The Museum as a Memory Institution

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The Museum as a Memory Institution

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Overview
This sociological aspect of the ForgetIT project seeks to develop a conceptual framework for organisational memory. Based on interviews with curatorial and management staff in a national museum the research attempts to identify the range of memory and forgetting practices within the museum. An attempt is made to develop a taxonomy which can be tested with other organisations with the intention to explore the theoretical and practical value in using human memory as a metaphor for understanding organisational memory.

Problem
For an organisation key issues for managing organisational memory and forgetting include:
- Integrating key organisational memory across systems;
- Enabling shared processes for encoding and retrieving organisational memory;
- Developing a framework for managing staff’s tacit knowledge;
- Reflexively developing a strategy for what knowledge should be preserved or forgotten;
- Supporting change while preserving key organisational memory;

Organisational Memory
Research on organisational memory has largely taken a functional approach (D’Adderio, 2001; Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Spender, 1993, 1996, 1998). Memory is seen as:
- Data and information which is be stored in systems or individuals;
- A resource in need of management;
- A tool to support efficiency and streamline business activities;
- Supporting the firm as a system for generating revenue.

However, memory is not simply a process of storage and retrieval of veridical data but rather the synthesis of different sources of information. (Lofthus & Palmer, 1974) We are interested in shared and negotiated processes of organisational memory, seeing memory work as practice and routines. Organisational memory is ‘irreducibly embedded in a collective practice that underlies even individual knowledge and action’ (Neche, 2012).

Organisational Forgetting
Managed forgetting has the potential support dynamic change. Knowledge of the past can become problematic from an organisational perspective when it:
- Presents a barrier to adopting new knowledge
- Supports outdated practices
- Is used to develop future strategies based on information which has been superseded
- Reinforces unproductive boundaries across teams and within an organisation

References

Doing Organisational Memory
- **Documentality** (Organisational Memory for Knowledge)
  - Externalisation of memory – writing, pictures, databases, etc.
- **Procedurality** (Organisational Procedural Memory)
  - Practices, routines and schedules routinely enacted
- **Physicality** (Organisational Action Memory)
  - Technological affordances, division & segmentation of space
- **Understanding** (Personal Memory of Organization Members)
  - Institutionalised values and beliefs, tacit knowledge
- **Current Operations** (Organisational Working Memory)

Documentality
- Storage
- Retrieval
- Distribution

Procedurality
- Practice
- Interaction
- Roadway
- Training

Physicality
- Technology
- Location
- Team Proximity

Understanding
- Beliefs
- Trust
- Prediction
- Protection
- History/Myth

Current Operations
- Responsive Operations

Documentality
- Accession Register
- Journal research
- Curator’s notes
- Display labels
- Web pages
- Photos of exhibitions

Procedurality
- Who adds to the records?
- What is the register based on?
- Who has access?
- How are exhibits accessed?
- Areas of responsibility – preservation, public engagement, research, learning, etc?

Physicality
- The stone itself
- Location of facts
- Location of records
- Proximity to other items
- Cultural contexts
- Permanent exhibit?
- Archived/On loan?

Understanding
- Provenance & history
- Physical relic
- Scotland’s Christianity
- Garden ornament
- Famous exhibit
- John’s specialty

Current Operations
- Arranging meetings
- Answering queries
- Directing public

The record becomes an artefact
Over time analogue records take on historical value

Curators trained to preserve everything. Management emphasise current practice.

Organisational memory: stored information from an organisation’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions.

(Walsh & Ungson, 1991)

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