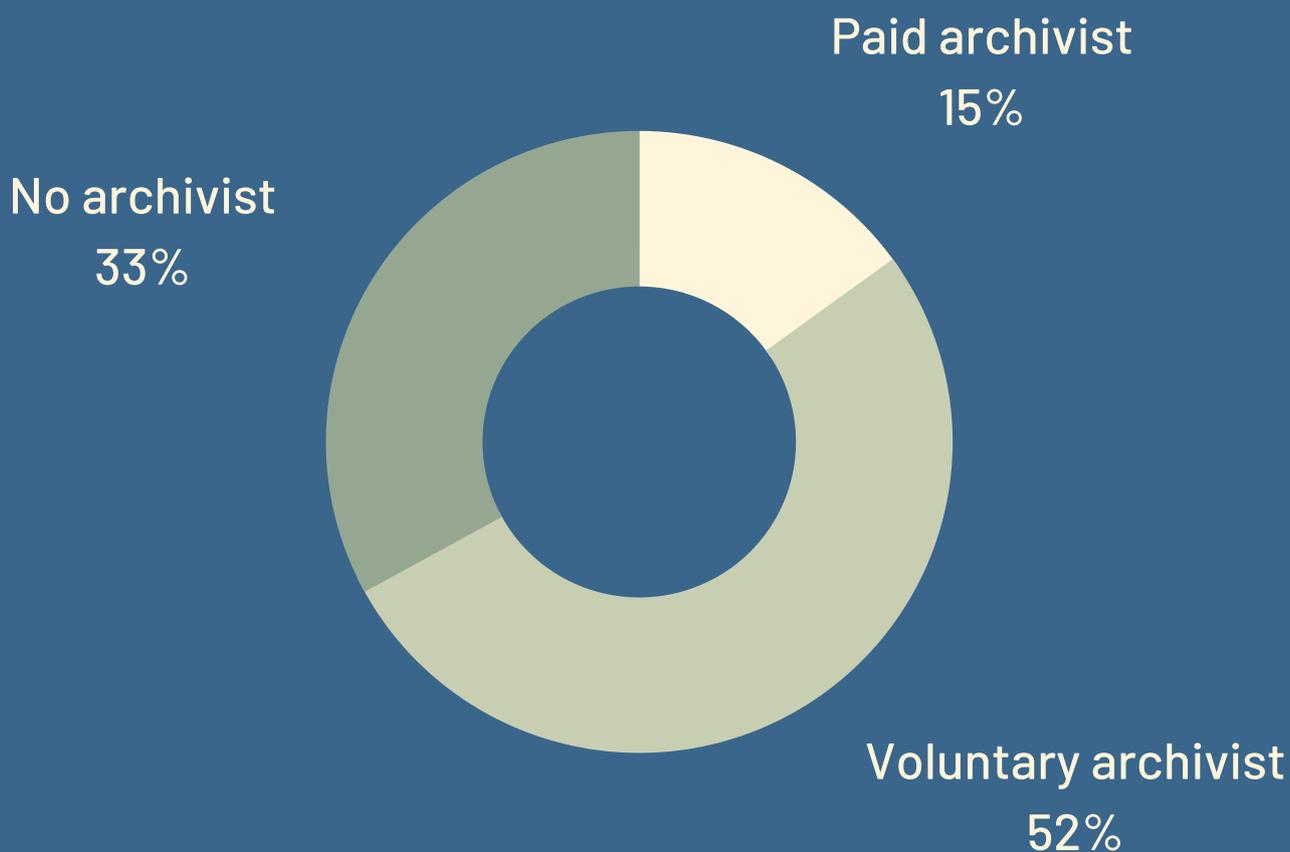
– Survey respondent.

The Numbers

An average of 72 staff members were reported per organisation:
9 paid and 63 voluntary.



15% of respondents reported having a paid archivist and 52% of respondents reported a voluntary archivist; 33% had no archivist.



Of the archivists reported (paid and voluntary), 24% had either formal training or a background in archives.

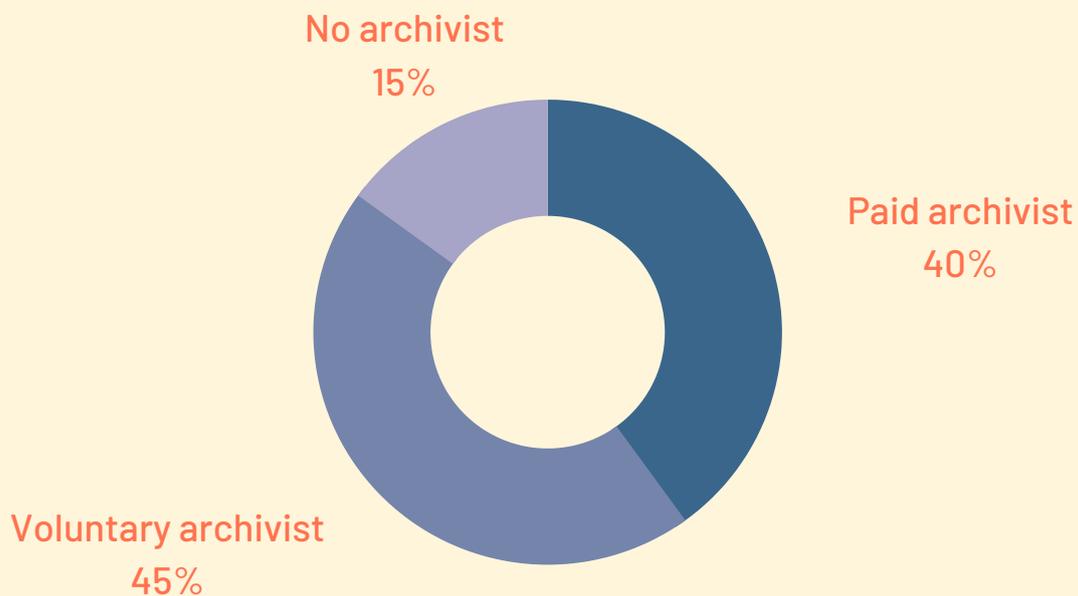


Museums and Archives

228 paid employees and 591 volunteers were reported across the 20 archives and museums surveyed.



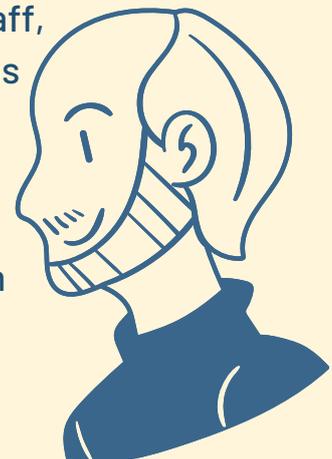
45% of these respondents reported having a voluntary archivist and 40% reported having a paid archivist; 15% had no archivist.



Of the organisations that reported having an archivist, 52.9% of those archivists had no formal training or background in archiving.

Despite their relatively high levels of paid and voluntary staff, 60% of these organisations cited a lack of staff capacity as a key problem facing their archives, a high percentage equalled only by the issue of low audience awareness.

50% of respondents have worked to deal with this problem by initiating or growing their volunteer programmes.

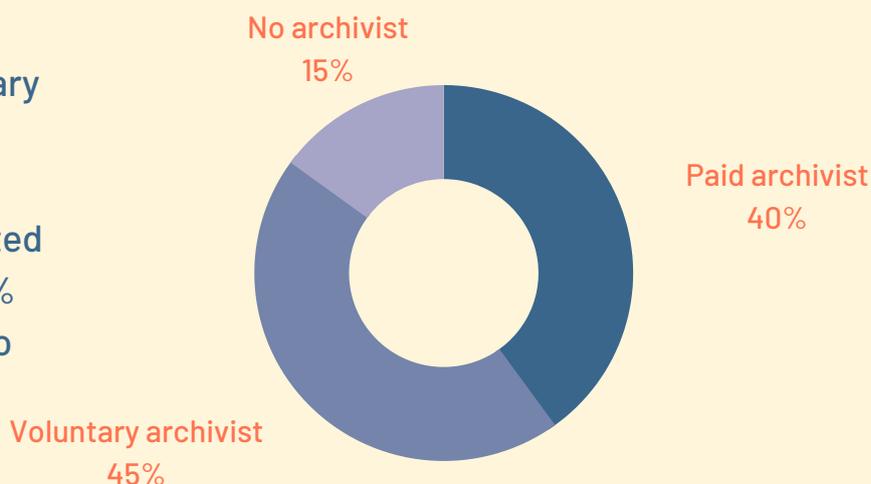


Line Associations

The 16 line associations surveyed reported just four paid employees, but a sizable 877 volunteers.



69% of respondents reported having a voluntary archivist; 31% had no archivist. Of the organisations that reported having an archivist, 93.8% of those archivists had no formal training or background in archiving.



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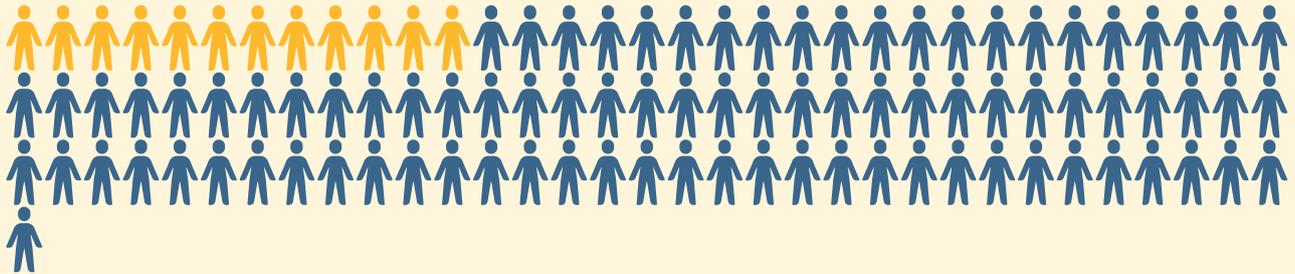
Once again, a lack of staff capacity was the most common challenge reported, with 50% of line associations listing it among their main barriers. 50% of line associations have worked to deal with this problem by initiating or growing their volunteer programmes. One survey respondent summed up the steps they felt their organisation needed to take in order to get on top of their cataloguing problem:

- “1) We need to recruit more volunteers to work on the collection.*
- 2) We need to tackle more of the backlog of cataloguing and shelving of the collection*
- 3) We need to make arrangements to open the collection to visitors by appointment once (1) and (2) are tackled”*

– Survey respondent.

Heritage Railways

The 17 heritage railways surveyed reported 199 paid employees and 1,833 volunteers, the largest staff of the three surveyed groups.



However, the majority of these organisations did not have a designated archivist for their collections. 43.8% of respondents reported having a voluntary archivist; 56.2% had no archivist.

Of the organisations that reported having an archivist, 85.7% of those archivists had no formal training or background in archiving.

65% of heritage railways cited a lack of staff capacity among the main challenges facing their archives, once again making this the most common challenge faced by this group. Just 18% of heritage railways reported having worked to initiate or grow a volunteering programme to deal with the issue.

Chart: Percentage of Organisations Affected by Lack of Staff Capacity



One respondent stated that they would find it easier to manage their collections if they had “more volunteers with an interest in archive subjects. Most of the younger members are not interested in anything old.”

Recommendations

01

Hiring an Archivist

The most common challenge reported by rail-related memory institutions involved in this study was a lack of staff capacity. Organisations in this industry are largely reliant on voluntary work, and many of those who volunteer are not interested in working with archival collections.

The industry also sees a distinct lack of formal archival training or archival backgrounds, though this comes as no surprise as those with such qualifications are likely to expect paid employment, which is not something many organisations are able to offer.

The ideal solution here would be for the government to provide funding that would enable organisations holding noteworthy collections to hire qualified archivists to manage those collections – this would also create new paid roles in a field that is already highly competitive.

Of course, it is unlikely that such funding will be made available, as many will argue that valuable records should simply be transferred to the railway collections held by The National Archives (TNA).

Where to Look

If you do choose to hire an archivist, the following resources may be useful:

Archives & Records Association (ARA) - www.araireland.ie / www.archives.org.uk

Museum Freelance - www.museumfreelance.org

Archives Gig - archivesgig.com

ARCHIVES NRA (Listserv) - www.jiscmail.ac.uk



02

Attracting New Volunteers

A more feasible solution is for organisations to work to attract greater numbers of volunteers, and to specify that they require volunteers with an interest in archival management. Inspiration may be drawn from the findings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Heritage Rail, released in their 2018 publication, *Engaging the Next Generation: Young People and Heritage Railways*.

This paper found that “Many heritage railways do well to run apprenticeships for younger staff. The best example, which is a model for other areas of activity, is the training scheme for the highly specialised skills of managing steam locomotive boilers operated by the Boiler and Engineering Skills Training Trust (BESTT).” [8]

This apprenticeship scheme was developed “with the HRA, the National Traction Engine Trust, Maritime Heritage Trust and other sector bodies, and training is based on the HRA Boiler Code of Practice” and gives participants “the confidence and background knowledge to deal more effectively with a new training programme, and to become more effective more quickly in their new role.” [9]

If effective apprenticeship and internship schemes can be set up between heritage railway organisations and engineering educators, what’s stopping the introduction of similar schemes with a focus on other skill sets?

In the case of the 24% of line associations, museums, archives and heritage railways whose collections are managed by an archivist with formal training and experience in archive management, partnerships could be set up with nearby educational institutions [10] which would be beneficial to both parties.

Similar arrangements could also be pursued with organisations like the Archives and Records Association or The National Archives.

The remaining 76% of organisations – those who have no trained archivists among their members – may be less well-placed to offer archival training to aspiring professionals, but may still benefit from actively seeking volunteers with an interest in railway archives. It is worth noting that most archival training programmes require that their applicants have a certain amount of experience in an archives or records management environment, a requirement that could easily be met by someone who volunteers in the archives of a line association, rail museum or heritage railway.

Many of these programmes also send their students out on placements each year.

03 Building a Network

A final recommendation regarding staff capacity would involve a change to the wider heritage railway industry in the development of a network of rail-related organisations that hold archival collections.

While this would not directly increase the number of staff available to manage archival collections, a formal network would make the dissemination of information between these organisations much easier and more effective, and would allow those organisations who have an experienced archivist on their team to advise other organisations on effective archival management and protocols.





The creation of such a network would also make it easier for network members to organise collaborations between their organisation and other archives and railway organisations.

It is worth noting that while a network like this did not exist when this study was carried out, there had been some discussion of The National Archives coordinating something like it in the future. This network was set to resemble the Aviation and Aerospace Archives Initiative [11] with a focus instead on wheeled land transport.

The subject was raised in a presentation by Mike Rogers published online (this presentation was intended to be given at a Society of Automotive Historians in Britain Spring Seminar in 2020, but this event was cancelled due to the coronavirus lockdown), which gave a rundown of some of the existing collaborative networks in the UK before posing the following question: “With the air and maritime sectors now active, is there a need for something to cover land transport archives?” [12]

While still in its early days, the network proposed in Rogers' presentation - Land Transport Archives Network (LTAN) - has now been created. Information is available via their website, <https://ltan.info/>.

The development of LTAN and similar groups will make a positive difference to the heritage railway sector and will likely make it easier to tackle many of the challenges highlighted in this paper.

Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs) are another valuable source of archival support. While there is currently no subject specialist network for heritage railway collections in the UK, Scottish organisations can seek to join the Scottish Transport & Industrial Collections Knowledge Network (STICK) [13] - though much of their work appears to focus on the conservation of artefacts rather than traditional records.

References

1. Cardarelli and Cerioni, 2003.
2. Ibid. pp. 2.
3. Ibid. pp. 4.
4. Ibid. pp. 6.
5. Ibid. pp. 8.
6. The National Archives and Pye Tait Consulting 2018.
7. Nichols and Oxborrow-Cowan 2015, pp. 13.
8. APPGHR 2018, pp. 4.
9. Ibid. pp. 16.
10. Accredited courses in archiving are currently offered by Aberystwyth University, Maynooth University, University College Dublin, University of Dundee, University of Glasgow, University of Liverpool and University College London.
11. AAI, 2020. <https://www.aviationarchives.uk>.
12. Rogers 2020.
13. STICK 2020. <https://stickssn.org>.

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(2020)

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