Organizational Memory as Objects, Processes, and Trajectories: An Examination of Organizational Memory in Use

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Abstract. For proper knowledge management, organizations must consider how knowledge is kept and reused. The term organizational memory is due for an overhaul. Memory appears to be everywhere in organizations; yet, the term has been limited to only a few uses. Based on an ethnographic study of a telephone hotline group, this paper presents a micro-level, distributed cognition analysis of two hotline calls, the work activity surrounding the calls, and the memory used in the work activity. Drawing on the work of Star, Hutchins, and Strauss, the paper focuses on issues of applying past information for current use. Our work extends Strauss’ and Hutchins’ trajectories to get at the understanding of potential future use by participants and its role in current information storage. We also note the simultaneously shared provenance and governance of multiple memories – human and technical. This analysis and the theoretical framework we construct should be to be useful in further efforts in describing and analyzing organizational memory within the context of knowledge management efforts.

Key words: boundary objects, collective memory, contextualization, corporate memory, distributed cognition, information reuse, knowledge management, memory reuse, organizational memory, trajectories of information

1. Introduction

Central to knowledge management efforts is reuse – of explicit information, tacit knowledge, or lessons learned – within an organization. Intuitively, the reuse of previously stored information, or organizational memory, is critical to the success of modern organizations. Yet much remains unanswered about organizational memory. We know relatively little about, for example:
• How do organizations, as collectivities of people, remember and forget?
• Where do knowledge-based organizations store information to be reused? What does it even mean for an organization to “store” information? How are people part of that “stored” information?
• How are memories accrued, located, and then used?
• How is information abandoned?
These are all areas of significant practical and theoretical merit.

If CSCW as a research area wishes to construct organizational memory systems as part of knowledge management in the context of organizational life, developing the ability to theorize at an appropriate level (Strauss, 1991) will be required to guide efforts. Theoretical conceptions of organizational memory, however, are due for an overhaul. The term organizational memory has been unnecessarily restricted to only a few uses centered around particular technologies; yet, memory appears to be everywhere in organizations.

Accordingly, we wish to step back in this paper and reexamine organizational memory to find suitable underlying theoretical constructions. Our intent is not (yet) to create technological organizational memory systems. Instead our goal is to examine and to understand where memory exists within an organizational setting.

The major portion of this paper consists of a detailed analysis of two hotline calls, progressively describing each call and the work activity surrounding the call. We found our field site, a telephone helpline for personnel issues, a particularly useful domain for studying organizational memory; largely because the repetition of questions and answers facilitated our observation and recognition of particular patterns. A descriptive examination, rooted in an organizational field study, that allows both a micro-scale analysis along with a theoretical development is most likely to be useful to later system construction. Accordingly, we necessarily have restricted our examination to a very small scale of operation because of the detail required. We approach this examination from distributed cognition theory (Rogers, 1992; Halverson, 1995; Hutchins, 1995), described below, because its theoretical language spans the diverse manifestations of organizational memory – from private to public and small scale to large.

The paper begins with a brief synopsis of the organizational memory literature and its need for empirically-based analyses of organizational memory. The next sections provide a brief introduction to distributed cognition theory. We follow this with a description of our field site and ethnographic data collection. As mentioned, the majority of the paper is an explication of two hotline calls along with the construction of an appropriate set of theoretical concepts. As with most ethnographically-based studies, the explication of the data and the findings are interwoven in the paper. The paper concludes with general implications for organizational memory research and a look at future research directions.

2. Organizational memory

Organizational memory, while it serves as an entry point for considerations of knowledge management has many varying, and occasionally competing,