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The Rise of Corporate Anthropology

by Tom Davenport | 9:01 AM November 28, 2007

I have been predicting for years that anthropologists would soon be in demand in the workplace (<http://www.unt.edu/anthropology/article2.htm>), and now this is finally coming to pass. Anthropologists are social scientists who study human behavior through systematic observation. There are a variety of types of anthropologists --physical, archeological, and medical. I am primarily focused here on social and cultural anthropologists, some fraction of which are interested in social relationships in the contemporary workplace. I also believe that sociologists (my own background), social psychologists, and even some behaviorally-oriented economists will be of increasing use in corporate life, but I am particularly bullish on anthropology because of its emphasis on observation.

What's so good about systematic observation? It's the key to knowing what's working and what isn't, how people are using technology and other tools in the course of the workday, how workers extract meaning (or don't) from their work, and so forth. We all make sweeping generalizations about these and many other topics, but we don't really know. Corporate anthropology provides the possibility of actually knowing what's happening and why in organizations.

Of course, it's not easy. Anthropologists can be a pain in the butt. They will want to watch for a long time before coming to a conclusion -- longer than you will deem reasonable. They will question your fundamental assumptions. They will insist on interpreting every little thing. They may even resist your desire to intervene in the work process they've studied, particularly if it means worse working conditions for the workers involved.

Companies are starting to get this again (the world began to get excited about corporate anthropology during the dot com boom, but that bubble burst too). The first firm I knew of to hire anthropologists was Xerox, although it has lost its early lead. Later came Motorola and Intel (although they still have about a 10,000 to 1 ratio of engineers to anthropologists), and many other technology firms. Nokia has placed a big bet on them to understand how people live mobile lives. Herman Miller uses them to help understand how people work in offices and use their furniture. MITRE, a government-funded research lab, is using them to assess how soldiers use technology, among other things. And, speaking of soldiers, the U.S. Army has discovered that anthropologists can be very helpful in building community and nation in Iraq -- although many anthropologists have qualms about helping.

We would be seeing even more corporate anthropology if universities recognized it as a valid field. Many professors still look down upon the discipline. One major exception is Marietta Baba (<http://www.msu.edu/~mbaba/>) at Michigan State, who was a pioneer in recognizing business applications of anthropology and training graduate students.

Yogi Berra once said that you can observe a lot by just watching. Perhaps he had corporate anthropology in mind.

Do you have anthropologists working among you? Do you want any?

Read all of Tom Davenport's "Next Big Thing" posts. (<http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/Davenport>)

Tom Davenport will be speaking at the Think Analytics conference (<http://www.think-analytics.com>) in Miami on February 4th and 5th.