

YOUR ARCHETYPE — LONGER READ

The Institutional Memory

The work runs because four people have been there for fifteen years. One of them is talking about retirement.



THE PATTERN

What this means in practice

Institutional Memory operations are usually competent and stable — sometimes for decades. The pattern isn't a failure mode; it's a structural risk. The people who carry the operation aren't replaceable on the timescale of a normal hire. They're not replaceable on the timescale of a normal training program either. And the operation has been running well *because* of them, which makes the people inside it slow to recognize the dependency.

"The day it stops being quiet is usually the day someone resigns."

Tells you'll recognize

- You can list, by name, the three people whose departure would cause the most disruption — and so can almost everyone else.
- Onboarding a new hire takes 4–6 months and requires shadowing.
- The most-detailed process documentation in your operation lives in someone's email archive.
- A specific recurring decision goes through one person every time, and it's been that way for years.
- People joke about *"what would happen if [X] retired."* The joke is getting less funny.
- Knowledge-transfer initiatives have been started and stalled at least once.
- The newest person on the team is more bothered by the situation than the longest-tenured one.



What it's costing you

The visible cost is onboarding time — every new hire is a 4–6 month investment before they're usefully autonomous. The invisible cost is risk concentration: a specific medical event, a sabbatical, or a competing offer can take out a critical capability for months. This pattern often co-occurs with Spreadsheet Republic, but the loss isn't documented in the spreadsheets — it's in the patterns of when to *override* them, which only the long-tenured people know. The cost compounds quietly; the day it stops being quiet is usually the day someone resigns.

Your sequencing read — and why

The work is documentation, not technology — automation first, but the right kind. The temptation here is to buy a knowledge-management tool. Resist it. KM tools fail in Institutional Memory environments for the same reason wikis fail: nobody who has the knowledge has the time, and nobody who has the time has the knowledge.

The first move is to capture what's in those four heads, in plain English, in a place anyone can find. This is a recording-and-transcribing problem before it's a software problem. Automation comes second — the things that *should* be in software but are currently in someone's judgment.

Analytics and AI are downstream of having the patterns documented well enough to model. You can't model what you can't articulate.

Three first moves (this week)

- 01 Pick the one person whose departure would hurt most. Schedule four hours with them in the next two weeks, recording (literally, audio or video) the things they do that nobody else knows how to do.
- 02 Pick one recurring decision that always goes through that person. Write down the rules they actually use, not the rules in the manual.
- 03 Identify the second-most-irreplaceable person and tell them they're going to be teaching the next person who joins.

What to look for over the next 30 days

Watch for the long-tenured person being asked the same question for the fourth time this month. Watch for the newest hire quietly asking peers instead of the obvious owner — they've already noticed the bottleneck. Watch for a recurring decision being deferred because the usual decider is on PTO. Those are the signals that the dependency is active, not theoretical.

If any of this resonates, the next step isn't a sales call — it's a 30-minute conversation about who in your operation should be recorded first. The link to book that conversation is on the result page.