

The Future Needs Our Past

Key Takeaways from the Heritage Advantage CoLab C-Suite Roundtable



Beth Maser



Charlie Greene



Paul Sugden



Casper Smithson

In Episode 003 of the Heritage Advantage CoLab, Beth Maser brought together three leaders who are helping shape how we think about memory, technology, and stewardship: Charlie Greene (Co-Founder & CEO, Remento), Paul Sugden (Founder & CEO, TownsWeb Archiving / PastView), and Casper Smithson (COO, TownsWeb Archiving / PastView). Their conversation dug into what "human-guided AI" actually looks like in practice, and why our future depends on understanding and honoring our past.

One message came through loud and clear:
***Memory is deeply human.
AI can help us shine a light on it,
but it should never replace it.***

1 Memory Isn't Data — It's Identity

AI can accelerate discovery, but only humans can protect meaning.

One of the clearest insights came from Paul Sugden, who reframed the entire conversation with a single line: *"Memory isn't data. It's identity, it's culture, it's belonging."*

This difference really matters. AI can sort information, suggest metadata, and find connections, but it can't feel the emotional truth behind a photo, a handwritten name, or a lived experience. That's why archivists, historians, and storytellers matter: they bring context, nuance, and real judgment to the table.

2 AI Can Reduce Friction — But Humans Preserve Meaning

The value of a memory isn't always in its accuracy; it's in its meaning.

Charlie Greene shared how Remento uses AI to make family storytelling feel easier, especially for older adults who might not love being interviewed. Sometimes asking loved ones about their past can feel awkward or even a little intimidating. AI can help take some of that pressure off.

But Charlie was clear: *"We're not about capturing the truth. We're about capturing lived experiences."*

For families, the emotional truth often matters more than getting every fact exactly right. A grandmother's fuzzy memory of her childhood home might not pass a fact-check, but her family will always cherish the feeling and meaning behind it.

3 Digitization Unlocks Discovery — and Dignity

Digitization isn't just about saving things. It's about bringing them to life.

Casper Smithson gave moving examples of how digitized records can help people living with dementia. When someone sees a familiar photo or scene from the past, it can bring memories back in a way that feels grounded and dignified.

"I've seen incredible work... using digitized records to trigger memories."

This is where AI can really help. Tools like facial recognition or pattern detection can bring forward materials that would be nearly impossible to find by hand, especially in collections with thousands of images.

4 Human-Guided AI Protects Provenance and Trust

If we don't have good metadata, governance, and documentation in place, AI can actually make existing gaps bigger instead of fixing them.

Trust is at the heart of archives, museums, and community collections. Paul pointed out that we need to bring AI in thoughtfully, with strong oversight and people guiding the process every step of the way.

"Authenticity, provenance, emotional truths... matter way more than speed."

If we're not careful, AI can make mistakes or misinterpret things, which can change the story of our records. Human-guided AI keeps archivists in the driver's seat, so they can check connections, validate results, and add the right context.

Casper reinforced this point: *"Meaningful data is essential. You need your house in order before applying AI."*

5 The Future of Memory Work Is Compassionate

The strongest innovation is human-guided.

As the conversation wrapped up, Beth noticed a theme that kept coming up: compassion.

The panelists weren't just talking about technology. They were talking about care: care for families working to save their stories, care for institutions protecting our cultural memory, and care for communities facing big changes.

Charlie captured this beautifully: *"AI is a means to an end. We're building technology that brings families together."*

Human-guided AI isn't here to replace expertise. It's about helping us share it more widely, with responsibility, ethics, and empathy.

6 The Future Needs Our Past

The roundtable made one thing clear: AI is changing how we work with memory, but it can't replace the human story.

AI can help us find things faster and make access easier, but only people can protect provenance, understand nuance, and honor real lived experience.

The future needs archivists.

It needs historians.

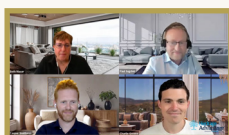
It needs storytellers.

It needs compassion.

It needs context.

It needs memory.

And most of all, the future needs our past—preserved with care, brought to life with purpose, and always guided by human judgment.



Watch the C-Suite Roundtable Discussion at:
archivalone.com/heritage-advantage-colab-ep-003