Building a Career in Business Anthropology

Business anthropology refers to the application of anthropological methods and theory in organizational settings. Business anthropologists may study organizational culture and change, product design, consumer behavior or help guide the adoption of new processes and technologies, like AI. Business anthropologists may work for nonprofit organizations, for-profit companies, or government services at any level (local to international).

Business Anthropology Covers Work in Many Domains

Business anthropology includes work in four domains, all of which are distinct fields in their own right.

Marketing and Consumer Behavior: Studying brands, products, and services as part of everyday life and how people find meaning in them

- Decoding what a brand means to the people who buy it
- Identifying unmet customer needs and "pain points"
- Bringing consumers to life as cultural beings, rather than data points, makes possible explanations for why a household keeps buying a "premium" detergent which tests no better than the store brand
- Creating product and brand strategy
- Analyzing the culture around a product or its consumers

Design Anthropology: Shaping products, services, and spaces by studying how people use them[1]

- Analyzing software or industrial design processes
- Gathering insights to inform the development of new products or services
- Evaluating and improving existing products and services such as shadowing nurses to redesign an IV pump whose alarm they have learned to ignore

Organizational Anthropology: Studying how organizations work beneath the organizational chart

- Identifying opportunities for improvement in work processes
- Trouble-shooting work issues
- Facilitating cultural change
- Brokering between groups that do not speak each other's language — e.g., translating between an engineering team that values speed and a legal team that values documentation, so that a ship date stops slipping
- Helping build organizational cultures to support desired business outcomes

Digital Anthropology: Studying how digital, material, and social worlds entangle as they pertain to organizational work

- Researching user concerns
- Collaborating with developers in making website or app improvements
- Assessing technology's impact on social life such as studying how delivery drivers experience being managed by an app instead of a person

Anthropological Training Offers a Different Perspective

Why are anthropologists well suited for careers in Business Anthropology? The basic skills that anthropologists have used for over 100 years in studying humans around the world are the same skills used by business anthropologists. Anthropological training, including its approach and methods, is unique and distinct from other disciplines working in business settings. Anthropologists offer the following valuable perspectives and approaches to business issues:

Concept of Culture, the construct underlying all anthropological work
This concept is defined here as an integrated system of shared ideas (thoughts, ideals, attitudes), behaviors (actions), and material artifacts (objects) that characterize a group.

Seeing cultural groupings is useful in understanding group behavior.

- In an organization, it allows the identification of patterns across the organization and points of consensus and conflict across groups. In a factory, it helps in understanding why the design team and the workers on the factory floor disagree on whether a new design is practical. Organizations are a complex web of interacting cultural groupings from diverse occupational groups, such as executives and factory floor workers, to cross-cutting cultural groups such as ethnic, gender, and professional groups.
- In marketing and consumer behavior, it helps in understanding why sales were low among Japanese buyers of US-produced plastic food wrap. Japanese buyers would not accept imperfections in the wrap that US buyers ignored.[2]

Holism and Systems Thinking

- **Pulling back to see the big picture**
  - The technology industry is focused on the end user but anthropologists expand the focus to each aspect of the system and the relationships among them. Anthropologists not only focus on voice assistants or chatbots but also at the interface or device in which it is housed and the wider environmental, social and ethical impacts. Cultural values underpin the design, use and deployment of these conversational AI systems.[3]
- **Attending to interconnections**
  - In understanding why it took too long to get beds for ER patients, researchers had to examine the hospital system. Issues explaining this impasse cut across five different occupational groupings from ER doctors to floor nurses to housekeeping staff. This new knowledge led to a new strategy that managed the integrated nature of this problem. [4]
- **Seeing how local actions interact with global processes**
  - Recognizing the difference in cultures helps one understand that, in Trinidad, Coke was seen locally as an important national drink when rum was added. It was rivaled only by the local beer.[5] Coca-Cola may be sold around the world, but it can be re-contextualized in new cultural environments.

Cultural Relativism: Studying cultures on their own terms, without bias, and in context

- In exploring cultural dynamics in a corporation, an anthropologist knows not to consider the views of one cultural grouping such as its sales force, more "right" than another group, its marketing department. Instead, the anthropologist works to understand how the two groups interact and how convergent and divergent views may aid or limit their success.
- In understanding why customers do not use a bank's software package, one does not assume the customers are incapable, but instead studies their behavior to understand how to make the software work for them.

Etic/Emic Perspective

The etic perspective is the formal, rational, outsider perspective while the emic view represents the insider or informal understanding

- A Google map is an etic view of a city while an emic map is the one an inhabitant carries in their head while going to shops, work, and other activities.
- In a corporation, the formal organizational structure and work processes are considered etic while the views of workers are seen as emic.
    - At General Motors, corporate asked three different car units to develop a model for a car seat that all three could use (the etic view), while each unit had valid reasons why one car seat design would not work (three different emic perspectives).[6]
    - From its corporate perspective, Adidas considered yoga a sport and marketed it as such (etic perspective) while practitioners viewed it as a lifestyle and well-being choice (emic perspective).[7]

Ethical Guidelines

Anthropological associations in the US have developed their own sets of ethical guidelines. Two examples include those of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology and the Society for Applied Anthropology. At a minimum, these guidelines emphasize

- Doing no harm to participants in anthropological studies
- Demonstrating a concern for humanity as a top priority

Anthropologists are also bound by the ethical guidelines of the organizations and sectors for which they consult or work.

Valuable Anthropological Skills

Participant Observation: Gathering data about the daily life and practices of a group through observation and participation in their activities to the extent possible and as appropriate.

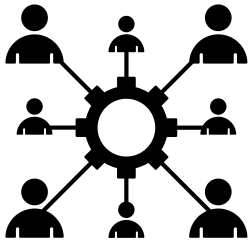
- Recognizing the confusion workers experienced in figuring out how to make a copy on a copy machine. This observation led to the addition of the green copy button on Xerox machines.[8]
- Noticing that in walking through the building of a recently merged company, the offices of the two previously distinct companies were in geographically separated sections of the building—suggesting functions had not been merged.[9]
- Observing families at breakfast to advise a company hoping to make a new breakfast food targeting children. Children like foods that are fun, such as a cereal that turns blue, and parents want health foods that can be eaten as the child walks out the door for school, such as a banana.[10]

Interviewing: A structured conversation where one or more persons ask questions of another person or persons. Selected types of interviews are identified here.

- **Semi-structured Interviews:** Asking the same set of six questions to employees across a federal agency to understand why its recent reorganization was so resisted. This study allowed for analysis of the same topics from workers with diverse experiences with the reorganization.
- **Informal Interviews:** Observing a bank customer navigate the bank's new software program while questioning them about the experience.
- **Critical Incident:** In response to the question, "Can you think of a shopping experience that you would like to talk about?" a shopper describes an experience in a shoe store which led him to change tennis shoe brands away from a brand he had been loyal to for decades.[11]
- **Interrupt or Intercept Interviews:** Following a willing shopper around a store and interrupting the shopper to ask questions about items they picked up.[12]
- **In-depth, Long Form, Conversational Interviews:** Asking a consumer, "What is a car?" to start a conversation about the cultural practices and rituals around cars in order to develop ads for a motor oil company.[13]

Relationship and Network Analysis

- **Relationship Analysis:** Used to understand the informal organization of a business or family ties to a specific consumer project such as collecting a family's history of their use with specific brands to understand brand loyalty through generations. For example, one young man always uses Colgate toothpaste and Ivory soap because his family had always used them.[14]
- **Network Analysis:** Used to discover a structure or pattern in social situations where the network is informal or hidden or where an old, formalized structure is undergoing such a profound change that it no longer provides a functional skeleton for social interaction. For example, asking executives in an organization a) who they regularly talk with about work-related issues and b) who they ask for information when making decisions makes it possible to analyze their answers to understand the pattern of informal organization.[15]



Interaction Analysis: Used to study how humans interact with each other and with objects in their environment. It allows one to look at talk, nonverbal interaction, and the use of artifacts and technologies.

Because activity is so multifaceted and complex, it is impossible to record all of it accurately in notes. For example, to design better office furniture, multiple video cameras were placed in a workplace to observe how employees interacted with their space and what their unmet needs might be.[16]

Virtual Ethnography: Entails using electronic data from sources such as emails, zoom meetings, web research. For example, using interviews, observation in Zoom meetings and analysis of Twitter discourse to understand how entrepreneurs involved in AI development viewed ChatGPT.[17]

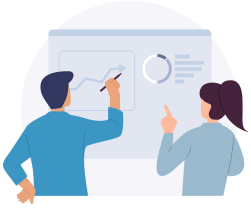
Co-Creation with Study Participants: Involves collaboration with study participants so that they help direct the focus of the data collection, participate in analysis, and draft recommendations. Using technologies such as photovoice or wearables give participants voice.

- In understanding the success of a museum exhibit, viewers were asked to use their cell phones to take photos about displays that interested them, record a narrative about each one, and upload this information to a web platform upon exiting the exhibit.[18]
- Giving participants smart glasses allowed the researcher to gain access to participant's lives in ways that other methods did not.[19]

Co-creating with participants may also involve creating new insights or designing new products. In one example, anthropologists, designers, community members, and end users worked together to co-design an online toolkit for mayors, public health professionals and others to use in understanding community members in health crisis.[20]

Artificial Intelligence Tools: Involves using agentic tools to collect and analyze data. Large language models (LLMs) are excellent at pattern recognition and can be used to develop a code set for analyzing large interview sets when checked for accuracy by humans.[21]

Job Title Key Words



Business/Corporate Anthropologist
Researcher
Consumer, Market or Design Researcher
Educational Consultant or Researcher
UX Researcher
CX or Voice of the Customer Researcher
Brand Manager
Experience or Service Designer
Brand Strategist
Strategist
Organizational Consultant
Change Management Consultant
Culture Specialist
Management Analyst
Business Analyst
Diversity Consultant

Potential Benefits

- Collaborate in interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary teams
- Bring out the voices of consumers and all employees
- Participate in dynamic work situations so that you can see the impact of your work quickly
- Participate in making change happen
- Opportunity to expand your skill base and learn to market yourself

Potential Drawbacks

- Possible job insecurity in a fast-changing work environment
- Need to develop adaptive skills for pivoting from one domain of business anthropology to another
- Frustration when others do not listen to your recommendations
- Proving the return on investment (ROI) on human-centered initiatives and cultural analysis
- Likely need to juggle more than one client or project at a time

General Reading

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