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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.

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**Organisational Memory**

Research on organisational memory has largely taken a functional approach (D’Addario, 2001; Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Spender, 1993, 1996, 1998). Memory is seen as:

- Data and information which is to 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 embodied in a collective practice that underlies even individual knowledge and action. (Necher, 2012).

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**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- Supports outdated practices
- Is used to develop future strategies based on information which has been superseded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

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**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 to whom and exhibitions?
- Areas of responsibility – preservation, public engagement, research, learning, etc.?

**Physicality**

- The stone itself
- Location of firm
- Location of records
- Proximity to other items
- Cultural context
- Regional interest?
- Archived/loan?

**Current Operations**

- Arranging meetings
- Answering queries
- Directing public

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**References**


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**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
- **Understandings** (Personal Memory of Organization Members)
  - Institutionalised values and beliefs, tacit knowledge
- **Current Operations** (Organisational Working Memory)

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**Practices of memory work create value for objects**

Curators trained to preserve everything. Management emphasise current practice.

**The record becomes an artefact**

Over time analogue records take on historical value

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**Organisational memory: ‘stored information from an organization’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions’**

(Walsh & Ungson, 1991)