

# The Museum as a Memory Institution

Jason Rutter, Cristina Alexandru, Elaine Niven,  
Maria Wolters & Robert Logie

 ForgetIT  
Department of Psychology, The University of Edinburgh

## 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.

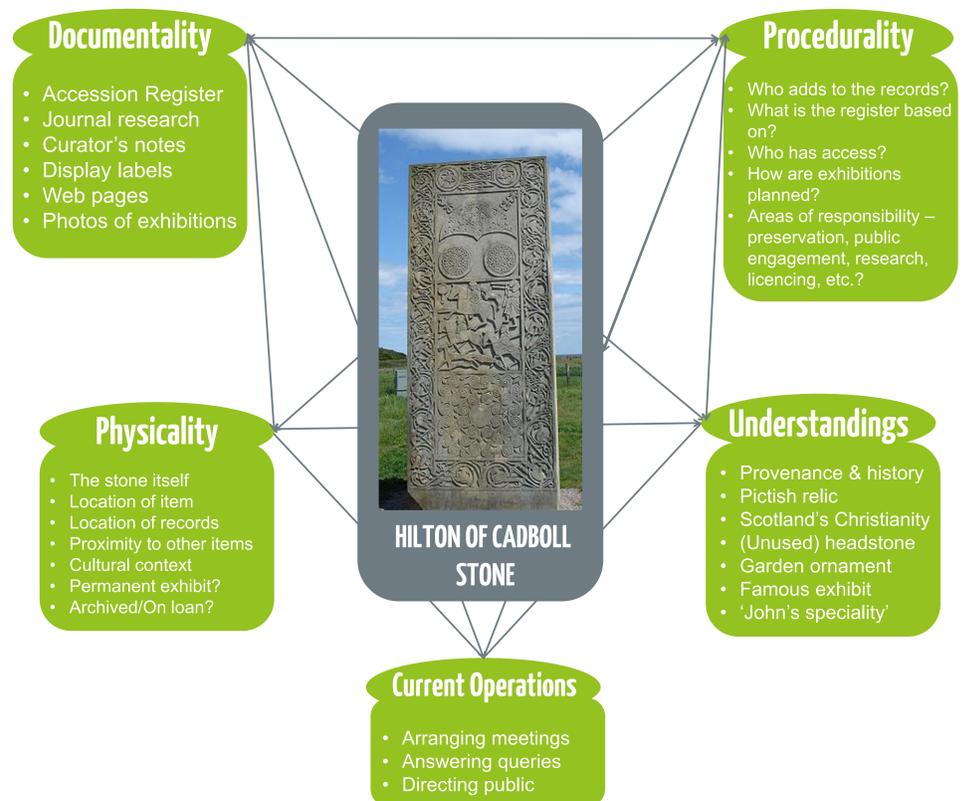
However, memory is not simply a process of storage and retrieval of veridical data but rather the **synthesis of different sources of information**. (Loftus & Palmer, 1974) We are interested in shared and negotiated processes of organisational memory, seeing memory work as practice and routines. Organisational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

		Active	Passive
<b>Documentality</b>	Storage		
	Retrieval		
	Distribution		
<b>Procedurality</b>	Practice		
	Interaction		
	Routines		
	Training		
<b>Physicality</b>	Technology		
	Location		
	Team Proximity		
<b>Understandings</b>	Beliefs		
	Trust		
	Prediction		
	Protection		
<b>Current Operations</b>	Responsive Operations		

## 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



Practices of memory work create value for objects



## The record becomes an artefact

Over time analogue records take on historical value

Curators trained to preserve everything.  
Management emphasise current practice.

## References

- D'Adderio, L. (2001). Crafting the virtual prototype: How firms integrate knowledge and capabilities across organisational boundaries. *Research Policy*, 30(9), 1409–1424.
- Feldman, R. M., & Feldman, S. P. (2006). What links the chain: An essay on organizational remembering as practice. *Organization*, 13(6), 861–887.
- Hecker, A. (2012). Knowledge beyond the individual? Making sense of a notion of collective knowledge in organization theory. *Organization Studies*, 33(3), 423–445.
- Loftus, E. F., & Palmer, J. C. (1974). Reconstruction of automobile destruction: An example of the interaction between language and memory. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 13(5), 585–589.
- Spender, J. C. (1993). Competitive advantage from tacit knowledge? Unpacking the concept and its strategic implications. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 1993(1), 37–41.
- Spender, J. C. (1996). Organizational knowledge, learning and memory: Three concepts in search of a theory. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 9(1), 63–78.
- Spender, J. C. (1998). Pluralist epistemology and the knowledge-based theory of the firm. *Organization*, 5(2), 233–256.
- Walsh, J. P., & Ungson, G. R. (1991). Organizational memory. *The Academy of Management Review*, 16(1), 57–91.

## Doing Organisational Memory

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

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

