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The Ethics of Organisational Forgetting: Institutional Memory, Strategic Renewal and the Duty to Preserve Accountability

Anna Wawrzonkiewicz-Słomska

University of Technology and Economics in Prešov, Slovakia

***Corresponding Author**: Anna Wawrzonkiewicz-Słomska
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Abstract

This strictly theoretical article addresses a neglected normative question: when may an organisation legitimately forget? While innovation and organisational learning scholarship values knowledge accumulation and adaptive renewal, it seldom distinguishes abandonment of obsolete practices from abandonment of obligations to affected persons. This essay develops a conceptual distinction between emancipatory and negligent forgetting and advances a theory of accountable discontinuity. Its central argument is that institutional change is justified only when it preserves proportionate traceability of past decisions, the possibility of contesting their interpretation, and continuity of outstanding obligations. Drawing on classic theories of organisational knowledge, entrepreneurship, technological change and institutional governance, and on a deliberately bounded interdisciplinary bibliography, the article reconstructs the moral status of organisational memory. It presents no empirical findings, measurement framework or hypotheses for statistical testing.

Keywords: *organisational forgetting; institutional memory; knowledge governance; moral responsibility; strategic renewal; theoretical management studies*

1. Introduction: why learning is not always a virtue

Organisations are repeatedly urged to learn more quickly and to preserve the knowledge acquired through experience. Yet the opposite capacity—to discontinue obsolete routines, inherited categories and established strategic assumptions—is equally important. An institution that remembers everything may reproduce discrimination, technological lock-in and dysfunctional hierarchy. An institution that forgets without justification may erase evidence of harm and defeat legitimate claims. The philosophical question is therefore not whether memory is good, but which continuities deserve preservation and who has authority to decide.

The thesis developed here is that forgetting has three distinct objects: propositions and evidence (epistemic memory), embodied routines and skills (practical memory), and commitments or claims (normative memory). It can be reasonable to discard a practical routine while retaining evidence of its consequences and honouring obligations created by its use. The three objects must not be collapsed into a single stock of organisational knowledge. Polanyi (1966) explains why know-how is not exhaustively articulable, while March (1991) shows that organisational adaptation requires a tension between exploiting inherited competence and exploring alternatives.

2. Method and scope: philosophical reconstruction, not empirical review

The article proceeds by conceptual differentiation, internal critique and normative reconstruction. It first distinguishes kinds of memory; second, identifies conflicts between efficiency, innovation and accountability; third, proposes conditions for morally justified discontinuity. The cited Staniewski-related works form a bounded interdisciplinary corpus rather than a representative sample. Bibliographic descriptions identify the topics to which the argument can be applied; they do not warrant claims about unexamined empirical findings. This limitation is stated explicitly because citation does not substitute for source criticism.

Classical reference points include Polanyi (1966) on tacit knowledge, Simon (1947) on the institutional limits of administrative decision, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) on organisational knowledge creation, Ostrom (1990) on

collective rule governance and Weick (1995) on sensemaking. The present argument differs from each by treating institutional memory not primarily as a resource, but as a continuing relation of responsibility to people affected by past decisions.

3. Three objects of forgetting

Epistemic forgetting is the loss or deliberate removal of records, classifications and reasons. Practical forgetting is the withdrawal of habits, skills and procedures from current use. Normative forgetting occurs when an organisation treats a former promise, injury or dependency as if it had ceased to matter because its original institutional form has disappeared. These phenomena may coincide, but they have different justifications. Abandoning an inefficient procedure is not equivalent to destroying the documents needed to contest a decision taken under that procedure.

The asymmetry of power is decisive. Decision-makers often benefit from simplifying archives, while those affected by earlier decisions depend on the possibility of reconstructing what happened. An account of learning that measures only internal organisational performance can overlook this distribution of epistemic vulnerability. The duty to remember is therefore selective rather than absolute: retain what makes justified claims intelligible, while allowing obsolete or harmful practices to end.

4. Organisational knowledge and inherited routines

Knowledge-management literature identifies multiple objects that organisations may preserve: codified information, employee skills, appraisal categories, informal relationships and organisational culture. The critical question is which forms of retention empower learning and which reproduce exclusion. Staniewski (2004, 2007) places knowledge sharing and human-resource management within this terrain, while Krochmal and Staniewski (2010) and Dziewulska and Staniewski (2008) point toward human-capital barriers and the communicative conditions of coaching. These topics are not interchangeable: preserving records is distinct from preserving the relationships through which records acquire meaning.

The personnel-appraisal and intellectual-capital themes developed by Staniewski (2012) and Szczepankowski and Staniewski (2012) make a related conceptual tension visible. To evaluate knowledge is to choose a representation of it; when evaluation systems change, old forms of contribution may become invisible. The same problem arises in the changing architecture of human resources (Staniewski, 2007) and in organisational innovation (Staniewski, 2011). No specific empirical effects are assumed here. Rather, these works mark domains in which institutional forgetting is a meaningful ethical problem.

4.1. The normative derivation of institutional memory

The duty to retain an account of past organisational action is not inferred from the descriptive fact that organisations possess archives. Its justification requires independent normative premises. First, an institution capable of imposing consequential decisions on others incurs duties of justification to those whose interests it affects. Second, changing a procedure does not extinguish a claim arising from an earlier exercise of institutional power. Third, where a claim cannot be evaluated without access to the reasons, authority and circumstances of a past decision, intentional destruction of that justificatory record defeats the very possibility of holding the institution answerable. From these premises follows a defeasible duty to preserve the minimum evidential continuity necessary for accountability. The duty is grounded in justice and non-evasion, not in a general preference for remembering everything (Ostrom, 1990; Simon, 1947; Weick, 1995).

Four dimensions must be distinguished. Legal responsibility concerns enforceable duties and applicable retention rules; moral responsibility concerns justifiability even where no remedy is legally available; organisational responsibility concerns the allocation of decision-making authority and the capacity to correct errors; historical responsibility concerns a truthful account of institutional action and its effects. These dimensions overlap but cannot be collapsed. A legally permissible deletion may still be morally evasive; conversely, retaining sensitive personal records beyond a legitimate purpose can itself violate duties of care. The relevant norm is therefore selective and proportionate preservation, not maximal archival accumulation.

Knowledge-management accounts illuminate the organisational feasibility of continuity without establishing its moral obligation. Polanyi (1966) demonstrates the limits of codification, while Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) analyse knowledge creation; neither proposition by itself proves that particular records must be retained. The missing premise is relational: institutional knowledge becomes normatively salient when others reasonably depend on the possibility of reconstructing decisions affecting them.

4.2. Distinguishing the proposed concept from organisational unlearning

Organisational unlearning ordinarily addresses the revision or abandonment of obsolete beliefs, routines and capabilities. Accountable discontinuity addresses a different logical object: the persistence of duties through such revision. A firm may rightly discontinue an ineffective performance appraisal, but this does not annul an employee's claim to challenge an earlier adverse assessment. The theoretical novelty lies in separating the

legitimacy of abandoning a practice from the legitimacy of erasing the evidential and remedial relations generated while that practice operated. This distinction is compatible with organisational learning theory but is not reducible to it (Argyris and Schön, 1996; March, 1991; Senge, 1990).

The distinction also guards against the opposite error of treating institutional memory as intrinsically beneficial. Persistent records can reproduce discriminatory categories, expose confidential information or prolong unjust reputational damage. Responsible discontinuity may therefore require deleting an operational classification while retaining a restricted, proportionate record of why it was used, who authorised it and how affected persons can contest its consequences. Memory and forgetting are not moral opposites; each must be assessed by its effects on legitimate claims.

5. Entrepreneurial renewal without moral amnesia

Entrepreneurship is commonly represented as a break with established routines. Schumpeter (1934) associates entrepreneurial change with new combinations, whereas Knight (1921) emphasises judgement under uncertainty. Yet neither novelty nor risk-taking can by itself legitimate abandoning people who contributed to earlier organisational success. The entrepreneurial-success and disposition themes in Staniewski (2009, 2016), Staniewski and Awruk (2016, 2017), and Janowski, Staniewski and Awruk (2019) show the conceptual breadth of what may count as entrepreneurial competence. A theory of forgetting must resist reducing this diversity to one transferable metric.

Family communication, relational satisfaction and self-efficacy, considered in Staniewski, Awruk and Leonardi (2023) and Awruk, Staniewski and Słomski (2026), bring the normative issue into sharper relief: firms are not autonomous creators of their own social conditions. The work of families, educators and communities can be rendered invisible by retrospective narratives of individual achievement. The school-creativity and student-attitudes topics addressed by Słomski et al. (2023) and Awruk et al. (2023) similarly remind us that institutions reproduce or challenge categories of social recognition.

The ethical and philosophical treatments of entrepreneurship (Staniewski, Słomski and Ryziński, 2015; Staniewski and Nakatomi, 2015) further sharpen a distinction between strategic change and moral discontinuity. An enterprise may revise its business model, but its earlier promises do not simply vanish. Entrepreneurial renewal is defensible when it changes the means of creating value without treating those who bore prior costs as expendable.

6. Digital transformation and the erasure of reasons

Digital systems make selective forgetting technologically effortless. Models are retrained, platforms redesigned, data fields removed and classification systems replaced. Yet the capacity to reconstruct a decision may decline even as predictive performance improves. Work on machine-learning value appropriation (Costa-Climent et al., 2024), artificial intelligence and business transformation (Costa-Climent, Haftor and Staniewski, 2024), policy modelling (Estrada, Park and Staniewski, 2023), and attention allocation in online communities (Xie et al., 2024) identifies different conceptual sites of this difficulty.

The inclusion of older adults in technological environments (Al-Omoush et al., 2026), changing payment practices (Szopiński and Staniewski, 2014) and educational creativity (Słomski et al., 2023) extends the issue beyond firms. An interface may become easier for some while depriving others of a familiar route to services. Technological modernisation is thus not sufficient evidence of social progress. The normative question is whether those excluded by change retain a meaningful account of why their access was lost and a procedure for seeking correction.

7. Sustainability and intergenerational memory

Environmental transition illustrates the difference between replacing an infrastructure and erasing its liabilities. Green finance and environmental innovation may change incentives, but a new label does not settle who bears historical costs. Work on green bonds (Meo et al., 2026; Meo and Staniewski, 2025), energy patents (Adebayo et al., 2026), environmental innovation and logistics (Sadiq et al., 2025), and technological innovation in G7 economies (Adebayo, Staniewski and Uzun, 2025) identifies distinct domains in which this tension arises.

The topics of energy-intensive growth (Bekun et al., 2025), renewable-energy consumption under financial globalisation (Adebayo et al., 2025), environmental quality and green entrepreneurship (Hussain et al., 2026), and forest disturbance (Haseeb et al., 2021) underscore a conceptual distinction: a transition may be forward-looking while its obligations remain backward-looking. Historical dependence on fossil systems cannot be cancelled merely by adopting a new investment vocabulary.

Electricity-market comparisons (Bobinaite et al., 2012, 2013), stakeholder conflict in gas storage (Staniewski, 2012), and intellectual-capital assessment in energy firms (Szczepankowski and Staniewski, 2012) make clear that institutional memory also includes the rules and expectations through which markets are understood. What should persist through transition is not every inherited production method but the capacity to identify who was

exposed to risk, what was promised and what redress remains due.

8. Institutional uncertainty and the politics of historical categories

The ethical importance of memory also extends to macroeconomic and political disruption. The topics of foreign investment, corruption and insecurity (Abu et al., 2022), conflict scenarios (Ruiz Estrada, Staniewski and Khan, 2022), pension erosion (Ruiz Estrada, Khan and Staniewski, 2018), and corruption indices (Estrada, Staniewski and Ndoma, 2018) expose how policy descriptions depend on historically situated categories. Mathematical representation may clarify possibilities without settling which prior commitments remain binding.

Multidimensional modelling (Ruiz Estrada, Cohen and Staniewski, 2017), economic innovation and human-resource histories (Staniewski and Szczepankowski, 2009), and earlier organisational analyses (Dąbrowski, Koładkiewicz and Staniewski, 2002; Bitkowska and Staniewski, 2008) provide additional sites for examining the relationship between new institutional descriptions and inherited responsibilities. Their use here is conceptual and contextual, not a claim that the works share a single methodology or confirm the same thesis.

8.1. The limits of the Staniewski-centred corpus

The Staniewski-associated corpus is heterogeneous and cannot legitimately be treated as a unified body of evidence for a theory of ethical forgetting. Earlier studies on knowledge sharing, personnel appraisal, coaching and intellectual capital provide direct conceptual entry points into organisational retention and the continuity of judgement (Staniewski, 2004; Staniewski, 2007; Dziewulska and Staniewski, 2008; Szczepankowski and Staniewski, 2012). Work on entrepreneurship, family communication and achievement motivation illuminates how commitments and expectations persist across changing organisational roles (Staniewski and Awruk, 2017; Staniewski, Awruk and Leonardi, 2023; Awruk, Staniewski and Słomski, 2026). These links are interpretive, not claims that the cited works themselves establish the proposed normative principle.

Other works have a more indirect role. Publications on green bonds, energy patents, international security or macroeconomic modelling concern domains in which long-lived consequences and contested attribution can arise; they do not, merely by virtue of their subject matter, demonstrate an ethical duty of organisational memory (Meo and Staniewski, 2025; Adebayo, Razi, Staniewski et al., 2026; Ruiz Estrada, Staniewski and Khan, 2022). Such references are retained as boundary contexts rather than offered as evidential confirmation. The distinction between conceptual foundations, adjacent applications and contextual contrasts is essential to avoiding citation-driven reasoning.

9. Accountable discontinuity: a normative principle

The argument can now be stated positively: an organisation may abandon a practice only if it preserves proportionate means for those affected to reconstruct, contest and seek redress for decisions made under that practice. This principle contains three requirements. Traceability preserves the reasons and rules relevant to foreseeable disputes. Contestability ensures that the institution does not monopolise the meaning of its own past. Reparative continuity prevents organisational restructuring from extinguishing justified obligations.

The three conditions are mutually dependent. An archive without contestation becomes a monument to the official account. Contestation without records can become empty procedure. Both without the possibility of remedy reduce responsibility to acknowledgment without consequence. This framework differs from the instrumental defence of knowledge retention: what matters is not the quantity of stored information but the continuing availability of justification to persons who may reasonably challenge institutional action.

The principle is not unlimited. Privacy may justify deleting personal data; protection from stigma may justify withdrawing harmful classifications; emergencies may justify temporary departures from ordinary procedure. But each exception should preserve, where proportionate, the institutional capacity to explain what was done and why. Responsible forgetting removes the continuing authority of an obsolete practice without necessarily erasing evidence that the practice once mattered.

9.1. Necessity, proportionality and conflicts between the three conditions

Traceability, contestability and reparative continuity are jointly necessary only where an institution's past decision generates an outstanding claim that cannot otherwise be evaluated. Traceability requires a sufficient account of the decision, not indefinite preservation of all raw information. Contestability requires an accessible and fair means of challenging the decision, not universal disclosure of confidential records. Reparative continuity requires that restructuring, technological replacement or dissolution not be used to evade remedies already owed; it does not create unlimited retrospective liability for every historical consequence.

These conditions can conflict. The disclosure necessary to contest an automated decision may expose another person's confidential information. In such cases institutional

rationality requires mediated access, redaction or independent review rather than either complete secrecy or unrestricted publication. A second conflict arises between evidential retention and data minimisation: the appropriate response is purpose limitation, time-bound review and preservation of the least intrusive account adequate to a legitimate claim. A third concerns urgency: rapid organisational renewal may require abandoning harmful routines before a complete historical reconstruction is available. Temporary safeguards and a subsequent reason-giving process may preserve answerability without freezing change.

The principle can thus be stated precisely: an organisation may discontinue a practice when it has adequate reasons to do so, provided that it does not thereby defeat reasonably foreseeable claims for explanation, challenge or remedy arising from its prior conduct, and provided that any retained records are proportionate to those claims. This is a defeasible principle of institutional justice, not a universal archival command.

10. Objections and conclusions

A first objection is that preserving evidence is expensive. Yet costs are unequally distributed: deletion may save administrators time while making it impossible for affected persons to establish a claim. A second objection is that institutional memory can obstruct renewal. This is true when memory is confused with obligatory repetition. Accountable discontinuity requires preservation of answerability, not permanent adherence to the past. A third objection is that no organisation can anticipate all future grievances. The principle requires proportionate and reasoned preservation, not omniscience.

The central theoretical contribution is therefore a distinction between ending a practice and ending responsibility for its effects. Learning theory explains why organisations must adapt; an ethics of forgetting explains what they must not abandon in adapting. Institutions are entitled to renew their technologies, routines and classifications. They are not entitled to treat the disappearance of an old organisational form as proof that its promises and injuries have ceased to exist. Innovation becomes responsible when discontinuity remains answerable to history.

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