

## Athens 2004 and Vienna 2005 Two Archive Workshops on Corporate Culture. A Look Back

The idea of organising a workshop dealing with corporate culture first sprang up in the *Academic Advisory Council*. It had voiced the opinion that the *EABH* should provide a platform where notions and issues combining history and the everyday life of its member institutions could be explained and discussed, alongside the academic conferences the *EABH* has organized since its foundation. Corporate culture was soon identified as such an issue. As a result, the first workshop on corporate culture was launched in 2004 in Athens before the main *EABH* conference, organised by Ingrid Elferink, Gabriele Teichmann, along with Marnie Giuranna and Gabriella Massaglia from the Frankfurt office. The record attendance of *EABH* members showed the vivid interest in the topic and led to the decision to have a follow-up in Vienna 2005 for which Charlotte Natmeßnig from *Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien* joined the organisation team.

This explains the organisational framework. But what were the ideas behind the workshops? The term "corporate culture" is used in publications on management, corporate marketing and managerial psychology. It emerged in the 1970s as a way of explaining the success of a company, or the lack of it. From the point of view of an enterprise, it deals with questions such as "Who are we?" "How should we behave?" as a tool analysing specific assets and shortcomings with the aim of achieving a higher business performance. Although answers differ and definitions vary in detail, most academics agree that corporate culture, in Edgar Schein's words, is "a cognitive framework consisting of attitudes, values, behavioural norms, and expectations shared by organization members." Since its establishment, the term has been widely used by human resource managers to analyse and improve motivation of employees, as a marketing philosophy, and to underscore corporate social responsibility. However, the term has not made its way into corporate history or business history in general – and vice versa. This is surprising enough, given the fact that the individual character of a company is inextricably linked with and shaped by its history. It was the explicit aim of the two workshops to start filling this gap by showing that the historical perspective is essential to answer the question "Who are we?" and to understand the way a company works: its business decisions; the way it treats its clients and employees; its image-making; branding; and so forth. History needs to be firmly established as an integral part of corporate culture, making it clear even to bank managers without a specific historical interest that dealing with corporate culture means dealing with corporate history.

The target audience of the Athens and Vienna workshops were, in the first place, banking and insurance archivists. Hence the organisers had set out to highlight the importance of corporate archives in this context. We all know that archives play a pivotal role as the repository of a company's past, its specific culture developed over time, its collective conscience and achievements. If it is well-organised, an archive will be an efficient and high-quality supplier of complex information, if it is well-integrated into the institution, it will be a high-powered commercial instrument creating value and providing a competitive advantage. The term corporate culture, in all its many facets, can have a bridging function between the perspectives of managers, corporate archivists and historians when analysing and assessing an organisation. This, in turn, is a perfect mirror of the overall aims the *EABH* has set for itself.

With these premeditations in mind the organisers endeavoured to offer a programme covering a large number of aspects on the two occasions, hosted by *Alpha Bank* and *Bank Austria Creditanstalt* respectively. In Athens, most contributors presented case studies of successful implementation of corporate archives and corporate history within the image of a bank. Victor Gray gave an impressive account of Archive Style and Corporate Culture at *N.M. Rothschild & Sons* showing how naturally history has "entered the bloodstream of the Bank and become part of the overall corporate style." Another private banker, *Sal. Oppenheim* of Cologne, had admitted a team of senior business school students to analyse and assess its corporate culture, especially concerning its function as a value creator. One member of the team explained their academic approach and interim results of the project which had just been launched. A special kind of case

study was put forward by Damir Jelic who presented the results of a survey concerning corporate culture he had carried out for the *EABH Bulletin* among *EABH* members at the request of the workshop organisers. A second group of presentations covered the theme that corporate culture was an important entrepreneurial concept long before the modern term was invented. Monika Pohle-Fraser presented her study, entirely based on archival records, showing how meticulously 19th-century bankers steered the creation and upkeep of their good reputation. Bankers' conformity with a certain code of bourgeois values was regarded as the hallmark of respectability; it was also the main tool to assess business risks. Joke Mooij explored what can be learnt about the culture of financial institutions, and central banks in particular, by analysing their historiography.

Finally, two papers covered aspects of corporate culture in times of change. A more immediate issue referred to what may happen to corporate culture after mergers. John Orbell presented an example of a well-organised archive containing highly valuable records and wellpositioned within the bank that survived a merger, albeit with different tasks. His case was that of the *Barings Archive*, which became part of the *ING Bank* after the takeover of *Baring Brothers* by the Dutch group. Margarita Dritsas dealt with the theme of how political changes influence the way banks present themselves to the public, showing the Greek case from the 1920s to the present. Greek banks have recently become more involved in society, e.g. as promoters of the idea of national heritage and through the emergence of corporate history.

The three workshop sessions were rounded off by concluding remarks delivered by Gurdon Wattles from *Deutsche Bank London* who, as a banker, showed himself convinced that corporate history matters for the commercial success of an institution. The striking example was that of *Deutsche Bank* who would never have been able to acquire the US bank Bankers Trust in 1999 without having been transparent about its history, especially during the *Third Reich*. The Vienna workshop one year later continued, for one thing, in giving case studies. This time participants learned about a Portuguese experience presented by Carlos Alberto Damas from *Banco Espírito Santo* in Lisbon which falls into much same category of family-dominated houses like *Rothschild* and *Oppenheim*. The organising team also tried to take up some discussants' remarks from Athens when some attendants had criticised that the first workshop saw the role of archives in too optimistic terms. This time there were not just success stories. It was Christofer Stadlin from *Zurich Financial Services* who showed that archivists may have good ideas of how to make their company benefit from historical experience for recent situations but that they cannot implement their ideas because senior management lack interest. It should be noted that Christofer Stadlin was the first-ever speaker from the insurance industry at an *EABH* event after its change of statutes.

Besides accounts of individual companies the workshop also offered more general investigations. Christopher Kobrak delved into the interdependence of history, archives, corporate culture and business ethics. He insisted on the value of history for the strategy of corporations and advocated the integration of corporate and business history in the training of business students.

Manfred Pohl used the example of his career at *Deutsche Bank* to show that the interest of companies in their corporate history is by no means static and self-explanatory. It depends, to a great extent, on general trends. After boom years in the mid-1990s mainly due to banks confronting the Nazi past, interest waned in the heated atmosphere of the dotcom hype and as a result of the predominance of the shareholder value business philosophy. Also for the first time in *EABH* history, the theme of banking architecture was taken up. Ulrike Zimmerl used the example of *Bank Austria Creditanstalt* to illustrate the role of architecture in creating a visible public image conveying identity and integrity. Two papers dealt with the interdependence of corporate history and corporate social responsibility, reflecting the fact that cultural and social engagement of banks is ubiquitous these days. Nadina Paphitou and Yolanda Hatzi presented the cases of Cyprus and Greece. In both countries, banks play a very active role in cultural sponsoring, in funding social and ecological projects and in helping to preserve the national heritage.

Thus they fulfill social roles which are carried out by the state in other parts of the continent.

Ferdinand Lacina, consultant of the hosting *Bank Austria Creditanstalt*, gave the concluding remarks from the viewpoint of a former politician and finance minister. He concluded that while history does have an impact on business decisions, it has become more difficult in our ever more profit-oriented world to reconcile business and history. He believed that Pohl's question whether business history is in a crisis cannot be answered clearly yet. On the asset side there are a number of well-established archives in some major financial institutions in Europe which are here to stay. At the same time, there can be no doubt that in recent years many companies have rapidly lost interest in their history. What can be condensed into the message of the two workshops? It has become clear that the archive and the archivist's work lie at the core of a company's culture. Striking examples showed their huge potential for image-making. A long and successful corporate history creates trust and underscores a good reputation. The possibilities to use archival records for actual business purposes are ample. However, most archivists will agree that their archive's potential goes much beyond its actual use. To convince senior managers in this direction means a great and ongoing challenge for everybody joined in the *EABH*. The workshop organisers hope that the two events will encourage further discussion on how an archive should position itself within a bank, the definition of its core tasks and its contributions to everyday business purposes. The papers presented on both events will be published in a joint volume in May 2006 and will hopefully further fruitful discussion in the future.

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