

Organizational Memory: An Important Resource for Organizations A Reading on TOYOTA's Practices

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Abstract:

In today's knowledge-driven economy, preserving organizational knowledge and applying it effectively have become crucial in order to ensure an organization's continuity and building its competitive advantage. As a result, organizational memory has emerged as an important strategic resource. It refers to the set of knowledge, values and experiences that an organization retains over time and recalls when needed to support its future decisions and activities, which makes it linked to knowledge management and organizational learning as well, in terms of both concept and function. This research aims to demonstrate the role of organizational memory by drawing insights from the practices of Toyota Motor Corporation, one of the most knowledge-oriented organization.

Keywords: Organizational Memory; Knowledge Management; knowledge retention Roles of Organizational Memory.

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Introduction:

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” this timeless quote from philosopher George Santayana speaks directly to the heart of Organizational Memory. Generally speaking, memory is thought to serve the same purpose for an organization as it does for an individual: to recollect the past (Florescu & Ispas, 2022).

The shift to a knowledge economy has imposed radical changes on the business environment, where knowledge has emerged as a driving force and a strategic resource. Organizations are now measured by their ability to acquire, produce, employ, and develop knowledge, which ensures its transformation into a sustainable competitive advantage. This justifies the growing interest in knowledge management practices, from diagnosing knowledge to creating and sharing it, and ultimately to using and applying it in decision-making and achieving organization's objectives.

However, the pursuit of knowledge acquisition and sharing is not enough to achieve its optimal exploitation. It is also necessary to provide all means to store and retain that knowledge for future use. Therefore, organizational memory is the cornerstone of the knowledge management process, as it is responsible for retaining the organization's experiences and past lessons, and allows for their retrieval when needed

Despite the above, many organizations still do not give the necessary importance to organizational memory, nor do they make the appropriate effort to exploit their previous knowledge and build repositories to retain it.

Through this study, we will attempt to demonstrate the importance of organization's memory and its various roles, by addressing the practices of Toyota Motor Corporation, one of the largest and most knowledge-oriented organizations.

Research Question and hypotheses:

Through this article, we aim to find an answer to the following question:

How can organizational memory enable the organization to retain accumulated knowledge, and what are the benefits of applying this knowledge over time?

To answer this question, we developed the following hypotheses:

- Organizational memory is the sum of an organization's past experiences and knowledge built through retention.
- Organizational memory prevents the organization from re-committing past mistakes and provides the best decisions.

Research objectives:

This study aims to shed light on the importance of organizational memory and focuses on its role within the organization. Through analyzing Toyota's practices, which have been responsible for its long-term success, as well as the relationship between these practices and knowledge management in general and the building of organizational memory in particular. It also states the necessity for organizations to develop and activate their memory and avoid falling into organizational forgetting.

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Research Methodology:

Based on the nature of the topic and the objectives sought to be achieved through this study, the descriptive and analytical approach were adopted. The article is structured into two main sections: the first presents the fundamentals of organizational memory, while the second is dedicated to the case study where we will illustrate the practices of the Toyota company to underline the importance of reusing an organization's past knowledge.

1- Literature review:

Despite the importance that organizational memory holds within management literature and its fields of application, it has been of great interest to researchers with different specializations such as information technology, psychology and sociology which made it difficult to provide an integrated and unified concept of this subject.

1-1 Definition of Organizational Memory:

In 1991 Walsh and Ungson brought organizational memory to the attention of researchers. Since then, researchers have made many attempts to clarify its concept, we will present some of them below.

Walsh and Ungson (1991, p. 61) defined organizational memory as "stored information from an organization's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions". Stein & Zwass (1995, p. 89) considered memory as "the means by which knowledge from the past is brought to bear on present activities, thus resulting in higher or lower levels of organizational effectiveness", referring to all organizational activities such as decision making, controlling, planning and more. While Moorman and Miner (1997, p. 93) described it as "collective beliefs, behavioral routines, or physical artifacts that vary in their content, level, dispersion, and accessibility". Huber, Davenport and King (1998) outlined it as being "the set of repositories of information and knowledge that the organization has acquired and retains" (Olfman & Jennex, 2003, p. 209).

These definitions discuss organizational memory from multiple perspective, the content perspective focuses on the knowledge that is captured, the context one, in which it is used and the repository perspective centered on where and how knowledge is stored and retrieved.

Although, proposed definitions of organizational memory differ, they all fundamentally focus on capturing and reusing the organization's past knowledge. Walsh and Ungson argued that This knowledge is stored within and outside the organization and resided in many different organizational locations called **storage bins** (1991) Which include individuals, culture, transformations, organizational structures, ecology and external archives (We will address these concepts later through the case study). The table below summarizes other researchers' propositions on where organizational knowledge can be stored.

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Table number 1: Knowledge storage devices

Researchers	Storage devices
Nelson & Winter, 1982	Formal and informal behavioral routines, procedures, and scripts
Stein, 1995	Standard routine procedures
Leonard -Barton, 1992	Managerial technical systems and capabilities
El Sawy et al., 1986	Individuals
Cook & Yanov, 1992	Culture
Olivera & Argote, 1999	Products
Campbell-Kelly, 1996	Physical artifacts of an organization
Stein & Zwass, 1995	Computer-based information systems

Source : (Jasimuddin, Connell, & Klein, 2009, p. 266)

1-2 Linking knowledge management, Organizational Learning and memory:

Organizational memory is most often linked with knowledge management organizational learning, and several other fields. In this section, we will focus only on these two concepts due to their relevance to our case study.

1-2-1 Knowledge Management (KM):

The importance of organizational knowledge requires focusing on its acquisition and development in order to use it to achieve organization's objectives. This, in turn necessitates a systematic approach to make it possible. known as knowledge management. The latter is defined as identifying, capturing, preserving, and retrieving the knowledge associated with the activities of the organization to create business value and gaining a competitive advantage

Given that a central aspect of knowledge management is the preservation and retrieval of organizational knowledge and that organizational memory is the mechanism by which knowledge from the past is brought to bear on the present and future, it seems legitimate to regard organizational memory as a constituent of knowledge management (Jasimuddin, Connell, & Klein, 2009, p. 265). This aligns with the argument presented by Walsh and Ungson who argued that organizational memory is a field of knowledge management because it involves the processes of storing and retrieving.

It is true that organizational memory is part of a larger approach that includes all processes related to organizational knowledge, but this does not diminish its value Rather, it calls us to say that it may be the most important part of this approach.

1-2-2 Organizational Learning:

Organizational learning is usually defined as the process by which an organization creates new knowledge or rebuilds existing one. This knowledge, in turn directs the future activities of individuals and groups within the organization (Steil & Santos, 2012, p. 5) to solve problems, discover errors and correct them.

Organizational memory plays a central role in theories of organizational learning and forgetting. the study of organizational learning helps us understand the building of organizational memory. Mutually, studies on organizational memory may contribute to the understanding of the organizational learning process (Steil & Santos, 2012, p. 3) This may allow us to say that memory is a critical component of organizational learning since the latter requires that new knowledge be somehow stored in organizational memory (Casey & Olivera, 2011). These two concepts are in an interactive cycle.

Organizational memory constitutes a central pillar in both knowledge management and organizational learning. While knowledge management focuses on the processes of creating, sharing, and applying knowledge, organizational memory ensures the retention and retrieval of this knowledge over time. In turn, organizational learning relies on organizational memory as a repository of past knowledge.

1-3 The Role of Organizational Memory:

Just as researchers have differed in defining the concept of memory, they have also differed in defining its roles. Below, we will attempt to present a set of views to better understand this role.

Walsh and Ungson (1991, p. 73) revealed that organizational memory plays three main roles within organization, presented as follow:

- ✓ **Informational role:** the information stored in different repositories contributes to enhancing the efficiency, effectiveness and speed of decision-making process.
- ✓ **Supervisory role:** The information stored in memory repositories helps reduce the costs associated with implementing a new decision, as it ensures the formation of correct behaviors without the need for high control costs.
- ✓ **Political role:** The Possession and control of knowledge create a source of authority and power that individuals/groups exercise to influence the behavior of others.

Stein and Zwass linked OM to organizational effectiveness and mentioned four organizational functions it supports (Casey & Olivera, 2003):

- ✓ adaptation to environment changes,
- ✓ integration between organizational activities,
- ✓ sustaining organizational culture,
- ✓ meeting objectives.

In addition to the important roles mentioned above, many researches have proposed other functions for memory. Te'eni & Weinberger (2003) believe that it enhances organizational learning and knowledge sharing, Yates (1989) linked it to

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improving coordination. Moorman & Miner (1997) believe that it contributes to the rapid development of products. Stein (1995), in turn, concluded that memory serves the organization in several ways, including reinforcing its identity and providing new employees with access to past experiences. (Jasimuddin, Connell, & Klein, 2009).

2- Organizational Memory within TOYOTA's practices:

Toyota Motor Corporation is a Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer headquartered in Toyota City, Aichi, Japan. It was founded in 1937 by Kiichiro Toyoda. It is the world's largest and top-selling automobile manufacturer, producing about 10 million vehicles per year, with a workforce of more than 380,000 employees.

Toyota is one of the institutions that has received the most attention when studying topics related to organizational knowledge. This interest is very justified once the researcher understands Toyota's work system and philosophy, it is a very knowledge-based organization. The following discussion will explain how Toyota applies organizational memory processes as outlined by Walsh and Ungson (1991): acquisition, retention and retrieval. Moreover, it will illustrate how it preserves its past experiences and knowledge within memory storage locations (storage bins). And finally identify organizational memory's role and importance to the organization.

Before starting the analysis, we found it useful to point out that Toyota's knowledge network comprises three units: multiple automotive plants, the Operation Management Consulting Division (OMCD) and the Global Production Center (GPC) (Suh, 2017, p. 91). Knowledge is mainly created on manufacturing plant floors.

- **OMCD:** is an organizational unit, unique to TOYOTA. It was established in 1970 by Taiichi Ohno (Suh Y. , 2019, p. 41). Its role is to systemize and diffuse Toyota Production System (TPS) within and outside the organization.
- **GPC:** is an internal center established in 2003, it sets the most fundamental skills required in automaking (Suh Y. , 2017, p. 96). Its important function is knowledge standardization.

2-1 The processes of organizational memory at TOYOTA:

As mentioned before, in this study we will adapt the processes proposed by Walsh and Ungson: acquisition, retention and retrieval.

2-1-1 Acquisition:

Walsh and Ungson (1991) linked the acquisition process to the decision stimulus and its organizational response. By this, they meant the relationship between the problem or environmental change (the cause) that requires a specific action and the action itself, which they defined as the decision. According to them, the information derived from linking these two elements constitutes the content of organizational memory.

For Toyota, this concept is a work routine practiced in several areas starting from its manufacturing plant floors. **The five why's technique** and **The A3 reports** serve as suitable examples of this practice.

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- ❖ **The five whys technique**, is a problem-solving tool that searches the **root cause of an issue** by asking “Why?” several times until the fundamental problem is identified, and the failure process is clarified.
- ❖ **The A3 report**, to write down information in a single page (A3-sized paper) using bullet point, charts and graphs. This simple reporting document contains detailed thinking process to problem-solving. Includes causes, alternatives and solutions.

These Brainstorming methods, serve to collect real data about the events (problems/situations) and the measures implemented (solutions/decisions). Which will provide organizational memory with information about cause-and-effect relationship.

2-1-2 Retention:

Organizational memory is stored in several repositories, presented as follows:

➤ **Individuals:**

Individuals are considered the main holders of knowledge within an organization they retain information in their own memory as well as keep it in records and files based on their experiences, expertise, and direct observations.

At Toyota, documentation is not just an activity, but rather a systematic process in its daily work system. The company also ensures that it is assigned to the right person, someone who has direct contact with the event being documented. When it comes to individuals, all relationships are founded on **Respect**, for Toyota respect is a primordial value to ensure support and satisfaction to all of the parties it interacts with Toyota supports a culture of development and growth, this environment encourages staff members to exchange expertise to strengthen the workforce (Taylor, 2023). To further clarify this concept, examples of the company practices are presented below.

- ❖ **Yokoten (Spread horizontally)**: employees are expected to preserve best practices, in order to share and broadly disseminate them within the organization's plants. This concept is meant to encourage managers to become aware of good practices, observe them, reflect upon them and creatively utilize that knowledge to improve the functions they manage.
- ❖ **Hansei (Self-reflection)**: in failure as in success, Toyota recognize the need for a **hansei-kai** (reflection meeting), a process that helps to identify what was experienced along the way and create clear plans for future efforts (Clifford, 2025). Employees admit mistakes and take appropriate action to avoid re-occurrence, explained via a written plan.

In addition to the above, Toyota relies on several other tools such as systematic recording of all operations through constant reports prepared by employees and the implementation of managing conversation strategy that facilitates communication among members, because conversations are seen as a platform for knowledge creation and exchange. Toyota as well has a powerful culture of adopting a listening attitude and building its listening capabilities (Sharafuddin, 2017).

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Employees are considered sources of information and act as a knowledge base. Toyota maintains its prior achievements by gathering and conserving the expertise of its workers (Taylor, 2023, p. 77). All this documented information and much more, are preserved in the organization's memory. Thus, Toyota not only retains past experiences but also transforms continuously employee's tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and keep it for future use.

➤ Culture:

The organizational culture is the accumulation of past experiences, ideas, expertise, and more, usually expressed through practices, language and shared frameworks that are considered the carriers of organizational knowledge.

"**Toyota Way 2020**" is the framework that defines Toyota's identity and culture. It is based on two fundamental pillars: **continuous improvement (Kaizen)** and **respect for people**. It is an updated version of the Toyota way 2001, streamlined the philosophy into ten guiding principles focusing more on: respect for people and society sustainability, adapting rapid technology and scientific thinking. **The principle of Respect for People**, lies in recognizing individuals, promotes responsibility, mutual understanding and trust, as well as fostering personal and professional growth through opportunities to enhance individual and collective performance (Palhau, et al., 2024). The second pillar, **Kaizen or Continuous Improvement**, encompasses a long-term vision, a commitment to ongoing, incremental improvement, and problem-solving by investigating issues at their source (Genchi Genbutsu) (Palhau, et al., 2024).

Standardization is documenting the current best-known way of performing the work, standardized work forms the baseline for **kaizen**. As the new standard is improved, it becomes the baseline for further improvements, and so on.

Toyota's culture encourages continuous improvement, participation, and teamwork. These practices require the documentation of exchanged experiences and information, making Toyota's culture one of its most important knowledge repositories. The Toyota Way functions not merely as a cultural philosophy but as a living mechanism for preserving organizational knowledge (Marksberry, 2011).

➤ Transformations:

Transformations refer to all the processes and procedures responsible for transforming the organization's inputs into outputs of all kinds. In other words, it includes all the functions and activities.

The Toyota Production System (TPS), is the main operating system, was developed to achieve the highest quality at the lowest cost and with the shortest delivery time, a concept often referred to as **Muda** or waste reduction. (Palhau, et al., 2024, p. 24). It is based on two pillars: **Jidoka** and **Just-in-Time** (Toyota Motor Corporation, n.d.). **Jidoka** (automation with a human touch), means that a machine has the capacity to stop itself whenever a problem is detected to prevent defective products from being produced and improving productivity. This eliminates the need for people to be simply watching

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over machines. **Just-in-Time**, is the concept of synchronizing production processes, linking all plants and their production processes in a continuous flow as they are needed neither too early nor too late.

The **TPS** is about kaizen activities that occur on the production floor. If the results of kaizen activities have positive effect for productivity, it becomes new work standards (Suh, 2017, p. 93). Toyota aims to create a standardized work system across its various plants, but also keep it adaptable to the different conditions of each plant through continuous improvement. This is carried out at the level of the **OMCD** and **GPC**. The **OMCD** standardizes and diffuses knowledge gained from domestic and overseas plants, when there is a great disparity in the knowledge between plants or new knowledge is expected to increase productivity by implementing it (Suh Y. , 2017) While the **GPC** creates standard manuals used when teaching best practices for these fundamental skills. Manuals explain fundamental skills in the form of videos, computer-based video, animation, and other visuals (Suh Y. , 2017).

Toyota's commitment to retaining every detail of its various activities has made its production system one of the most important knowledge repositories.

➤ Structures:

The organizational structure affects individual behavior, as it reflects the general rules established by the organization to define the role of individuals and their relationship with the environment. These roles and relationships, in turn, store important organizational information within the organization's memory.

Toyota invests in and develops its people from the offices to the labs to the shop floor to take on challenges and accomplish remarkable feats. (Liker & Morgan, 2006, p. 20). From one perspective, Toyota, expects superiors to treat subordinates with growth and respect (Marksberry, 2011). The work environment should support their professional and personal ambitions. Managers have to train and teach their employees but encourage and inspire them as well .

From another perspective, feedback, initiatives and even decision-making stems from manufacturing plant floors. Toyota believes that the best way to understand conditions and solve problems is by being at the **Gemba** (real place), it is where the action is happening. the bottom-up strategy (one of the most innovative aspects of Toyota's leadership style) (Taylor, 2023) is what puts in practice this approach.

Knowledge in Toyota is transferred through direct interaction between hierarchies at each level. Different meetings take place periodically, such as subcommittees, public managers meetings, section managers meetings, and operational floor meetings (Taylor, 2023, p. 75). Which makes the organizational structure more flexible and agile, and the work environment a real support of continuous improvement learning and innovation. Thus, it can be argued that Toyota's organizational structure is a true repository for storing knowledge.

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➤ Ecology:

The physical structure or workplace contributes to guiding the behavior of individuals and significantly affects their performance. Therefore, the workplace ecology has been considered one of the containers that stores a considerable amount of information. that are likely to explain the motivations and causes of both behavior and performance.

Genchi Genbutsu (go and see for yourself), means that whenever a problem occurs, the best practice is to go to see the location or the process (Clifford, 2025) Toyota considers the manufacturing plant floors as a place where routines experiences and problem-solving strategies are embedded into day-to-day operations. The industrial Equipment enhance safety and increase efficiency and productivity. It is implemented according to the **5S process**: Sort, Systematize, Shine Standardize and Sustain. this process ensures that physical environment of manufacturing is clear, orderly, pure consistent and disciplined. It is also equipped with visual management tools such as **Kanban** (signboard system) and **Ando Cable** (to stop production) (Clifford, 2025).

Along with the plants, Toyota is committed to making the physical environment, a place for development and positive participation. Making it easier for employees to communicate while dispersed across a large open-space offices (Sharafuddin, 2017) **Obeya room**, for example, is a big space dedicated to team collaboration where short-focused meetings are held to discuss problems and brainstorm potential solutions using visual tools.

This is how Toyota makes the workplace a large repository for storing information, knowledge, and previous experiences, and provides it with the best technologies to facilitate the exchange and sharing of knowledge among employees.

➤ External Archives:

Elements of the external environment also record prior information and knowledge about the organization. the company's memory, therefore, is not only formed by its internal environment, it can also extend to other parties such as competitors, former employees, suppliers, government databases and even business historians.

kyohokai is the supplier association of Toyota, it was established in 1943 to promote 'mutual friendship' and the 'exchange of technical information' (Dyer & Nobeoka, 2000, p. 352). Toyota meets with its suppliers through general meetings every other month to review production lines and general policies, and more frequently, it joins committees to discuss matters related to quality cost, and safety. The committees are designed to facilitate the transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge (Dyer & Nobeoka, 2000)

in addition of suppliers, Toyota interacts with stockholders, employees, business partners and host societies who all derive benefits from mutual respect that Toyota provides (Marksberry, 2011, p. 22).

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2-1-3 Retrieval:

The retrieval process occurs when stored past knowledge is used to solve current organizational problems or support decision-making, it can take place at either the individual or collective level.

Toyota's culture is a strategic mix of collectivist and individualist culture (Marksberry, 2011). It places strong emphasis on teamwork, bringing team members together to share knowledge, experiences and values -in a team- and collaborate in ways to generate outcomes that no individual could accomplish alone. On the other hand, it focuses on the individual's role and support employees to make decisions.

Walsh and Ungson (1991, p. 82) argued that it is difficult to pinpoint exact boundaries between acquisition, retention and retrieval, because it is an ongoing process it is also difficult to analyze Toyota's practices separately since they are closely interrelated and operate as an integrated whole.

It is worth noting that Stein (1995) added **memory maintenance** as one of the processes of organizational memory. which is about providing access to knowledge sharing it, ensuring its intensification and updating its content. Furthermore, he linked the process of knowledge acquisition primarily to organizational learning. As discussed above, Toyota practically applies these concepts by ensuring knowledge sharing among employees and continuously improving it, as well as promoting organizational learning.

2-2 The role of organizational memory in TOYOTA:

As Jeffrey Liker (2004, p. 7) notes, The Toyota way and TPS together "constitute the double helix of Toyota's DNA". Organizational memory at Toyota is a complex fabric of interconnected practices, philosophies, tools, and culture that ensures knowledge is continually acquired, stored and retrieved, to be applied when needed. Based on what was discussed above, we will present the most important roles that organizational memory plays at Toyota, as follows:

- ✓ **Improves Decision-Making:** Access to retained past knowledge , experiences and projects (Obeya room, A3 reports) allows employees to make more informed decisions,
- ✓ **Supports Effective Problem-Solving:** historical documented data, experiences and problem solving storytelling (A3 reports, Gunchi Gembutsu) help solving current problems efficiently and effectively,
- ✓ **Avoids repeating mistakes:** saved lessons learned from failures and errors and root cause analyses (Hansei, the 5 whys) minimize the risk of repeating mistakes,
- ✓ **Enhances performance:** Diffusing codified value-adding processes and standardized best practices (TPS, Kaizen, Yokoten) enable employees of all plants to perform tasks efficiently, reinvent solutions, minimize the time spent and reduce waste which leads to Improved productivity and individual performance.
- ✓ **Increases Innovation:** Building on existing knowledge creates creativity and innovation (Hansei), leading to the development of new products and solutions.

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- ✓ **Retains Knowledge of former employees:** documented and preserved valuable knowledge about best practices and skills (yokoten, Kaizen), ensures that the culture of the operational floors and the knowledge that works for them is passed on and kept within the company for newcomers which also reduce the impact of employees turnover or absence.
- ✓ **Helps in Preservation of Organizational Identity:** Organizational memory helps preserve the organization's identity, values, and culture (the Toyota way) ensuring continuity.
- ✓ **Facilitates the transformation into a global company:** the standardization wish relies on retained knowledge, played a key role in expanding and adapting Toyota's production system and learning practices and values across multiple units and plants.
- ✓ **Strengthens relationships with external parties,** the clear record of past interactions and exchanged knowledge, helps Toyota to build continuous trust and maintain long-term partnership.
- ✓ **Enables organizational learning,** organizational learning (continuous improvement) depends heavily on organizational memory as a mechanism for embedding past lessons into present and future practices.

In addition to the above, organizational memory plays an important role in Crisis Management, as for example during the Toyota's 2010 recall crisis, quality feedback reports, customer complaints and past knowledge about supplier network constituted a key element in overcoming the crisis.

Conclusion:

The issue of taking organizational memory into consideration has become a pressing concern within organizations, as it asserts itself alongside knowledge as one of the most important resources. While some view it as a key factor in achieving organizational success or failure, other struggle to understand its value reflecting a persistent gap between awareness and actual understanding.

Building organizational memory ensures that the organization keeps, over time information resulting from the experiences it goes through and information about the relationships between causes and effects (Florescu & Ispas, 2022). It plays multiple roles within the organization most notably supports decision-making and problem-solving, avoids repeating same mistakes, enhances performance and organizational learning and helps preserve organization's identity and culture.

However, when using past knowledge, it is important to consider that the context in which decisions are made may have changed. Environmental factors are constantly evolving, and even the organization's goals and vision may shift over time. Just as memory can have a positive impact, it can also have negative consequences, if it causes the organization to become attached to ineffective patterns of thinking and behavior and repeat them.

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The case study reveals that Toyota's management philosophy operates as a dynamic form of organizational memory. It is used to standardize processes, enhance efficiency and establish mechanisms for organizational learning. By focusing on human resources as the producer, user and disseminator of knowledge, Toyota has prioritized the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge that can be easily shared thus, has significantly improved the efficiency of its organizational memory.

In conclusion, the storage and retrieval of organizational knowledge is just a part, albeit a crucial part, of the whole job (Jasimuddin, Connell, & Klein, 2009). Recognizing the important role of organization's memory is only the first step in building it, as this requires other stages and prerequisites, such as organizational culture and information and communications technology.

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