

## Reiterating malpractice: the role of organizational oblivion

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### Call for papers

In the present context of turbulences and of financial crisis, a very old but scarcely discussed question comes back to the forestage: why do “people” or “organizations” reproduce practices that already lead them to the same kind of hopeless situations? We do hear and read about the forgetfulness of what happened in 1929. Analysts compare the subprime breakdown with the junk bonds crisis in the late 1980s, and easily underline that some stakeholders actively took part to both of them. How many times can one read that such company has forgotten to learn from former failure and success? However, organizational oblivion is a two edged sword as on the one hand it could facilitate unlearning in domains where a capability renewal is necessary. On the other hand, organizational oblivion could lead to the lost of knowledge in domains where memory traces from the past would provide valuable guidelines for the future (e.g. for coping with disruptive events that rarely but regularly happen).

Research on organizational memory is mostly focused on identifying the loci of what can be depicted as “memory” for a non-human entity. This identification process is no less than a prerequisite to acknowledge organizational memory as something more than a pure anthropomorphic concept. So doing, practices, routines, standards, and rules are considered as major places for organizational memory (Girod-Séville, 1996, Birnholz, Cohen & Hoch, 2007, Feldman and Feldman, 2006, Antonacopoulou 2008). These “units” of knowledge are supposed to be reactivated if necessary, in specific situations.

In such a theoretical context, the notion of organizational oblivion deserves to be discussed. Oblivion is a wide concept, which includes the reproduction of malpractice as well as the development of new learning opportunities. It induces, as a counterpart of knowledge acquisition, specific developments on unlearning and “non-acquisition” dynamics.

By putting together this call for paper, we aim to:

- Deepen discussions about the nature of organizational oblivion. Should it be depicted as a process, as the absence or the loss of loci for memory inside the organization, as progressive disconnections among members or units...?
- Help to understand the role of reluctance towards change in organizational forgetfulness.
- Explain why some firms in one industry are able to remember while others suffer or even profit from oblivion?

- Explore the role of organizational taboos, restructuring activities and HR transfers as strategies to facilitate organizational oblivion.
- Make the case for the influence of attitudes towards time onto learning processes. In the last decades, retrospective and prospective attitudes have been declining whereas reactivity and pro-activity are considered panaceas. Cognitive psychologists define pro-activity as a kind of learning disability (Méric, 2000).
- Examine under which conditions oblivion is necessary (as a way to renew knowledge bases, for instance) or harmful (the most frequent way we consider it).
- Provide actionable considerations on how to promote, to limit, to influence organizational oblivion.

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