

# Organizational Memory and Knowledge Transfer in Agri-food Organization: the Corporate Museum Way

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*Corporate museums represent an unexplored phenomenon under various aspects. In fact, numerous studies on corporate museum focus on marketing aspects. Although, the first corporate museums appeared in the early 1900s, few studies have addressed this phenomenon from the perspective of organizational memory and the transfer of knowledge. This study fits into this gap in the literature. From the perspective of organizational theory, the study analyzes the phenomenon of the corporate museum as a mechanism for knowledge transfer and organizational memory. To achieve this goal, this work uses a descriptive qualitative methodology, based on the analysis of a public dataset. The corporate museums in Italy were analyzed, with particular attention to the agri-food sector. The results of this study, highlight that the corporate museum assumes a strategic value to reduce the risk of “organizational forgetting” and increase the sharing of organizational culture. This study offers some first observations on the phenomenon of the corporate museum and the relationship with organizational memory.*

**Keywords:** Corporate Museum, Corporate Collection, Agri-food Sector, Knowledge Transfer, Organizational Memory

## 1. Introduction

The great changes imposed by the knowledge economy - such as globalization, technological innovation and new consumer trends - have profoundly influenced the global competitive system. To respond to these changes, organizations have had to implement new organizational models and processes to enhance knowledge. In this competitive context, organizations must increasingly base their competitive advantage on the enhancement and transfer of knowledge. Some sectors have shown a greater propensity to enhance and implement knowledge in their organizational processes. Indeed, a current of studies shows this propensity of some sectors such as automotive (Canonico, et al., 2021) or in public administrations (Wiig, 2002; Syed - Ikhsan and Rowland, 2004; Massaro, et al., 2015). Some entrepreneurial forms have also proved particularly inclined to the enhancement of knowledge such as start-ups (Myers, 2009), spin-offs (Antonelli, 2004; Vesperi & Gagnidze, 2019). Few studies, on the other hand, have focused on the agri-food sector (Vesperi, et al, 2021). Despite this little attention from the literature, the agri-food sector and agri-food organizations have an important “weight” in creating the value of a local economic system. Precisely for this reason, the agri-food sector and agri-food organizations represent a new challenge for KM scholars. Most agri-food organizations are micro and small dimensions (Ménard & Klein, 2004; James, et al., 2011) with low propensity for innovation and low investment in R&D and characterized by low-knowledge managerial practices. Despite this, the agri-food organizations in order to enhance traditional knowledge (Ragavan, 2001) have created corporate museums. Corporate museums are the object of great attention from scholars, involving a plurality of disciplinary fields. There are still few studies that deal with corporate museums connected to agri-food organizations, making use of theoretical frameworks based on organizational theory, and in particular by linking corporate museums to knowledge transfer and organizational memory. Studies on corporate museums have focused from the perspective of marketing (Piatkowska, 2014; Carù, et al., 2017) and corporate branding (Iannone,

2020) others in the more recent one of corporate culture (Nissley & Casey, 2002; Felipe, et al., 2017). Most of the literature, therefore, has emphasized the contribution that a corporate museum can offer to marketing strategies, particularly to institutional communication.

This study aims to offer some initial reflections to fill this gap in the literature. In particular, this study - in the context of organizational theory studies - analyzes the strategic role of the corporate museum as a form of organizational memory and assets capable of transferring knowledge. To achieve this goal, a descriptive qualitative methodology is used based on the analysis of secondary sources. We present the remainder of this work as follows: after this (i) introduction, (ii) the main theoretical elements on Corporate Museum, Organizational Memory and agri-food organizations are discussed. Following, (iii) the methodological process is illustrated. Finally, (iv) the main conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **Corporate Museum and organizational memory**

The Corporate Museum phenomenon is a relatively young phenomenon. In his study Danilov (1992), he traces the first appearances of corporate museums in the United States, in the early 1900s. Danilov (1992) also notes that in the following years the first corporate museums appear in other countries, such as Great Britain (1906), Germany (1911) and Italy (last twenty years of the 20th century). The first corporate museums took on a historical nature, i.e. corporate spaces dedicated to collecting and exhibiting corporate documents, photographs and historical production machines, or they sought to reconstruct the history of the company or the contribution of the founder and other leaders to its growth. Alongside these dedicated company spaces, factory visits take on the same function (Axelrod & Brumberg, 1997; Mitchell & Orwig, 2002; Lin, 2020). The main purpose, therefore, of the early corporate museums is to “collect” the company’s artifacts (Iannone and De Chiara, 2019; Martinez, 2020). Some authors do not identify this configuration as a corporate museum, but as a corporate collection (Nissley & Casey, 2002; Booth & Rowlinson, 2006). The corporate collection has no strategic value, but represents a simple collection of organizational artifacts. The corporate museum, unlike the corporate collection, aims to inventory the artifacts of the organization with scientific criteria and specific purpose. These activities allow the corporate museum to define and interpret the image and identity of the organization. In this way, the corporate museum takes on a strategic value. Corporate museums represent tools capable of sharing and transmitting the knowledge and values created within an organization, through the representation of organizational memory. The representation and narration of the organizational memory allows the organization to improve dialogue with its external and internal stakeholders (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Danilov (1992) identifies four primary objectives for corporate museums: (i) Preserving and transmitting the company’s history; (ii) Develop employee pride and identification with the company; (iii) To inform guests and customers about the company about its line of products and / or services, and (iv) to influence public opinion about the company and / or controversial issues. Kinni (1999) recognize the corporate museum as a form of organizational memory, suggesting that in addition to archives and formal written histories, “*corporate museums are establishing themselves as repositories for corporate memory*”. Sturken (1997), in his work, defines the concept of “*organized forgetting*” or “*strategic forgetting*.” Through to this information, the public, the role of the corporate museum is inserted as an intermediary in the process of transferring knowledge and identity between the organization and its stakeholders. The corporate museum helps to define industrial activity, avoiding the phenomenon of “*forgetting memory*”. (Ruixiao, et al., 2011; Feiz, et al., 2019; Mariano, et al., 2020). Organizations can benefit from corporate

collections and corporate museums by consolidating image and identity, but also by creating a tool for transmitting “*know-how*” for employers, especially those involved in the processes of innovation, creativity and development of new products. Corporate museums, therefore, represent an organizational asset in the field of communication (Montemaggi & Severino, 2007; Castellani & Rossato, 2014). The corporate museum, does not represent only a source of communication and marketing, in terms of social prestige, loyalty and differentiation from competitors, but they are a source of innovation and competitive advantage (Vicari, 1991), as they can represent sources of organizational learning, sense of membership and belonging of the members of the organization. Several authors have proposed corporate museum classifications. For example, Amari (2001) creates a classification based on the ownership of the museum (public or private ownership, single or multi-company). The same author provides a further classification based on the nature of the artifacts collected. On the basis of criteria, we can distinguish corporate museums into: generic of the product, generic of the sector, company history, territorial and complementary products. Only a few studies have investigated the phenomenon of corporate museums using theoretical frameworks of an organizational theory, in particular based on the constructs of organizational memory and the transfer of knowledge. This article explores corporate museums as a form of organizational memory and when used strategically as a tool for transferring knowledge from the organization to the stakeholders. The concept of organizational memory takes on different conceptions in the academic literature. An interesting line of studies focuses on the definition of organizational memory as a repository (Huber, 1991; Grant, 1996; Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020; Zahra, et al., 2020). According to this line of studies, organizational memory represents a collection of knowledge present within an organization in the form of documents, information material or any other form that can facilitate internal activities and with easy access. From this perspective, the artifact takes on a particular meaning. Cultural artifacts are tangible phenomena that incorporate the organizational culture, knowledge and values of an organization such as the characteristics of the individuals employed (personality, level of education, etc.), traditions and rituals, technology, errors, stories and myths. The artifacts represent fragments of knowledge recovered from various activities. For this reason, the organizational artifacts must be collected, cataloged and analyzed, to assume a strategic value. Alongside this trend, studies have been developed that compare organizational memory to “collective knowledge”. In these studies, collective knowledge is considered as knowledge shared by a group of individuals; that is, the set of individual knowledge of the individuals who make up an organization. The sources that can generate collective knowledge are: common experiences and knowledge sharing activities (eg. Chatman, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Reagans, Argote & Brooks, 2005; Van den Steen, 2010). The corporate museum represents a form of organizational memory that must be used in a conscious and strategic way. The corporate museums allow the transfer of routine practices and knowledge through the narration of culture and organizational memory.

Organizational culture has distinctive and lasting characteristics and is part of the organizational memory. Organizational culture is linked to the nature and success of the company and are the starting point on which external relations and decision-making processes are based. According to Albert & Whetten (1985), the members of an organization recognize organizational culture as central values and define daily actions. Numerous studies in academic literature (Weick, et al., 2005; Hatch, 2018) interprets organizational culture as something that an organization possesses and difficult to transfer. Some of the elements that characterize the organizational culture are codified and shared in the formal documents of the organization (such as official company documents, strategic plans, internal communications, disciplinary procedures). These documents become organizational artifacts, often exhibited and used in corporate museums. These artifacts make an organization immediately distinguishable from other organization. The organizational culture, also, influences the way the individuals work within the organization. The organizational

culture, therefore, determines the organizational action and how the organization responds to external changes. Organizational culture, therefore, represents a source of organizational memory as it incorporates the values, knowledge and practices of an organization.

### 3. Methodology

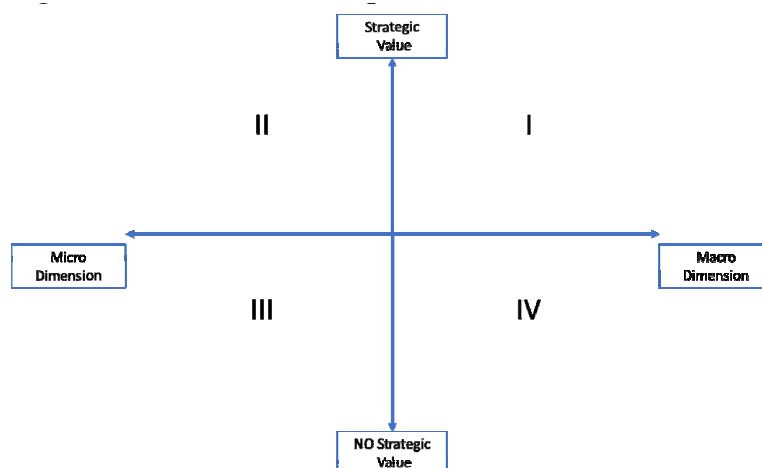
This document aims to understand the phenomenon of corporate museums in Italy, in the agrifood sector. For this reason, this research presented is based on qualitative and descriptive study in order to comprehensively understand and frame the general dynamics of the phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994; Ventura, et al., 2020). This study is based on a methodological process divided into two steps. The first step aimed to frame the corporate museum as a new mechanism for sharing knowledge and organizational memory. In this phase, by analyzing the main theoretical references, we tried to understand the strategic value of corporate museums, in order to understand them and evaluate the strategic role in the transfer of knowledge and organizational memory.

The second step - on the job - the corporate museums in Italy were identified. This phase was carried out by analyzing those present in the public and free dataset created by Museimpresa. Museimpresa is an Italian association, founded in 2001 by the will of Assolombarda and Confindustria. Museimpresa aims to promote the enhancement of business archives and museums, the exchange and dissemination of practices and encouraging research, training, development and in-depth study in the field of museology and corporate archives. The data were observed up to the date of 04/10/2021 (mm/dd/yyyy). As of that date, 101 corporate museums in Italy are reported. In the dataset, three types are divided: corporate museums, historical archives and hybrid forms.

### 4. Results

From a brief analysis of the literature on corporate museums, different classifications and perspectives for analysis emerge. Many authors have taken pains to provide a definition of the corporate museum. Several studies (Greenhill, 1992, Polesana, 2007; Marstine, 2008) have offered different classifications and interpretations of corporate museums. Historical archives, company archives, corporate museums and sector museums are just some of the terminologies used.

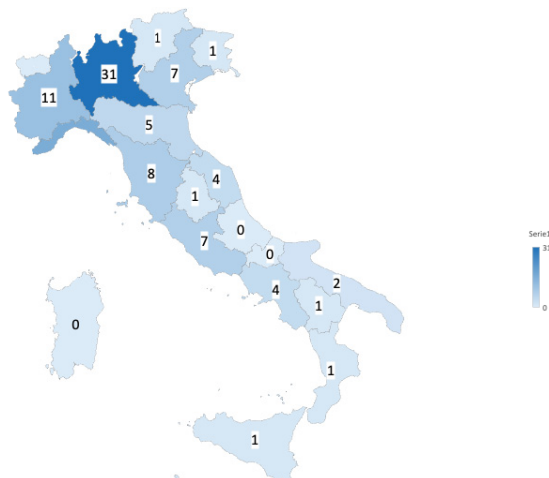
Figure 1. Framework of corporate museum



Source: our elaboration

Figure 1 relates two dimensions: “strategic value” and “micro / macro dimension”. The first dimension “Strategic value” represents the strategic role that the corporate museum assumes in the transfer of knowledge and organizational memory. A high “strategic value” allows to reduce the phenomenon of “memory oblivion”. A low “strategic value” configures the corporate museum as a mere collection of artifacts with no strategic purpose. The second variable “micro / macro dimension” is determined by the focus on a single organization or product, or if the corporate museum is focused on a category of product, territory or complementary products.

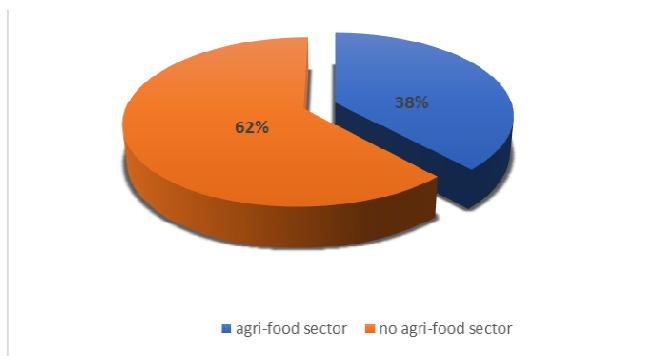
**Figure 2. Geographical distribution of Corporate Museum in Italy**



Source: own elaboration

Figure 2 shows the geographical distribution of corporate museums in Italy. In Italy there are n. 101 corporate museums. Through the observation of Figure 2 it emerges that the geographical distribution is not homogeneous. The Lombardy region is the region with the highest concentration of corporate museums. The Lombardy region was among the first Italian regions to experience the industrial revolution. The regions with the highest concentration of corporate museums are the regions with a very widespread and consolidated industrial and entrepreneurial fabric. The Valle d’Aosta, Sardegna and Molise regions do not have corporate museums. The other regions have at least one corporate museum.

**Figure 3. Corporate museums in agri-food sector**



Source: own elaboration

Figure 3 highlights the percentage of corporate museums connected to the agri-food sector. Over a third of the corporate museums in Italy are connected to the agri-food sector. The massive presence of corporate museums connected to the agri-food sector highlights the economic impact of the sector.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Changes in the competitive environment have become a central topic in academic debate (Mack, et al., 2015; Cousins; 2018). This has generated a copious and vast literature on the effects that entire sectors and organizations are facing. From these debates, the agri-food sector (Vesperi, et al, 2021) and the corporate museums in agri-food would seem neglected. This study aims to offer initial reflections on corporate museums in the agri-food sector, from the perspective of organizational memory and the transfer of knowledge. The lack of interest of KT scholars in agri-food organizations is determined by the characteristics of managerial practices, often with a low content of innovation (Fait, et al., 2019; Gardeazabal, et al., 2021). Despite this, the agri-food sector is the sector that most affects the economic system of a country. Introducing new innovation (knowledge) in agri-food organizations has a direct and positive impact on the level of well-being. To respond to the rapid changes in the competitive context, agri-food organizations need to integrate different types of knowledge. In addition, agri-food organizations must design processes capable of converging existing knowledge in the organization (organizational memory) and new knowledge. Since agri-food organizations converge, transform and constantly create knowledge through documents (manuals, official company documents, strategic plans, communications) and actions (sharing of experiences or deliberate training processes), the corporate museum represents a solution to the transfer of knowledge and the consolidation of the organizational memory.

The corporate museum, therefore, must assume a strategic value, not limiting itself to a passive collection of organizational artifacts, but facilitate the transfer of knowledge and organizational memory. Since these considerations can easily adapt to other types of collective knowledge, agri-food organizations could concentrate managerial efforts to better enhance the organizational memory and facilitate the acquisition of values. This study is not without limitations. In fact, the main limitation of this study is represented by the dataset. The analyzed dataset does not include all the corporate museums in Italy. Registration is on a voluntary basis, so some corporate museums may not be registered. Furthermore, since the aim of the study was to offer an overview of the phenomenon and for the sake of convenience, a clear distinction was not made between corporate museums, historical archives and hybrid forms. Despite these limitations, the results of this study offer interesting insights for the development of future studies on the subject. In particular, a gap emerges in the literature on corporate museums, from the perspective of the transfer of knowledge and organizational memory. In fact, corporate museums represent a phenomenon that is much analyzed as a communication and marketing tool, while there are few studies from the perspective of knowledge transfer. Furthermore, despite the fact that the corporate museums connected to the agri-food sector are over a third of those in Italy, there are few studies on this subject. Starting from an epistemological perspective, organizational memory and the transfer of knowledge are complex phenomena and there are many processes that revolve around them, making this study potentially even more complex and stimulating for future research.



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