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- \$130 (including GST) covers green fees, power carts, prizes and a fabulous dinner!



Kumar Rajendra

To play, contact the TUG office at: 905-607-2546, (toll free 888-607-2546), or [admin@tug.ca](mailto:admin@tug.ca)

# Institutional Memory

By David Fillmore

*Recently while watching an episode of the West Wing I became intrigued by the concept of Institutional Memory. In the context of the story this referred to a process associated with the transition from one administration to the next whereby each outgoing member of the staff was required to produce something called a "transition document". This presumably would contain all information relating to a particular job that would be necessary for one's successor to know so that the transition proceeds smoothly.*

**I**t occurred to me that this has application in virtually every field and certainly also in our business. Imagine this situation: A shift in economic position or a change in management results in a massive staff change in the IT department (and maybe in other areas) of a company, but the IT needs of the company do not substantially change. In this scenario it may be necessary for the company to continue operations of the IT area in exactly the same manner as they have always been handled before. The problem is that the new IT staff will usually be significantly unfamiliar with policies and procedures that were previously well established.

In many cases the IT staff has become so familiar with the ongoing operation of the systems that the processes are simply routine. Even if documentation exists, there may be significant differences to the reality. Inevitably those differences are masked by the fact that the staff are so comfortable with the systems that they simply ignore the documentation altogether. It is likely that in many cases a staff member may even say, "Well, the documentation says to do it this way, but that is old and the process has changed. Just do it this other way now and we'll change the documentation later." Of course later never seems to come along and eventually all who remember that there even was documentation have left the company.

Many people would be averse to considering such a situation. After all, why make it easy for management to terminate your employment by producing complete documentation of your job? Isn't it in

an employee's best interest to secure his future employment by making himself indispensable? Wouldn't retention of knowledge in one's head as opposed to writing it down be one way of maintaining that security? Well, that may be true and there is no doubt that it actually does happen. However, it is always in the company's best interest to have accurate and up-to-date documentation for every existing process or system that is employed by the company. To that end, it is up to the employer to make sure that all employees document everything they are doing sufficiently well that another person of similar technical background could come off the street and take over with a very small learning curve. Documentation therefore needs to be a part of each workers' culture and responsibility. There are probably many ways to establish this. One might be a simple edict that no new system may go into production without sufficient documentation being on file. Also, no substantive change to an existing system or procedure may be made before the documentation is submitted. This amounts to a stringent change management process under which documentation is a primary component.

As a technical worker I myself find the process of creating documentation very limiting and tedious. I always want to move on to the next exciting thing and a part of me finds that documentation simply gets in the way of that goal. On occasion it is simpler to bite the bullet and write the documentation just so that I don't have to keep going back and reinventing the wheel on a regular basis. If the process is well documented then it can become somebody

else's problem and I never need to deal with it again. But then there is the other side of the coin. Who among us would feel good about producing multiple pages of documentation for a process only to find that it is never used by anyone? What would be the point? How many times have you been asked to come up with a way to do something and have been utterly convinced that you already did it once or twice before? If only you had made notes or filed some sort of memo to yourself so that you could bring it back and reuse it. It is also possible that one of your coworkers may have solved the very problem you are working on at some point in the past. Wouldn't it be nice to borrow on that person's knowledge and experience either by talking to them in person or by reading their notes so that you can make your own life easier?

There is no doubt that some feel that the documentation process could slow the pace of progress. However, when you consider how much time can be saved in training and preventing the duplication of effort the justification becomes unavoidable. The



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documentation in your company's library, along with the knowledge of your colleagues, is the Institutional Memory of your company. I would encourage you to always document as thoroughly as possible so that that memory is enhanced. You and others at your company will undoubtedly benefit greatly. 

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David holds several certifications in relation to IBM eServer/iSeries Technical Solutions Implementation, and has a CISCO certification. He has many other credits in the technical support field.

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