

6-15-2026

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Recommended Citation

Varone, Alberto; Bolici, Francesco; and Crowston, Kevin, "Prompting The Past: Generative AI And Organizational Memory" (2026). *ECIS 2026 TREOs*. 13.

https://aisel.aisnet.org/treos_ecis2026/13

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PROMPTING THE PAST: GENERATIVE AI AND ORGANIZATIONAL MEMORY

TREO Paper

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Abstract

This paper examines how Generative AI reconfigures organizational memory and sensemaking. We argue that GenAI alters the process through which organizational actors translate lived experiences into traces for future retrieval across three stages. During encoding, GenAI drives promptification, translating experiences into conversational representations. During retention, it generates abundant but provenance-blurred records, obscuring the origins of organizational knowledge. Finally, during retrieval, GenAI replaces distributed interpretive labor with centralized, coherence-driven reconstructions. Cumulatively, these shifts risk generating pseudo-organizational memory: reconstructed interpretations that act as collective understanding despite lacking contestable experiential grounding. This creates a governance challenge: because GenAI systems prioritize narrative coherence over clear attribution, organizations may lose their capacity to contest, revise, or unlearn outdated interpretations.

Keywords: Organizational Memory, Generative AI, Sensemaking, Pseudo-organizational Memory.

1 Introduction

Organizational memory functions as the mechanism that makes an organization's past consequential for its present actions (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Before an organization can retain or retrieve an episode, however, it must first translate lived experience into a meaningful representation. This sensemaking process (Weick, 1995) allows past events to carry significance into future contexts.

This TREO paper examines how Generative AI (GenAI) systems reconfigure organizational sensemaking by altering how experiences are encoded and interpreted. We propose that GenAI changes the forms in which interpretations persist and how actors reconstruct sense during decision-making. These dynamics shift sensemaking from a distributed, contestable process into a centralized, coherence-driven reconstruction. This shift is relevant because sensemaking produces organizational meaning and establishes the legitimacy constraints that determine which framings persist (March & Olsen, 1975; Ocasio, 1997).

Thus, the integration of GenAI creates a governance challenge regarding attributing and revising collective understanding. The primary concern is not that GenAI inevitably produces factual errors. Rather, the technology may diminish an organization's capacity to contest and revise its own history as the interface with the past becomes more reconstructive. Organizations must therefore determine how to maintain a transparent and revisable record of their experiences in an increasingly AI-mediated work environment.

2 GenAI as a Sensemaking Interface

2.1 Encoding and Promptification

Encoding concerns how actors translate lived experience into forms that can later guide behavior. We propose that GenAI reshapes this process through what we term *promptification*: the progressive rendering of an organizational episode into an iterative, conversational representation. To prompt effectively, actors are generally required to externalize their situational understanding: selecting which elements appear salient, ordering them into a coherent problem formulation, and articulating what would count as an acceptable outcome. This process tends to be bidirectional, as GenAI feeds back plausible framings and alternative categorizations that may stabilize particular interpretations while attenuating others' salience. As a result, what becomes available for later retrieval may not be "the episode as experienced" but rather "the episode as prompted and reconstructed", a distinction with potential implications for which interpretations persist.

Hence, *promptification* may produce a stratified form of sensemaking: experienced actors are likely better positioned to encode richer diagnostic structure and causal reasoning, while less experienced actors may tend to encode surface features, potentially amplifying representational inequalities in organizational memory. At the same time, GenAI's interactive scaffolding can help actors externalize tacit knowledge (heuristics, exception conditions, evaluation criteria) that might otherwise remain unarticulated, partially offsetting the well-documented tendency for rationale to be lost in organizational retention.

2.2 Retention and Stabilization of Sense

We identify three ways in which GenAI may alter the retention ecology. First, it can expand the volume of inscribed sensemaking by incentivizing formalization: the prompt-response trajectory often records not only final outputs but also developmental residue (i.e., alternative framings considered, successive refinements, intermediate interpretations). This has the potential to preserve more interpretive scaffolding than traditional repositories, which tend to disproportionately capture polished endpoints.

Second, this abundance can create a stabilization challenge. When multiple actors encode overlapping episodes, the organization may accumulate heterogeneous, internally coherent but mutually inconsistent framings. In such conditions, stabilization risks occurring less through deliberate authoritative review and more through reuse, rhetorical fit, and circulation dynamics: outputs that are immediately usable and genre-conformant may become de facto canonical through repetition rather than validation (Douglas, 1986). In such cases, the organization could find itself "remembering" more while possessing less clarity about which interpretations are authorized and current.

Third, retention may become increasingly provenance-blurred. GenAI tends to blend local organizational details with generic scripts derived from its training corpus, producing inscriptions whose origins can be difficult to trace. Since contestability generally depends on provenance (i.e., actors need to be able to identify where a claim originated in order to evaluate its applicability; March & Olsen, 1975), blurred provenance may make retained sense harder to interrogate, revise, or deprecate.

2.3 Retrieval as Reconstructed Coherence

Retrieval has classically been understood as involving distributed interpretive labor: consulting colleagues, locating documents, inferring norms from routines (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). GenAI may alter this balance by making centralized reconstruction more readily available. Rather than providing pointers to traces that actors must assemble, GenAI tends to deliver synthesized, action-ready interpretations of what the organization purportedly knows about a given situation.

We theorize three potential implications of this shift. First, retrieval may appear more definitive than the underlying traces warrant, potentially reducing the likelihood that actors will reopen sensemaking work by returning to original sources or soliciting rival interpretations. Second, GenAI may introduce a salience mechanism based on narrative fit rather than evidentiary grounding: what becomes prominent

could be what coheres most readily, rather than what is most attributable or most recently validated. Third, retrieval risks becoming performatively recursive: reconstructed outputs, being immediately usable, can be enacted into practice and reinscribed as new traces that seed future retrievals (Levitt & March, 1988), potentially creating feedback loops in which the system's interpretations progressively displace the distributed traces from which they were originally derived.

3 Conclusions

The cumulative effect of promptification in encoding, provenance-blurred stabilization in retention, and coherence-driven reconstruction in retrieval points toward what we term *pseudo-organizational memory*: reconstructed interpretations that come to function as if they were the organization's collective understanding despite being only partially anchored in contestable organizational experience. We frame this as a challenge of epistemological governance: when reconstructions circulate as precedent without adequate mechanisms for tracking provenance or specifying conditions of applicability, the organization's capacity to distinguish what it has learned from experience from what has been imported as generalized script may be progressively weakened.

Organizational learning depends on both accumulating experience and the capacity for unlearning, based upon recognizing when past interpretations have become misaligned with current conditions and deprecating outdated sense (Olivera, 2000; Stein & Zwass, 1995). This capacity can be undermined when the organization's encounter with its past is increasingly mediated by a system that tends to privilege coherence over attribution. Future research in this field is thus not only about measuring factual accuracy but about theorizing governance under reconstruction: how organizations negotiate when coherence is sufficient and when provenance must be demanded, under what conditions reconstructed outputs become institutionalized, and how maintenance routines might be adapted to account for the infrastructural conditions that influence which interpretations become salient.

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