

Solutions to strengthen professional ethics education for archivists in the context of digital transformation

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Abstract: *In the context of rapid digital transformation, archivists need specific ethical qualities to address emerging challenges. Strengthening ethics education helps archivists understand their responsibilities, comply with professional standards, and effectively preserve and utilize national archival documents. This contributes to the success of administrative reform and the development of e-government. This article proposes appropriate solutions to help build a team of archivists with strong ethical standards capable of meeting the demands of archival work in the current context.*

Keywords: *Archivists; professional ethics; education; digital transformation; solutions; strengthening.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the archival sector has played a crucial role in the information management of government agencies, organizations, and enterprises. As Vietnam accelerates its digital transformation process, archivists are assuming an increasingly pivotal role in ensuring information security, enhancing transparency in state operations, and meeting the growing demand for access to archival materials within society. This context poses new challenges for archival professionals. In addition to professional expertise, professional ethics has become a decisive factor in credibility, accuracy,

and effectiveness. Therefore, strengthening professional ethics education for archivists, including cadres, civil servants, and public employees is urgently required in the current period.

2. Ethical standards for archivists

Archival work requires a combination of professional knowledge, meticulous skills, a strong sense of responsibility, and the ability to apply technology. It is a profession that makes a quiet yet essential contribution in several key areas: preserving collective memory and cultural heritage; ensuring transparency and accountability; providing critical information for

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decision-making, policy formulation, and organizational management; and serving as a valuable source of reference for researchers across fields such as history, culture, society, science, and technology. Archival work also plays a role in protecting citizens' lawful rights and interests. This profession carries the following characteristics:

(1) *Scientific and systematic nature:* Archival work demands a meticulous and scientific approach to classifying and organizing documents according to specific principles and practices. This ensures that documents are managed systematically, enabling easy retrieval and use. Every step - from collection, arrangement, appraisal, and preservation to access and use - follows strict procedures and regulations.

(2) *Accuracy and caution:* Archivists must ensure that documents are preserved optimally to prevent damage, loss, or information distortion. Archival materials often serve as important historical and legal evidence, requiring precise management and information provision.

(3) *Silence and patience:* Many archival tasks require extreme care, detail orientation, and patience, such as organizing and classifying old documents. Archivists typically work in a quiet environment to maintain focus and prevent document damage.

(4) *Confidentiality and responsibility:* Many archival documents contain sensitive information, including national secrets, business secrets, or personal data. Therefore, archivists must maintain a high level of confidentiality. The management and use of archival materials involve legal issues, requiring archivists to demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility in their professional duties.

(5) *Vital role in society:* The archival profession helps preserve the nation's and humanity's memory, knowledge, and heritage

throughout history. Archival records provide crucial information and evidence for the operations of government agencies and organizations. They also serve as a rich resource for researchers in diverse fields.

Based on the mission, responsibilities, and specific characteristics and nature of the archival profession society, the State has developed and promulgated ethical standards for archivists:

(1) Article 8 of the Law on Archives (2011) stipulates prohibited acts such as appropriating, damaging, or losing archival documents; falsifying, modifying, or distorting the content of archival documents; illegally trading, transferring, or destroying archival documents; using archival materials to infringe upon the interests of the State or the lawful rights and interests of agencies, organizations, and individuals; and illegally taking archival documents abroad.

(2) Article 3 of Circular No. 13/2014/TT-BNV, dated October 31, 2014, issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, provides general ethical standards for public employees in the archival sector. These include honesty and objectivity in the execution of duties; caution and strict adherence to regulations on authority, procedures, and workflows in archival operations; dedication, responsibility, and enthusiasm for the profession and assigned tasks; solidarity, humility, and practical cooperation with colleagues; maintaining the confidentiality of information and documents by legal and organizational regulations; and actively researching and proposing the application of scientific and technological advancements and innovations in archival work.

(3) Decision No. 916/QĐ-BNV, dated April 20, 2016, by the Ministry of Home Affairs, issued a detailed code of conduct and professional ethics for public employees in the archival sector. This decision emphasizes the

absolute protection of Party and State secrets during archival work; maintaining vigilance to prevent malicious actors from exploiting security lapses to access sensitive information; prohibiting acts such as appropriating, damaging, or losing archival documents; falsifying or modifying archival content; illegally trading, transferring, or destroying documents; using archival materials for purposes that harm the interests of the State or the lawful rights of agencies, organizations, and individuals; and illegally taking archival materials abroad. This decision aims to enhance archival officers' awareness and sense of responsibility in performing their duties, maintaining social relations, combating corruption, and promoting thrift and waste prevention. It seeks to promote a stronger sense of responsibility in protecting, preserving, and promoting the value of archival records of agencies, organizations, and the people. Furthermore, it serves as a basis for agencies and units to assess the political qualities, ethics, and lifestyle of archival officers and to handle accountability for violations of professional duties and social interactions.

(4) Circular No. 07/2022/TT-BNV dated August 31, 2022, issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, stipulates the professional ethical standards for archivists, including honesty, objectivity, dedication, responsibility, humility, solidarity, and effective collaboration with colleagues during task execution; compliance with regulations on authority, procedures, and processes in archival operations; safeguarding the confidentiality of information and documents by legal provisions and the rules of the respective agencies, organizations, or units; and proactively researching and proposing the application of scientific and technological achievements and innovations in archival work.

It can be affirmed that these regulations

play a pivotal role in guiding awareness and behavior, ensuring integrity, objectivity, dedication, and responsibility among archival professionals. They serve as a compass for archivists to act responsibly, contributing positively to themselves, their organizations, and society. Strict adherence to these regulations is vital for protecting archival documents' integrity, confidentiality, and value, thereby supporting national sustainable development and safeguarding the legitimate rights of organizations and individuals. Furthermore, these standards are essential for assessing professional conduct and handling violations during task performance.

Notably, the rapid advancement of science and technology is profoundly impacting archival professionals, especially as electronic archives are increasingly replacing traditional paper-based methods. In this context, the following requirements must be prioritized, reinforced, and widely promoted: ensuring the confidentiality of information (predominantly classified documents of the State, organizations, and individuals), maintaining a strong political stance and resilience, and strengthening the ethical standards of public service. Effectively fulfilling these requirements will enable archivists to remain steadfast against petty material temptations, fulfill their responsibilities, and contribute meaningfully to society, the nation, and the people.

3. Practical implementation of professional ethics among archivists

In recent years, archivists have generally adhered well to professional ethical regulations. A practical survey conducted at 239 agencies and organizations implementing these regulations showed that most have issued internal clerical and archival work regulations. These legal documents serve as the foundation for archivists to carry out archival procedures properly and behave appropriately in professional activities.

In terms of professional practice, archivists have complied with archival laws by collecting documents for archiving on time annually, classifying records, appraising the value of documents within agency archives, compiling statistics and creating retrieval tools, preserving archived records, and organizing the exploitation and use of archival materials. Additionally, training institutions and archival agencies have held training courses to enhance the professional ethics of archivists. Many archivists demonstrate a high sense of responsibility, dedication to their work, meticulousness in archival operations, and awareness of the importance of archival documents to the country's history, society, and development (Oanh, 2023).

Despite these strengths, there remain several limitations, such as: (1) A portion of archivists have not strictly practiced professional ethics. For example, an ethics violation occurred at the Transportation Works Management Board (Thanh Hoa city, Thanh Hoa province), where an official sold 60 boxes of archival documents as scrap for 9 million VND (Lam, 2023), or another case in the Archival and Records Sub-department of Hau Giang province, where 2.6 billion VND was disbursed from archival arrangement funds without clear justification (Ky, 2023); (2) Show negligence in document collection, preservation, and access, affecting the integrity and value of the documents; (3) Breaches of information confidentiality; (4) Improper professional conduct; (5) Failure to establish complete records or to submit documents to agency archives on time; (6) Unauthorized or procedurally incorrect document destruction leads to the loss of critical information (Oanh, 2023).

In addition to the aforementioned strengths and limitations, in the context of digital transformation, archival work and the professional ethics of archivists are facing new

and complex challenges:

Firstly, electronic archival records are vulnerable to cyberattacks, unauthorized access, data theft, or alteration in a digital environment. The storage of personal information, state secrets, and trade secrets presents a major concern that requires archivists to possess strong ethical awareness in protecting such data and avoiding its leakage or misuse.

Secondly, electronic documents can be easily altered without leaving clear traces. Thus, preserving electronic records' integrity, authenticity, and originality has become a significant challenge for archivists today.

Thirdly, archivists must balance providing broad access to information for research, education, and public needs with protecting personal privacy and classified data. Furthermore, digitization can create barriers for those who lack access to technology. Therefore, archivists must ensure equitable access to information for all.

Fourthly, archivists face difficulties in selecting and appraising documents in an era of information explosion: (1) Information overload - the massive amount of data generated daily presents a challenge in identifying and preserving documents of lasting value; (2) Objectivity and fairness - the selection process must ensure impartiality and comprehensiveness, reflecting diverse aspects of social life while avoiding omitting valuable historical evidence.

In summary, amidst rapid digital transformation, archivists contend with long-standing challenges. They must respond to new and complex issues related to security, integrity, access, and the appraisal of electronic records. This necessitates the continuous reinforcement of ethical foundations, the enhancement of professional competencies, and heightened individual

responsibility. For archival work to serve as the “guardian of a nation’s memory” and effectively contribute to social development, it is essential to improve regulatory frameworks, strengthen training and supervision of ethical practice, and proactively adapt to the digital environment.

4. Solutions to enhance the professional ethics of archivists in the context of digital transformation

Firstly, the current ethical framework for archivists should be reviewed and supplemented with rules and behavioral principles appropriate to the digital working environment. This includes issues such as digital information security, data privacy, the integrity of electronic records, metadata management responsibility, and digital fraud prevention. In addition, the ethical framework should be widely disseminated, easy to understand, and accessible to all archivists online and offline. Given the rapid pace of technological change, the framework should be periodically reviewed and updated to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

Secondly, archival institutions and organizations should develop a clear code of professional ethics tailored to the specific nature of archival work and the current context. These ethical rules must be widely communicated to all archivists and regularly updated to ensure their effectiveness. At the same time, each archivist must be deeply aware of their role and responsibility in preserving and utilizing archival materials and voluntarily comply with legal regulations, professional standards, and personal conscience. Especially in the digital transformation context, archivists must exercise greater caution in safeguarding confidential information relating to the Party and State secrets and institutional and personal privacy by law. Additionally, they must remain vigilant against hostile forces and

avoid compromising the interests of their organizations or the State for personal or economic gain.

Thirdly, archival training and professional development programs should incorporate ethical education, helping learners to recognize the close relationship between professional competence and ethical character. In the face of rapid digital technology development, archivists must continuously learn and improve their knowledge and skills in electronic records management, information security, and ethical issues in the digital environment. Archivists should be encouraged to engage in self-learning and research and participate in forums and professional seminars to enhance their technical expertise and ethical awareness.

Fourthly, leaders of archival agencies and organizations must set an example in adhering to ethical standards. They should reward and recognize individuals and collectives who demonstrate exemplary ethics to encourage and promote positive ethical values within the profession. Platforms, both online and offline, should be established to enable archivists to exchange ideas, share dilemmas, and learn from one another’s experiences.

Fifthly, archival associations and professional organizations should play a more significant role in developing and monitoring the implementation of professional ethical standards. They should organize networking and experience-sharing activities to protect members’ legitimate interests. A network of ethically exemplary archivists should be developed, and those with outstanding moral character should be honored to spread positive values within the professional community.

Sixthly, universities and colleges offering archival studies should strengthen cooperation with national and provincial

archival centers to organize talks and specialized seminars on professional ethics led by experienced experts and practitioners. This will allow students and new professionals to learn directly from real-world experiences. In addition, they should participate in international research projects on professional ethics in the archival field, especially on issues related to digital document management and information protection.

Seventhly, information technology should be applied to support the monitoring and enforcement of professional ethics compliance, such as (1) Utilizing electronic archival management software with strong security features, detailed access controls, and complete audit logging to enhance transparency and traceability; (2) Implementing technical measures such as data encryption, digital signatures, firewalls, and intrusion detection/prevention systems (IDS/IPS) to protect electronic records from unauthorized access, alteration, or destruction.

5. Conclusion

Strengthening professional ethics education for archivists in the context of digital transformation requires a comprehensive approach that combines the development of ethical frameworks, innovation in content and teaching methods, enhanced training and professional development, the cultivation of an ethical culture, and the promotion of collaboration. Only through such an integrated effort can we build a workforce of archivists who are not only highly competent but also firmly grounded in professional ethics and capable of meeting the increasingly demanding requirements of archival work in the digital age.

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