

Understanding Organizational Memory

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally recognized that Walsh and Ungson (1991) “provided the first integrative framework for thinking about organizational memory” (Olivera, 2000, p. 813). Within the field of knowledge management (KM), there has been interest in a variety of issues surrounding organizational memory (OM), which is understood to involve processes of storage and retrieval of organizational knowledge of the past for use in both the present and the future. The recognition of the importance of OM has implications for practice. For example, Argote, Beckman, and Epple (1990) suggest that the effective use of OM can protect an organization from some of the negative effects of staff loss, while Stein (1995, p. 19) asserts that an appreciation of OM can facilitate the solution of problems associated with the retention and utilization of knowledge within organizations.

Although the need to preserve knowledge in organizations is now recognized, organizational theorists still disagree on a number of issues relating to OM. Existing literature exhibits contradictory arguments regarding OM which can make the relevance and application of OM concepts to KM difficult to understand. This article describes some of the disagreements surrounding OM in order to provide a deeper understanding of how OM might help to manage knowledge.

BACKGROUND

The topic of OM has received a great deal of attention from researchers across a wide range of disciplines, most notably organization theory, psychology, sociology, communication theory, and information systems. In a detailed exploration of OM, Stein (1995, p. 17) suggests that “there are three major reasons to explore this concept in more detail: (1) memory is a rich metaphor that provides insight into organizational life; (2)

OM is embedded in other management theories; (3) OM is relevant to management practice.”

Most of the literature on OM tends to focus on definitions of the term, the content and types of OM, its location, and the processes associated with the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and maintenance of memory (Walsh & Ungson, 1991; Stein & Zwass, 1995; Casey, 1997). Walsh and Ungson (1991, p. 61) provide an overall definition of OM as “stored information from an organization’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions.” This corresponds closely with the definition given by Stein (1995), who regards OM as the way in which organizational knowledge from the past is brought to bear on present activities.

Some studies have addressed the role of information technology in developing OM systems (OMS) which support OM processes (Sherif, 2002). Several researchers have highlighted the barriers to the implementation of OMS, the ways in which they might be overcome (Sherif, 2002), and the influence of OM on organizational effectiveness (Olivera, 2000).

OM occupies a significant place within management literature. However, Walsh and Ungson (1991, p. 57) argue that “the extant representations of the concept of OM are fragmented and underdeveloped.” Examination of the existing literature reveals frequent divergence of understanding of the notion of OM (Corbett, 1997). Indeed, earlier researchers (most notably Ungson, Braunstein, & Hall, 1981; Argyris & Schon, 1978) denied the existence of OM. Generally, organizational theorists disagree about a variety of issues surrounding OM. Ackerman and Halverson (1998, cited by Schwartz, Divitini, & Brasethvik, 2000, p. 3) are concerned that a clear and universally accepted definition of what an OM should do appears to be lacking:

After nearly 10 years of research, the term organizational memory has become overworked and confused. It is time for a re-examination. The term is

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burdened with the practical wish to reuse organizational experience, leading researchers to ignore critical functions of an organization's memory and consider only some forms of augmenting memory.

CONTROVERSIES IN OM

The field of OM exhibits many controversies in which researchers seem unable to agree about fairly fundamental features. The literature regarding these issues tends to be somewhat sparse and inconclusive. Some of the most notable of these issues, on which we focus in subsequent sections, are:

- Can organizations be said to have memories, or is OM essentially anthropomorphism?
- What is the relationship between the research fields of OM and KM?
- Does OM reside in the minds of individual organizational members, or elsewhere?
- Is OM appropriately modeled in terms of static storage bins, or should it be treated as a dynamic socially constructed process?
- How are OM systems operationalized?
- Is OM functional or dysfunctional in terms of organizational performance and effectiveness?

IS OM ANTHROPOMORPHISM?

Some researchers question whether OM can truly exist at all. They argue that, unlike an individual human being, an organization cannot be said to have a memory. Walsh and Ungson (1991) suggest that the idea of OM raises possible problems of anthropomorphism: Attributing characteristics that may be uniquely human to organizations may be an everyday convenience, but may obscure rather than clarify research issues. Argyris and Schon (1978), for example, contend that organizations cannot memorize knowledge of the past. Others, however, argue the contrary. Weick (1979, p. 206), for instance, asserts that organizational memory is implicated in the production of organizational personality, and that organizations must accept and live with their memories.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OM AND KM?

The relationship between OM and KM is another issue of contention. Knowledge management encompasses the management of organizational knowledge to en-

hance competitive advantage and implies an integrated approach to identifying, capturing, preserving, and retrieving the knowledge associated with the activities of an organization. Davenport and Prusak (1998), for example, define KM as the process of capturing, preserving, and distributing organizational knowledge. But are OM and KM fundamentally distinct fields of enquiry, or do they possess substantial commonality? This question is unresolved. Recent KM literature has either identified OM as an element of KM or appears to have used the terms, whether by accident or design, interchangeably. Unfortunately, however, there has been little attempt to systematically address the nature of the differences and similarities between them. There is little agreement as to what, if indeed anything, distinguishes OM from KM.

OM and KM seem to have evolved, at least, into close partners (Schwartz et al., 2000). Most researchers, including Kuhn and Abecker (1998), view OM as an important component of the KM perspective. The argument is that OM, being concerned with the preservation of knowledge for present and future use, must be integrated with KM. Similarly, Randall, Hughes, O'Brien, Rounfield, and Tomie (2001) consider OM to be a sister concept to KM, and the two are in practice used interchangeably. Hoog and Spek (1997, p. v) acknowledge the close relationship between OM and KM when they state that an important problem in KM is "insufficient use of knowledge possibly stored in badly organised corporate memories."

However, some researchers hold the view that OM and KM are not the same and should not be confused. Marsh and Morris (2001), for example, draw attention to temporality, arguing that KM is of the present, while OM is of the past. They regard KM as relating to the management of knowledge that is currently in use, while OM is concerned with the storage of past knowledge for future use.

Given that a central aspect of KM is the preservation and retrieval of organizational knowledge and that OM is the mechanism by which knowledge from the past is brought to bear on the present and future, it seems legitimate to regard OM as a constituent of KM. The two terms are not synonymous: KM, which addresses the entire issue of managing organizational knowledge, is a far broader area than OM. The storage and retrieval of organizational knowledge is just a part, albeit a crucial part, of the whole job.

WHERE DOES MEMORY RESIDE?

The memories held by an organization constitute a record of its past that may contain a vast amount of knowledge.

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