



Chapter 11

Organizational Memory Systems in a Multi-Unit Public Organization

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ABSTRACT

Organizational memory systems (OMS) are means used by organizations to retain and reuse their knowledge. This study identifies organizational memory systems and their use for performing daily activities in a multi-unit public organization. Data were collected through a questionnaire and observation. Analytical categorization of systems, descriptive statistics, and non-parametric test were used as analytical procedures. The results show the most of OMS store explicit knowledge, but the most accessed store tacit knowledge. Internal and external systems to organization were identified. Identification of external systems suggests existence of a thin line between what organization proposes and formalizes as OMS and the systems actually in use. These results indicate the need to research the properties of existing memory systems and those actually used in organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge has been considered an important resource for organizations (Delgado, Hernandez, & Pua, 2019). People use their knowledge as well as seek for new knowledge through other people and artifacts to carry out daily activities in organizations (Levine & Prietula, 2012). A growing number of researchers have tried to understand the ways in which different kinds of knowledge are stored and used in organizations (Robinson & Ensigh, 2009). The system that comprehends methods for storing organizational knowledge for future use has been widely defined as organizational memory (OM). In their seminal paper, Walsh and Ungson (1991) defined organizational memory as “stored information from an organization’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions” (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, p. 61). It consists of a metaphor to refer to organization’s information and knowledge, as well as acquisition, storage or retrieval processes of knowledge by people in organizations (Anand, Manz, & Glick, 1998).

Empirical evidence indicates organizational memory helps organizations avoid past mistakes, ensure continuity of best practices, and take advantage of collective knowledge of both employees who have left the organization and those who actually work in the organization (Lai, Huang, Lin, & Kao, 2011; Pauget & Chauvel, 2018). Different areas of knowledge are devoted to the understanding of organizational memory (Stein, 1995; Lehner & Maier, 2000). This is one of the reasons why the construct has been defined both by its content (static view) and processes (dynamic view). Researchers who focus on memory content seek to identify existing knowledge in memory systems, as well as to describe their characteristics. In this perspective, memory content is equated with organizational knowledge (Mort, 2001). On the other hand, process view of memory seeks to understand how knowledge in organizational memory was created and stored, that is, how it developed until be stored in memory (Stein, 1995). Rao and Argote (2006) compare process view of memory with organizational ability to learn from experience over time and to communicate this knowledge to organization’s members.

All existing memories in an organization must be collected, stored and accessible so that people can use them effectively to carry out their activities (Robinson & Ensigh, 2009). Organizational memory systems (OMS) are devices used by organizations to store and retain its knowledge (Olivera, 2000). They are aligned to a content perspective of organizational memory, since their focus is directed to identify existing knowledge in each memory system and how it is accessed in the organization. Understanding how organizational knowledge is stored and preserved in organizational memory in different repositories (or means) has become central to organizational memory studies (Steil & Santos, 2012).

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