

Retro-Converting Analog, Archival Finding Guides

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Efforts to modernize German public archives over the past decade have led to several externally funded *retro-conversion* projects to convert analog finding aids into a digital form, which later could be input into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets or Access databases for XML online finding guides to aid the public and for other archival use.

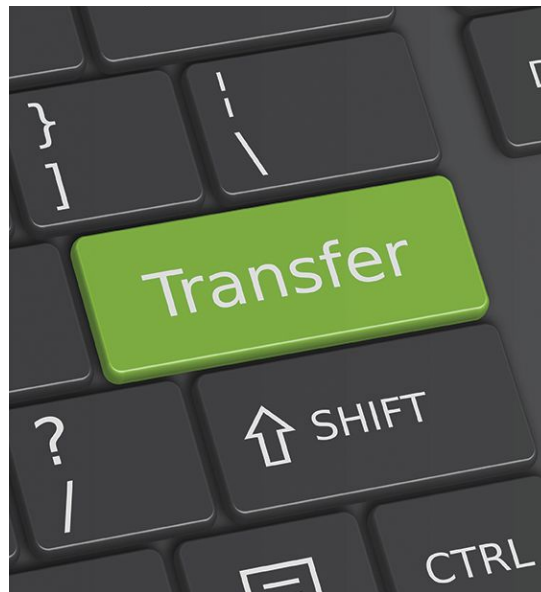
Such projects not only improve organizations' ability to retrieve archival materials, they allow them to preserve their historical finding aids, including handwritten or typed finding books, special card files collections, and archival badges.

The following case study chronicles a manual retro-conversion project, as there seem to be no reliable technical or optical character recognition-based ways to perform retro-conversion on these types of handwritten materials. Other organizations wishing to complete a retro-conversion project can follow the steps detailed in this article.

Planning the Project

To get the required budget and resources for a similar project, draft a proposal that includes the project's objectives. Justify the project to the management team by explaining the value of an electronic archival database to retrieving information more easily and accurately, which also saves money in the long term.

If seeking funds for a new archival database is too ambitious, then note that the project is important for the purposes of putting the analog data into electronic spreadsheets for more efficient internal retrieval of archival materials, generating statistical reports, and preserving the historical



file aids from the degradation that comes with further use.

Next, estimate the project duration and cost, taking into account the number of finding aids that need to be converted and the length of time that will be required for entering all their lines of data and the corresponding metadata into a spreadsheet or database. Do this by taking a practical test run of the workflow to determine the average number of

lines per finding aid and the average amount of time required to enter a specific number of lines of data and pieces of metadata.

Determine also whether the existing staff is too busy with other responsibilities to take on this project. If so, estimate the cost of hiring qualified staff, such as vendors or consultants, to do the job.

After the project is approved, enlist existing staff or hire external staff with these skills:

- Ability to read handwritten content from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries
- Knowledge of the basics of institutional histories
- Ability to identify the metadata that should be kept in a spreadsheet
- Ability to deal responsibly with all archival records

Training for the Project

Begin the project when the retro-converter has all the necessary items and information about the archives and the institution's history, as well as a familiarity with the handwritten and typed finding books, special card files collections, and archival badges. Use core staff to provide any hired staff with necessary additional training.

Next, learn the recordkeeping requirements of the retro-conversion. It is important the retro-converters know exactly which metadata must be kept verbatim from the finding guides or card files and then en-

tered into Excel or Access for later migration into an archival database. Though the finding guides have changed over the years, this data has always been documented consistently in this institution. The following metadata must be retained, at a minimum:

- File archival signature
- File name
- File physical parts
- File description
- File location

Depending on the project, there may be other metadata to capture. Make and use copies of the finding guides to keep the originals in good shape.

Entering Data

Next, begin the data entry. The principle is to have every line or entry in a finding guide entered into its own single entry in the spreadsheet to later become a processable dataset. Consider using macros to facilitate the process.

When the retro-conversion of a single finding book, or fixed badge, or group of finding cards has been finished, the list should then get a meaningful name and be secured on a platform. Some platforms have implemented the praxis, which recognizes linkages to and relationships among data to help prevent natural human errors, for such monotonous work can lead to errors from lack of concentration.

Questions may arise along the way because some handwritten data is unreadable, or numbers are changed, or other gaps appear. If such questions cannot be clarified by looking at the original finding guides, then checking a physical control in the related file or record in the repository is necessary.

Checking Quality

Next, quality check the results by comparing spreadsheets with similar cell content. Make any necessary changes. This is a time-consuming step, but quality assurance will confirm the accuracy of the data

entry and that it produced a reliable spreadsheet of a retro-converted finding guide with virtually no errors.

Next, secure the quality-checked spreadsheet on a protected platform.

Using the Data

Finally, if the retro-converted list will be used in the archive for different archive management procedures (such as for a faster retrieval of records), it has an ideal data

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pool. If an archive plans to implement a database, it can be transferred and integrated with the necessary metadata anytime. Further, a retro-converted, quality-checked finding guide spreadsheet can be published online in XML format for public retrieval and research.

Concluding the Project

Preserve the original finding guides in the repositories; retain the copies temporarily, as evidence of the work that was done in case any questions later arise. Conclude by writing a project review report that contains all the hard facts and denotes the process strengths and weaknesses.

Sharing Lessons Learned

The two factors that most affect a retro-conversion project are the number and quality of the finding guides and the human resources' capacity to do the job. In this case study

of a public German archive, 30 handwritten finding books from the twentieth century, with 80,000 entries, were retro-converted by two full-time retro-conversion experts into finalized spreadsheets within 12 months.

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advantage to keep the project in-house to have more control over the workflow and to protect any confidential information.

Further, because of project monotony, it's a good idea to allow for plenty of lengthy breaks for the retro-converters to minimize the chance for errors. **E**



About the Author: Maik Schmerbauch, Ph.D., is a permanent state archivist at a German archival department. Previously he worked on temporary-based projects in archives, library, and records management in Germany and Poland. He studied information, library and archival science, theology, and history in Germany and universities abroad and received several post-graduate degrees. Schmerbauch can be contacted at schmeichi@web.de.