

Business Anthropology as Collaboration

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Abstract

Business Anthropology, which uses an anthropological lens to examine problems in design, technology, and business, was born 33 years ago. The entire trajectory of Business Anthropology reveals a growing collaboration both among multiple disciplines and multiple sectors that was not so much centrally directed as an organic, spontaneous growth arising out of the unique situation of Detroit in the 1980s yet finding resonance in numerous industries and numerous countries around the world. This unique situation included de- and re-industrialization, a thriving arts community with original contributions to world music, yet also racial divisions and white flight which continue to handicap the city 50 years after the 1967 riots.

The objective of this paper is to trace the growth of Business Anthropology, from its earliest intimations in *The Social System of a Modern Factory* through the beginnings of a program at Wayne State, the EPIC conference, the Business Anthropology Matters! initiative at the annual meetings of the AAA in November 2017, and the current situation where Business Anthropology programs are found in the US, Mexico, Spain, Italy, France, the UK, Denmark, China, Japan, Thailand, and other countries, and where employment growth of anthropologists in tech, design, and manufacturing companies far outpaces growth of academic employment. The future of Anthropology in business presents the discipline with a crossroads, a choice between institutional subservience on the one hand vs. using the anthropological lens and perspective to enlarge and humanize “business.”

Business Anthropology, however, is far more than simply opportunistic ethnography, the finding of field sites in a world in which indigenous villagers are rapidly disappearing. Business Anthropology tackles some of the central theoretical problems in anthropology, including the nature of culture, the formation of identity, and the contribution of discourse to social cohesion. Business anthropology also tackles some cutting-edge issues in business, including corporate social responsibility and the tension or dynamism between large institutions (including but not exclusive to) big business and grass roots organizations.

Central to this, however, is an openness to collaboration, a management of the institutional, epistemological, and cultural boundaries that separate disciplines. Typically, the institutional and cultural barriers are more difficult to tackle than intellectual boundaries, yet an awareness of their existence is a major step in overcoming them. Through a series of case studies this paper describes the growth of Business Anthropology and the steps that were taken to overcome the institutional, cultural, and intellectual barriers to collaboration.