

**‘Please remember my mistakes’: Why organizations should keep job applicants’**

**unpleasant online information in reserve**

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**Structured abstract**

*Purpose*

When hiring new employees, managers often conduct online background checks on applicants. This practice has led many applicants to reach out to legal and technological solutions that render unpleasant online memories forgotten. With this article, we question the effectiveness and social value of approaches aimed at permanently erasing information from the web. Furthermore, we provide practitioners with guidance toward responsible handling of applicant information from the web.

*Design/methodology/approach*

In this conceptual article, we review the literature on organizational memory and interpret it through a philosophical lens by turning to the works of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur and the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs.

*Findings*

We conclude that legally or technologically enforced forgetting on the web fails to provide true protection from a memory in a hiring situation, as remembering in an organization is a complex social process that hardly lets a memory disappear completely. As a result, legal and technological approaches that aim at erasing unpleasant memories from the web, represent only an illusion of protection for job applicants. Alternatively, we propose a selection process that makes the erasure of unpleasant memories from the web unnecessary.

## *Originality*

Previous literature on organizational memory has already criticized a purely mechanistic view of memory in organizations, by which memories are treated as objects that can be retrieved and deleted on demand. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first article that establishes a connection between organizational memory and the use of online information in selection.

## **Keywords**

Employment relations; failure tolerance; organizational culture; organizational memory; philosophy; recruitment and selection

## **Introduction**

The computer and its sheer infinite storage capacity are often referred to as an ‘unforgiving’ machine that confronts individuals with past mistakes forever (Westin and Baker, 1972). In an environment in which online media and digital storage capacity make it more convenient to remember information than to delete it (Mayer-Schönberger, 2011), companies have started conducting web searches about applicants to identify the right person for a job (Berkelaar, 2017; Van Iddekinge *et al.*, 2016). This practice can have serious consequences for job applicants, as they may be rejected if hiring managers find information on the web that they deem unacceptable (Clark and Roberts, 2010). In a hiring situation that involves an online screening of candidates, the chasm between the need to remember and the need to forget becomes particularly obvious: As observed by Bangerter *et al.* (2012), the organization aims to get the clearest possible picture of its candidates, whereas candidates may not always

want to provide accurate information about themselves unless it supports them in the application process. In the face of increased potential privacy invasion by third parties, it is, however, not surprising that a growing number of internet users wish to forget or be forgotten (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, 2013), especially if their future professional career is at stake. In this area of tension, organizations need to find a responsible way of dealing with applicants' past on the web.

Questions about how the past is used in business organizations have gained increased attention in the field of Organization Studies in recent years (e.g., Cutcher *et al.*, 2016; Decker, 2014; Decker *et al.*, 2021; Durepos *et al.*, 2021; Feldman and Feldman, 2006; Sadeghi and Islam, 2021), especially the role of organizations' narratives of the past in their sensemaking of the present (e.g., Adorisio, 2014; Foroughi, 2020; Humphries and Smith, 2014; Maclean *et al.*, 2014; Rodgers *et al.*, 2016; Rowlinson *et al.*, 2014). In this article, we propose an approach toward handling unpleasant applicant online information in recruitment and selection that makes it unnecessary for candidates to turn to legal or technological solutions to delete information about themselves from the web. Linking the literature on Organizational Memory (OM) with the thoughts of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur and the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, we intend to contribute to this literature by challenging the antagonism of remembering and forgetting in relation to negative personal information on the web discovered in the hiring process. We want to show that an organizational culture of failure tolerance can support the responsible handling of past personal failures displayed on the web in order to better attract the right people who share the organization's values. Such an approach would, ultimately, contribute to more sustainable HRM practices that place employees at the centre (see Richards, 2022).

In doing so, we proceed as follows: After a short review on forgetting in the digital sphere, we will connect the concept of OM with Ricœur's (2004) notion of forgetting kept in reserve

and the concept of silent memories established by Foroughi and Al-Amoudi (2020). We will then show that applicants' attempts to erase or censor unpleasant memories from the web to appeal to potential employers represent an inadequate way of dealing with such information in the hiring process. Following this discussion, we propose an approach toward an organizational culture of failure tolerance that makes it unnecessary to erase or censor unpleasant memories from the web.

### **Forgetting on the web**

Technological advancements open up new possibilities for employees to assume new communicative roles, which enable them to share and exert greater control over knowledge and connections (Pekkala *et al.*, 2022). However, the digital sphere seems to confront internet users with increased pressure to present a certain image to the public, not only in a hiring context. This pressure becomes particularly visible with respect to body image, whereby mass media have continuously influenced users' body image perceptions (Barlett *et al.*, 2008): Recently, especially image-based social media channels have been found to have serious consequences for young people's body perceptions and their psychological and physical wellbeing (see Chatzopoulou *et al.*, 2020 for discussion), as it puts them under pressure to conform to an idealized body image presented in these media (Barlett *et al.*, 2008; Morrison *et al.*, 2004). In an employment context, applicants also intend to present the most favourable image of themselves possible, for example by cleaning up their social media profiles if they know that a potential employer is checking on them online (Black and Johnson, 2012; Chauhan *et al.*, 2013; Davison *et al.*, 2016; Jeske and Shultz, 2016; Kluemper and Rosen, 2009). Some authors criticize that, under the pressure to conform, people modify what they post on social media (Clark and Roberts, 2010), and may even suffer self-devaluation as a

result of privacy invasions by a potential employer viewing their online activities (Alge, 2001; Stoughton *et al.*, 2015).

The literature on forgetting on the web discusses a number of technology-based approaches toward the erasure of unpleasant online memories. Thereby, Bannon (2006) proposes so-called ephemeral technologies, similar to self-destructing messages or tapes known from old espionage movies. Most suggestions of this kind aim to restore a condition of practical obscurity, a concept of forgetting referred to by Mayer-Schönberger (2011) that was inherent in the times before search engines were invented. In this way, several authors propose a type of automatic expiration date for personal information by making data unreadable after a certain period of time. This way, users can determine how long their information will be available (Bannon, 2006; Manny and Carter, 2015; Mayer-Schönberger, 2011; Mitrou and Karyda, 2012). Similarly, so-called reputation bankruptcy has been proposed, a process by which individuals can delete their personal information once every ten years (Manny and Carter, 2015). Another approach imitates the process of remembering and forgetting in the human brain and is referred to as digital rusting, as it lets older and less relevant information appear further down the result list of a search engine query instead of deleting it altogether (Manny and Carter, 2015). Different ways, however, also exist to delete personal information manually through the use of a deletion manager tool. For instance, Google's Dashboard offers users the possibility to erase selected records from Google products and services. Other tools, such as the Web 2.0 Suicide Machine, were designed to help users delete records and profiles from social networking sites (Mitrou and Karyda, 2012; Politou *et al.*, 2018). However, technological solutions pertaining to the controlled expiration of data also have their limitations: First, it is questionable what the incentives are for data collectors or aggregators to install such mechanisms. Second, they are difficult to implement for specific

data, as it is usually copied, shared and integrated into other records several times by different people (Ausloos, 2012; Mitrou and Karyda, 2012).

In the European Union, the desire to remove unpleasant information from the web manifested itself in the right to be forgotten, which was established by the European Court of Justice (Kim and Kim, 2017). By granting EU citizens the possibility to request from data controllers the erasure of certain personal data on the web (European Parliament, 2016), the right to be forgotten is said to allow individuals to detach themselves from past actions and start anew (George, 2018). Despite having received considerable praise for defending users' privacy rights and information autonomy (Lindsköld, 2018), the right to be forgotten has also been heavily criticized, in particular with respect to potential conflicts with freedom of speech and a free and open internet in general (e.g., Rosen, 2012). As noted by De Baets (2016, p. 58): "Like the duty to remember imposed on others, the right to be forgotten carries an element of coercion: when successfully applied, its net result is that the person exercising it diminishes, if not censors, the right to information of others". For Garcia-Murillo and MacInnes (2014), a right to be forgotten supports a judgmental society in which people feel pressured to present a reputable public image that may have little to do with reality. Under such pressure, people seem to feel the need to protect themselves from hostile judgment by others through the erasure of certain information from the web (Garcia-Murillo and MacInnes, 2014). In the following sections, we question the effectiveness of approaches like the right to be forgotten that seem to force others to forget when applied in a hiring situation. We proceed by reviewing the concept of OM, as it provides important insights into how memories, like unflattering information on a candidate's past, are shared and retained in organizations.

## Remembering and forgetting in organizations

### *Organizational memory*

The question of whether organizations can have a memory has been subject to debate and has produced a number of different definitions of OM (see Fiedler and Welppe, 2010 for discussion). According to Fiedler and Welppe (2010), OM conceptualizes an organization as a collective that stores information. Walsh and Ungson (1991, p. 61) established a prevailing perspective in the OM literature, defining OM as “stored information from an organization’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions”. Following this perspective, OM is conceptualized in terms of the acquisition, retention, and retrieval of memory through retention facilities and bins. However, such a perspective on “organizational memory studies (henceforth OMS) has been limited by mechanical models, which treat memory as a storage bin, methodological individualism, and a managerialist preoccupation with the functional utility of memory for management decision making” (Rowlinson *et al.*, 2010, p. 69). In contrast, Casey (1997) points out that memory in organizations hardly works like books or computers where information is stored and retrieved in exactly the same form. As observed by Rowlinson *et al.* (2010), such a storage bin view of organizational memory neglects the historical condition (Ricœur, 2004) of the people within an organization. Rowlinson *et al.* (2010) note that for members of an organization, OM is constituted by aggregating histories that are made up of events without ever being sure that the official history, and even more so the OM, will want to retain them. In Ricœur’s (2004, p. 284) words, “we make history, and we make histories”.

An alternative perspective to the storage bin view on OM has been suggested by Feldman and Feldman (2006), arguing that human remembering involves complex connections, personal qualities and an embedding in one’s personal system of past and history. Thus, Feldman and



Feldman (2006, p. 862) conceive memory as a “collective, culture and time specific process and practice” within an organization, rather than an object. Such a dynamic perspective on OM also considers the fact that memory is social (Corbett, 2000), whereby experiences are recreated or reconstructed by others and not simply retrieved through memory (Rowlinson *et al.*, 2014). In relation to the social nature of memory, Rowlinson *et al.* (2010) cite Ricœur (2004), stating that remembering ultimately requires other people. In highlighting that remembering is a social activity that strongly depends on the social groups with which an individual identifies (Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020), several OM scholars (e.g., Foroughi, 2020; Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020; Rowlinson *et al.*, 2010) refer to the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. According to Halbwachs (1992, p. 43), “no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve recollections”.

### *Organizational forgetting*

Memory and forgetting seem to be inextricably connected processes, since enacting organizational knowledge involve processes of creation, retention and decay (Casey and Olivera, 2011). Other authors, like De Holan and Phillips (2004), view organizational forgetting as a loss or the absence of knowledge, such as the inability to retain new knowledge, or the failure to maintain stored knowledge. Concerning this understanding of organizational forgetting, Casey and Olivera (2011) observe a consistency with Walsh and Ungson’s (1991) view of OM as storage bins. However, as opposed to the mere loss or absence of knowledge, Feldman and Feldman (2006, p. 872) encourage a view of forgetting that is “structural, emotionally driven, unconscious, and implicit”.

Based on Halbwachs' approach, which "breaks the dichotomy between forgotten memories and those available for recollection" (Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020, p. 453), the concept of silent memories has been used to describe memories that stopped circulating within a group, yet remain within the grasp of its members. According to Foroughi and Al-Amoudi (2020), memories become silent, because the social groups in which they were circulated have eroded, but the memories themselves have not completely fallen into oblivion. In their study on the effects of organizational changes on collective forgetting within a company, Foroughi and Al-Amoudi (2020) conducted interviews with long-standing staff members of an organization after a major restructuring process and induced them to share their memories of a common past. Although it involved a lengthy procedure with several attempts, the silent memories of the employees reappeared in the interviews.

Similar to the idea of silent memories, Paul Ricœur (2004) opposes the dualism of remembering and forgetting in favour of a more comprehensive approach, which takes the profundity of forgetting into account. Thus, Ricœur emphasizes that forgetting is a problem of more or less rather than one of if or if not. He distinguishes profound forgetting as the erasing of traces from what he calls a "backup forgetting, a sort of forgetting kept in reserve (*oubli de réserve*)" (Ricœur, 2004, p. 414). He thus proposes to search for the right measure between memory and forgetting, whereby the concept of forgetting as kept in reserve implies that a memory never disappears completely but can be subject to a sudden re-living of images (Ricœur, 2004). This understanding of forgetting strongly resembles the silent memories that re-emerged in the study by Foroughi and Al-Amoudi (2020) in a way that both concepts challenge a view on OM that deems forgotten memories to be permanently lost. Thus, acknowledging that memories are difficult or even impossible to delete completely, we argue that a constructive failure culture within an organization can be regarded as superior to any attempt to erase the digital traces of an applicant's mistakes in the hiring process.

## **The problem of erasing online traces in the hiring process**

Many of the legal and technological solutions discussed in the section on forgetting on the web refer to what Ricœur (2004) considers forgetting through the erasing of traces.

Consistent with the logic of a storage bin view of OM (Walsh and Ungson, 1991), pieces of information about applicants discovered on the web would become manageable objects that can be stored, retrieved, or even deleted either automatically or upon request. However, with Ricœur's (2004) memories kept in reserve and the silent memories proposed by Foroughi and Al-Amoudi (2020), we have seen that forgetting in organizations is not binary, but a matter of more or less, deeming the complete erasure of a memory impossible. Moreover, a perspective on OM as a social process (Corbett, 2000; Feldman and Feldman, 2006), whereby experiences are recreated or reconstructed by others and not simply retrieved through memory (Rowlinson et al., 2014) seems to be consistent with the ideas of both, Ricœur (2004) and Halbwachs (1992), who teach us that remembering requires other people.

Following this argument, in a situation in which an applicant tries to remove certain pieces of information from online records, this would also cover the knowledge held by a variety of other people, like friends and (former) colleagues. However, we have seen that silent memories (Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020) and memories kept in reserve (Ricœur, 2004) can come back to people's minds even after a long time. We have to conclude that, although a memory may be removed from online records, it can still be recollected in the minds of other people. Moreover, we have to acknowledge that personal information on the web is frequently viewed, shared and copied by different people on the web across platforms and contexts, which makes it practically impossible to delete a piece of information completely from the web (Ausloos, 2012; Garcia-Murillo and MacInnes, 2014). As a result, the erasure

of online information through policy or technology only provides an illusion of protection for someone trying to hide an unpleasant memory from being discovered in the hiring process. Having demonstrated that forgetting is not binary and that the complete removal of traces can never be guaranteed, the adequate challenge is to find a responsible way of dealing with an applicant's unpleasant memories when they are discovered on the web. By putting such memories in reserve instead of erasing their traces, we will show how a failure-tolerant culture can support an organization in hiring the right person for the job.

### **The hiring process in a failure-tolerant organizational culture**

Although failure in an organizational context still carries an enormous stigma, it forms an essential part of learning processes (Zaharee *et al.*, 2021). For instance, the US Marines require their members to fail and learn from their mistakes, because someone who fails is regarded as someone who tries hard (Freedman, 2000). Some companies foster a failure-tolerant culture by giving out failure awards, like Procter&Gamble's 'heroic failure award' and Tata's 'dare to try' award (Morgan, 2015). Generally, a failure-tolerant culture is also influenced by group observation (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017) in employees' daily interactions with colleagues and superiors (Lam *et al.*, 2010). This highlights the importance of the hiring process as an organizational practice that usually represents the first information for applicants on how the organization treats its employees (Gilliland, 1993) and aids future hires in making inferences about the corporate culture (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012).

Organizational practices like the hiring process, defined as "procedures, policies, and formalized routines, from training programs and feedback systems to rules for promotion and dispute resolution systems" are key in establishing and maintaining a climate that forgives mistakes (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012, p. 673). In their role as climate engineers, leaders also

shape employees' climate perceptions by developing, enforcing and implementing organizational practices (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012; Naumann and Bennett, 2000). It is therefore that leaders in organizations assume a key role in establishing, maintaining and communicating a failure-tolerant climate to applicants in the hiring process.

However, in a hiring scenario, the removal of online information about an applicant by legal or technological means is problematic in two ways: First, most of the legal and technological approaches discussed earlier in this paper fail to guarantee the complete removal of traces, providing only an illusion of protection for an applicant in a hiring situation. Second, in contrast to a failure-tolerant organizational culture that helps its members to learn from mistakes and develop, the right to be forgotten contributes to a judgmental society, in which individuals feel pressured to present a reputable public image (Garcia-Murillo and MacInnes, 2014). It is therefore that a culture of failure tolerance should also be reflected within processes of recruitment and selection, serving as a cue for applicants' perceptions of "how things are done around here" to attract the right people who share the organization's values. In a situation in which the hiring manager discovers unflattering information about an applicant on the web, his or her way of dealing with this information could strongly influence the perception of the corporate culture, since the manager is considered a climate engineer (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012; Naumann and Bennett, 2000) for the organization. In order to be able to evaluate a candidate for a job beyond his or her past mistakes, Ricœur's (2004) concept of keeping memories in reserve calls on hiring managers to keep the negative information about the applicant in the back of their minds without losing sight of the person's positive qualities. However, this makes it necessary to provide the opportunity for two-way communication already during the selection process (Hurrell *et al.*, 2017), so an applicant may get the chance to comment on any piece of information discovered on the web. On the technological side, this opportunity has also been discussed by Manny and Carter (2015),

proposing a mechanism that allows the data subject to post responses to inadequate, irrelevant, inaccurate or outdated information. Similarly, Chang (2019) points to the company GoodHire which offers a feature that allows applicants to view what a hiring manager will see about them in an online search and enables them to add their own comments to provide a fuller picture of themselves.

## **Conclusion**

As increased storage capacity allows companies to review personal information on the web for hiring purposes, individuals increasingly wish to forget or be forgotten. In this context, a number of technology-based, as well as legal approaches offer users the possibility of having links to unpleasant online memories removed from the web. However, in this article, we attempt to show that the dualism of remembering and forgetting that underlies such approaches does not represent an appropriate basis for responsible handling of unpleasant memories on the web in organizations. Instead, any attempt of erasing the documentary traces of an unpleasant memory in a hiring situation is an inadequate way of dealing with past mistakes in two respects: First, it nourishes a judgmental society and intolerance of failure, leaving little room for addressing mistakes or learning from them. Second, the more recent literature on organizational memory, as well as the works of Paul Ricœur (2004) and Maurice Halbwachs (1992) teach us that forgetting is not binary, but a complex social process. Thus, any attempt to fully erase an online memory fails to provide true protection from this memory in a hiring situation, because it remains in the minds of a variety of people inside and outside the organization, making it impossible to guarantee the complete removal of traces. If unwanted information is retrieved during the search process, or if employees in an

organization are later confronted with the behaviours they wanted to conceal, this may lead to even worse consequences.

Rather than fostering an organizational culture in which mistakes need to be concealed, we propose that a culture of failure tolerance should be encouraged in which mistakes are kept in reserve, so employees can learn from them and develop. Furthermore, a hiring process embedded in a failure-tolerant organizational culture would also represent a self-reinforcing mechanism, as it serves as an example of “how things are done around here” for future hires to adopt this attitude. Thereby, it helps the organization identify the right people who share its values.

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