

Chadwick Dunefsky

The Relationship between Power Dynamics and Organizational Memory in Developing a Business Archive

Introduction

In this paper, I will be exploring the influence of power dynamics in developing organizational memory and how that influence shapes the development of a business archive. Prior research has been conducted on each of these individual parts. However, organizational memory is an evolving term, adapting to new technologies and shifting work cultures. The link between organizational memory and business archives is also in development as archivists strive to demonstrate the value of an archive to corporations. Research on the role of power dynamics and organizational memory in developing business archives is in its infancy. Little research on it has been conducted. Articles written on organizational memory make note of how power can influence its shape. These articles do not fully dive into how this manipulation of organizational memory might look in the business archive. I would like to use this paper to create links across these varying fields of research and demonstrate how future research can be done to investigate the role of power in developing a business archive. The links I create do not have a quantitative backing or thorough fieldwork but will hopefully provide a spark to continue this research in the future.

Before I begin dissecting these articles, I want to briefly discuss the ever-shifting form of memory across cultures. Ketelaar (2005) briefly explores this point by citing an anecdote about the Aboriginals in Australia. In Aboriginal culture, “there is no clear division between personal and collective stories, between public and private.” (p. 17) He continues this anecdote with suggesting that society “plays a powerful role in determining which values, facts, or historical

events are worth being recalled and which are not.” (p. 48) The example of the Aboriginal culture demonstrates the variety in which memory is formed across different cultures and society.

This example provides context into how each corporation creates its own sense of culture and expectations of its employees. Some companies expect a high dedication and loyalty to the company combined with high work hours. Other companies might not have a strong sense of identity and employees might not have a sense of attachment to the company. These varying images of corporate culture depend on the company as a whole. No single corporate culture is the “correct model” to follow and each form of culture shapes how its employees act around each other and in their daily role. This information is important in understanding how an employee contributes to their organization’s memory and how that memory takes shape over time. The development of organizational memory does not have an absolute model. Its formation can be analyzed and broken down to better understand how a company creates its heritage and therefore its archives.

Definitions and Clarifications

In order to fully contextualize the relationship between power dynamics and organizational memory in developing a business archive, these three key terms should be loosely defined.

Defining Organizational Memory

Organizational memory is an evolving term, adapting to changes in cultures and technologies. Prominent scholars on this topic include Mark Ackerman, James Walsh, Gerardo Ungson, and Andrea Casey. I will be citing these four scholars’ works to contextualize and clarify the type of organizational memory I will be exploring in this paper.

James Walsh and Gerardo Ungson (1991) wrote a historiographical dissection of the works of organizational memory up to that point in time. Their paper since has been commonly cited as the building blocks of organizational memory. (Casey and Olivera, 2011, p. 305) Ungson and Walsh (1991) describe organizational memory as being “stored information from an organization's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions.” (p. 61) They contextualize this quote by further dividing organizational memory into five bins. Each of these bins describe the development of organizational memory. The five bins include: “Individuals, culture, structures, ecology, and external archives.” (p. 73) To clarify these terms, structures are the varying power dynamics and relationships within a company. Ecology is the physical structure of a company. External archives is information that exists outside the company, primarily from former employees.

Defining Business Archives

Business archives might appear to be nebulous, a waste of space and money, within a structure that traditionally seeks to create profit. However, Shkolnik (1990), writes that “A successful archival program could also prove valuable in the education and training of new employees, both management and staff. New management personnel could utilize the archives to learn the long term history of the company.” (p. 19) The function of a business archive is to support the corporation and preserve its memory. It serves as the introduction for new employees and allows established employees to use that information to support their work. Legal cases can be supported with information found in the business archive. The organization of information in the form of heritage creates a specific narrative that bolsters the company’s image and allows it to sustain its objectives. In addition to that, Eulenberg (1984) suggests that a business archive is additionally useful in “to expand knowledge and understanding of other fields.” (p. 31) A good

example of this can be seen in pharmaceutical companies with a heritage archive. Their archive provides context and knowledge to the ever-growing field of medicine.

Defining Power Dynamics

For this paper, I will be using Georgesen (1998) and Turney's (2003) works to define power dynamics. Georgesen's article is primarily quantitative driven while Turney explores the role of power in the context of workplace bullying. Georgesen suggests that power "encompasses the idea of unilateral control." (p. 185) He continues by writing that "that individuals in powerful positions attended less to subordinates." (p. 185) These concepts of power provide insight into the varying levels of relationships within a company. The amount of interaction between different planes of employees leads to a better understanding of how these roles contribute to the development of organizational memory. The lack of direct influence from higher up employees might mean that lower level staff warp or shape organizational memory in unique ways. Without that constant supervision, memory might naturally be altered by a variety of factors in the employee's life - stress or time being two examples.

Role of Organizational Memory in Business Archives

The development of a company's archives is influenced by the documents and records created by the company's employees. However, records management is already a major part of contemporary companies. Brothman (2001) writes about the key differences between records management and the company's archives. He depicts a company's records through three stages: an active stage, a semi-active or dormant stage, and an inactive archival state. (p. 53) The archives records' are in the third stage, after the records have outlived their business use. He writes that once records reach this point that they have reached archival permanence, "which precludes the anticipation of eventual death... [these records] renders the concept of life and the

passing of measurable units of time meaningless.” (p. 58) The company’s records, once no longer active, contribute to the image of the company. Once the employee, who created the record, no longer remembers or is connected to that record, the company might “forget” about that record. When this happens, the archive acts as the memory of the company and serves as a constant preservation of the creation of these records. An employee’s actions and how they contribute to the company’s records are cemented in the archive. The archivist then shapes these records into a company history that will later provide use to complement the work of the employees. This constant back and forth of record creation and the archive allow for organizational memory to constantly act as the preservation for these records.

I am going to use one case study to further demonstrate the role of organizational memory in developing the business archive. The first being the Walt Disney Company Archives. I will use Smith’s (1996) article which investigates the development of this archive. Smith cites Mickey Mouse as being ubiquitous, “he is sixty-seven years old, but he is still everywhere. You cannot go into a department store or a toy store anywhere in the world and not see his smiling face on a stuffed figure, a book, a game, or a puzzle.” (p. 15) Over the course of sixty-seven years at the time of this article (91 years today in 2020), Mickey Mouse has sustained a constant presence in society. Numerous employees over the years have contributed to the various marketing and products of Mickey Mouse. All of these employees contribute to the organizational memory of how Mickey is represented in the company’s history. The employees who worked on Mickey day one, 91 years ago, likely do not remember all of their contributions. The company as a whole, also undergoing normal transitions over the years, no longer is the same company that those employees worked for several decades ago. Even though the company’s aged and these employees might no longer be connected, they still contribute to the

organizational memory of Mickey Mouse. The importance of this preservation is that the archival records preserve the efforts of those day-one workers in which their work might no longer be active in contributing to the contemporary presence of Mickey. As Brothman (2001) demonstrates, “organizations are shaped by their past, even – and sometimes especially – when they don't remember it. This notion converges with the idea that (organizational) tradition and culture is an “always-in-use and hence never-criticized framework of the world.” (p. 73) This quote is important in understanding how companies continue to sustain the same image without being linked to the original moment that they created that image. Even though Disney's company might no longer be clearly connected to that past, they are clearly still shaped by it and continue to use it for branding. The Walt Disney Archive acts as the link between the contemporary creation of Mickey and the records that those early employees created for Mickey.

Role of Power Dynamics in Developing a Business Archive

Ackerman's (2000) article on reexamining organizational memory includes a case study on a call center and how its employees process information from each call. After an employee completes a call, they “[start] a new tracking record in the CAT system for the new call, closing out the old one she had not quite finished... [ask] for the relevant information... types the information into the call tracking record... [write] onto a scrap of paper [and] types into the EMPLOY system.” (p. 4) The variety of systems and the ways this employee processed information “belonged to the individual or to the group.” (p. 4) To clarify, the individual includes her notes and the group are the company's systems where she is placing her information. Depending on the employee's length of term at the company and her skill level, this information that she is creating is bound to her knowledge. Regardless of the training and systems in place to create a fluid system, her contributions to the systems will be unable to match the systematic

expectation of the company. As a result, the information this employee creates lends itself to the company's organizational memory in its flaws and imperfections. These imperfections are natural and to be expected. As more employees contribute to this phone center's systems using their own skills and knowledge, they bend the company's organizational memory into their perspectives of the system.

Bringing in Casey and Olivera's (2011) article will further clarify how Ackerman's example illuminates the possibility of power dynamics in influencing the formation of organizational memory. They posit the following: "Consider the problem of knowledge ownership in organizations. Who owns the knowledge that is produced in the process of work? There is a natural tension between individual ownership of knowledge versus yielding knowledge to the organization." (p. 308) Their example might connect to Ackerman's point of the group vs. the individual. The individual might strive to match the company's expectations of them to conduct their portion of the work. However, that individual, once embarking on that work, now possesses a partial awareness of that work's context in the company. That does not necessarily mean they own the knowledge they produce though. Casey and Olivera suggest this is where the tension exists. Once the employee produces the knowledge, that knowledge is in tension for ownership between that individual and the company.

An employee can scribble some information on a piece of paper about their work that day and that information would contribute to the organizational memory of the company. However, that organizational memory is then transacted from the individual to the company. Casey and Olivera continue this argument by writing that "power dynamics are also reflected in decisions and assumptions about what constitutes organizational knowledge." (p. 308) The information the employee scribbles on a piece of paper is influenced by what they determine contributes to the

organization's memory. This contribution can be altered by power dynamics. A leering boss or a restrictive workplace can shape the information this employee writes down or inputs into the system. Both the individual and the system are then poisoned at this point. Feldman (2006) supports this point in stating that, "power is inherent in the construction of knowledge." The type of information an employee records in their everyday work is shaped by the power relationships in their job. The information that is absent from a record or the hesitations in the writings of an employee all could display a restraint in sharing knowledge.

Tying this information back to creating a business archive, Ackerman (1996) in another article, wrote that "memory is more fruitfully viewed from the current needs and assumptions of the organization... if a sufficient time has elapsed, it will be difficult to reconstruct the meaning of the event in the terms of the event's participants." (p. 9) When an employee is in the middle of processing information using a variety of systems, parts of these systems exist only in their short-term memory. These parts include how the employee processed the information and what influenced that employee to decide on those parts. As time distances itself from that moment, these parts become blurred and distorted. An archivist takes these blurry moments and must somehow translate it into a cohesive artifact for the company's history. For an archivist to preserve this information is to preserve the power dynamics that influenced the development of this information. When future generations of the company's staff look back at these documents, they are no longer aware of the context that went into developing it. Power dynamics, in this way, are subtle and can be erased by the passage of time.

There can be three ways an employee reacts to power. The first might be an employee not performing adequately and feeling claustrophobic in a workspace dominated with anxious power relations. The second might be an employee restraining from providing information to the

systems in fear that it tarnishes the company's image. The third might be more rare but an employee could refuse to provide information in spite of the power relations going on. These demonstrations of power struggles are a few examples of how an employee can inadvertently warp the company's records and organizational memory.

Implications of Power Dynamics and Organizational Memory

When an employee inadvertently warps records in response to power dynamics, an archivist might respond with equal action. An archivist could respond by refusing to archive the material, determining that it is not valuable information for the company to preserve. Its faulty characteristics would demonstrate to the archivist an insufficient worth. However, its context, the fact that its flaws were shaped by power dynamics, might be lost to that archivist. Ravenwood and Zijlstra (2017) state that the “The potential loss of corporate memory resulting from poor, or non-existent, archiving has a cost to the business.” (p. 214) This cost could be “increased staff time in searching for documents, increased risk to reputation and from litigation, and costs of storage.” (p. 214) When a business archive cannot flourish with a lack of documents, its contributions to its company weaken. In litigation, these documents influenced by power dynamics, lose their worth. If an employee tied to a certain moment in time leaves the company, the company loses its organizational memory of that moment.

As power dynamics shift and sway the employees of a company, their records and contributions to the archive reduce in their worth. Ravenwood and Zijlstra share one example in this happening with “a former large employer in Loughborough [that] had archive material destroyed or lost when the company was taken over by a larger corporation.” (p. 220) When the employees of that former company loosen their ties with that said company, organizational memory is lost and damaged. Since that archive no longer exists, that memory cannot be

preserved successfully. The larger corporation in this example lost their ties to the past by destroying it forcefully. This example is a much more brutal way power dynamics can influence the development of a business archive.

The employees in a company, regardless of their level or title, shape the company's organizational memory. Power relations within a company influence how that employee acts or behaves within the company. The varying levels of influence power shapes how that moment in time is preserved within the archive. An archive might decide these documents no longer have value if power has decayed their worth to that point. It is important for a business archive to exist, to preserve the company's heritage and provide a long-lasting resource for organizational memory to exist. New employees use the archive to gain a footing within the company. The legal team uses old records to bolster their cases. Staff might find a shared connection to the past when the business archivist digs up old records to share. All of these demonstrate the value of a business archive to a company. Business archivists constantly vey for their existence. Power dynamics weaken the structure and can damage a company's heritage permanently. A company's heritage persists even when the employees who contributed to it have left. These contextual clues are important for a business archivist to be aware of so their archive is not tarred by varying levels of power in the company.

More research is needed to further understand the influence of power in the development of a business archive. This research could include an oral history project with business archives, a quantitative study with employees, and interdisciplinary partnerships. The papers I read on organizational memory touch on power a little but I would like to see this field expand further in the future to better understand how a business archivist can be prepared to respond to such a crisis.

Works Cited

- Ackerman, M. (1996). Definitional and contextual issues in organizational and group memories. *West Linn*, 9(1), 10–24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09593849610111553>
- Ackerman, M. S., & Hadverson, C. A. (2000). Reexamining organizational memory. *Communications of the ACM*, 43(1), 58–64. <https://doi.org/10.1145/323830.323845>
- Brothman, B. (2001). The Past that Archives Keep: Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records. *Archivaria*, 51, 33.
- Casey, A. J., & Olivera, F. (2011). Reflections on Organizational Memory and Forgetting. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 20(3), 305–310.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492611408264>
- Eulenberg, J. N. (1984). The Corporate Archives: Management Tool and Historical Resource. *The Public Historian*, 6(1), 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3377682>
- Feldman, R., & Feldman, S. (2006). What Links the Chain: An Essay on Organizational Remembering as Practice. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Organization, Theory and Society*, 13(6), 861–887.
- Georgeson, J. C., & Harris, M. J. (1998). Why's My Boss Always Holding Me Down? A Meta-Analysis of Power Effects on Performance Evaluations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2(3), 184–195. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0203_3
- Gray, V. (2002). Developing the corporate memory: The potential of business archives. *Business Information Review*, 19(1), 32–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382024238266>
- Ketelaar, E. (2005). Sharing Collected Memories in Communities of Record. *Archives and Manuscripts*, 33(1), 44–61.

- Meeker, S., McCoy, G., & Timke, E. (2019). Advertising in the Archives: Procter & Gamble's Corporate Heritage and Archives Center. *Advertising & Society Quarterly*, 20(3), 16. <http://doi.org.libproxy.uncg.edu/10.1353/asr.2019.0016>
- Organizational Memory.pdf*. (n.d.).
- Ravenwood, C., & Zijlstra, T. (2017). Business archives and local communities: Corporate heritage in Loughborough, UK. *Archives and Records*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2017.1336615>
- Shkolnik, L. (1990). The Role of the Archive in the Corporate Structure. *ARMA Records Management Quarterly*, 24(4).
- Smith, D. R. (1996). The Walt Disney Archives: It all started with a mouse. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 16(1), 13–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439689600260031>
- Turney, L. (2003). Mental health and workplace bullying: The role of power, professions and 'on the job' training. *Australian E-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 2(2), 99–107. <https://doi.org/10.5172/jamh.2.2.99>
- Vince, R., Sutcliffe, K., & Olivera, F. (2002). Organizational Learning: New Directions. *British Journal of Management*, 13(S2), S1–S6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.13.s2.1>
- Walsh, J., & Ungson, G. (1991). Organizational Memory. *The Academy of Management Review*, 16(1), 57–91.