

CHAPTER 16 Culture and Diversity in Business

Anthropologists in the Corporate Jungle

Their special skills in fathoming how humans work are helping more and more companies

by **Christina Le Beau**

When your company's culture is famously dysfunctional because of warring tribes, what can you do but call in an anthropologist?

The idea sounded good to Motorola, which hired one of these professional observers of human behavior two years ago, during what's now regarded as a remarkable turnaround period for the company. In a bid to reinvent itself for the Internet Age—and rev up its lagging businesses—the Chicago-based company was acquiring small startups with proven tech knowhow. But one problem quickly surfaced: The startups' founders and employees didn't necessarily fit into a culture that was more competitive than cooperative, more focused on engineering than marketing, more homogenous than diverse.

SLOWLY DOES IT. Suddenly, "trying to merge cultures from within and outside became a priority," says Pat Canavan, Motorola's senior vice-president and director for global-organization development, who hired anthropologist Kath Fell after more traditional approaches like training failed. "Before, efforts had been more oriented to the quick fix," says Canavan. "But when you're talking about a culture merge, it does take a long time."

So Fell went to work, sitting in on project meetings, asking questions—and listening. Among other things, she helped engineering and marketing folks communicate better with each other. "They come from very different disciplines—one, engineering, is very internally focused, and the other, marketing, is very externally focused," says Fell. "I had to show them they were talking different languages, even if they were both speaking English."

Fell also persuaded executives to reinstate a set of employee councils for women, African Americans, and other groups. "Her work led to a much stronger commitment on the part of senior executives to listen more openly and be role models," says Canavan.

No one can put a number on it, but the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology, the trade group for anthropologists working outside of academia, reports a significant anecdotal increase in the number of anthropologists, sociologists, and other ethnographers who study the way people work. The practice has been around for years—companies enlisted social scientists back in the 1930s to analyze productivity and working conditions—but today's constant change has boosted demand for insights into what makes workers tick.

DIVERSE WORKFORCE. Mergers and acquisitions often bring together vastly different corporate cultures. And globalization means that your co-workers may be several time zones away. On top of all that, e-commerce and new technologies have forever raised the bar on how quickly business has to get done. Add to that a tight job market that puts employees in the driver's seat, and it's clear why companies are turning to researchers who are uniquely qualified to understand people.

"Knowledge capital is just walking out the door," says anthropologist Patricia Sachs, who worked with Nynex (now part of Verizon Communications) before starting Social Solutions, a consulting firm in Half Moon Bay, Calif. Workers today have little tolerance for anything that hinders progress, so companies are acutely aware of the need to make their workplaces highly functional.

Tuning in to workplace vibes can go a long way toward retaining good people, notes Karen Cates, a professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management. "It's a wonderful step—incorporating the human factor into the equation."

Most workplace anthropologists start off as university professors, but a growing number are preparing for the field's business side from the get-go, aided by specialized programs like those at Wayne State University in Detroit. That program, which offers an anthropology degree with a concentration in business and industrial anthropology, started with two students in 1990 and now schools 25, about a third of this year's graduating class.

SEEING RESULTS. The lure for anthropologists? "It's much easier to have your research make a difference when you work in a business environment," says Marilyn Whalen, a sociologist at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center who previously taught at the

University of Oregon. Now, she studies everything from how people collaborate to how their workspaces are configured.

In one project, Whalen and her team rode with service technicians to examine ways to better manage their workload. As a result, Xerox organized workshops in which technicians from across the country could share tips for maximizing efficiency. “It’s really important to us to have what we do make a difference in the company,” she says.

Employing ethnographic techniques such as on-site observation, in-depth interviews, and videotaping (hidden and not), researchers like Whalen learn what workers might never acknowledge—or even realize—on their own. Take what happened when researchers followed a group of Intel internal-support managers this past summer. “These managers weren’t communicating with each other, just with their staffs. So they’d be working on similar projects, but taking them in different directions,” says Emily Brelsford, one of several ethnographers who worked on the project in Portland, Ore. Once anthropologists pointed this out, the managers reinstated department meetings that they had previously canned, and their various projects started moving in sync.

BONUS BENEFITS. Sometimes, research can have unintended effects. About five years ago, Xerox’

Whalen worked on a project at the company’s call center in Lewisville, Tex. She and her colleagues assembled teams of workers to cross-train each other in handling various calls—everything from answering questions about invoices to following up on past-due accounts. The idea, hatched after the researchers observed how workers naturally learned from each other, was to craft a training program that would be integrated into the workplace, not squirreled away in a classroom. The cross-training worked, but something else emerged as well. Once co-workers realized it wasn’t so easy to “just sit there and take a service call,” the mood shifted. “The self-confidence of people coming out of that organization changed dramatically,” says Rick Hawkins, a 19-year Xerox employee who was a customer-service rep at the time. Employees who might otherwise have resigned themselves to life as a call-center rep suddenly saw value in their skills and started looking for more rewarding opportunities. Now a marketing analyst, Hawkins is one of many call-center employees who have since earned promotions to other jobs. “Every person who came out of there benefited,” Hawkins says. “I don’t think [Xerox] had any idea it would happen like that.”

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