The Museum as a Memory Institution

Citation for published version:

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
The Psychonomic Society Governing Board Edinburgh Symposium

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Download date: 24. Jan. 2018
The Museum as a Memory Institution

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. (Loftus & 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’ (Heckel, 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- Supports outdated practices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
- Encourages the rejection of innovation and innovative practices

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 exhibitions/names created?
- Areas of responsibility – preservation, public engagement, research, learning, etc.? 

Physicability
- The stone itself
- Location of form
- Location of records
- Proximities to other items
- Cultural context
- Personal or corporate?
- Archived/loan?

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

Current Operations
- Arranging meetings
- Answering queries
- Directing public

Construction of knowledge and the evaluation of its potential significance can be seen as a process that involves three distinct types of knowledge: documentality (the calculative, knowledge of the presence of information), procedurality (the functional, knowledge of how to access this information), and physicability (the representational, knowledge of the nature and function of the objects) (Heckle, 2012).

References

Organisational memory: Stored information from an organization’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions. (Ungson, 1991)

Research supported with funding from the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 600826: project ForgetIT