



Cultivating Opportunities

Business Anthropology Matters

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Enriching change through business anthropology.

The discipline of anthropology is changing through a steady rise in anthropological practice. A network of anthropologists interested in the many facets of anthropological practice—including research, employment, consulting, and education—has formed and welcomes your participation. It is known as the Business Anthropology Community.

The Business Anthropology Community's goal is to advance the field of anthropology—in education, research, and work.

Emergence of practice domains and distinctiveness

Anthropologists are no longer **only** studying in community settings, but study organizational and consumer culture. Design anthropology is flourishing and domains such as entrepreneurship, organizational culture and change, and ethics of practice are increasingly prevalent.

Among all anthropologists, practitioners have made significant contributions to much of this recent research. They have various roles in firms, non-profits, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies. Their experiences as organizational “natives” uniquely position them to contribute to scholarship. At the same time, their jobs typically require application of anthropological theory and methods, problem solving, and advocacy.

Business anthropology examined through SWOT analysis

When AAA issued its 2017 Call for Papers, it contained no mention of the work anthropologists do *in* or *for* organizations. In response, both of us—along with approximately 10 practicing and academically-based anthropologists—helped to launch the Business Anthropology Community. Some of us are seasoned anthropologists and others much newer to the discipline. Some of us work in positions in the public, private, and non-profit sectors, while others work or study in the academy.

Among ourselves, we conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to understand the business anthropology landscape in relation to the broader discipline and, in particular, the changes it is facing. SWOT is a heuristic device that was initially developed by the Stanford Research Institute in the 1960s to understand corporate planning and create a process for managing change (Humphrey 2005). Since then, it has been used to help develop strategy in many fields and has been suggested as a tool for anthropologists on the job market (Nolan 2017).

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fertile domain for applying <i>and</i> developing theory• Significant growth in scholarship due to increase in articles, books, videos, new journal, conferences• Pedagogically-valuable ethics' discussion• Conduit to cross-cultural understanding• Positive role in society through innovative products and services, marketing eco-friendly products and social causes, organizational effectiveness, sustainability, social impact, problem solving• Students finding internships, while many graduates hired for jobs, contract work, and consulting• Network connections and discussions encourage via list serves and blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of domain clarity since field expands beyond private sector into organizations generally• Little knowledge of domain in academia among faculty and students since infrequently taught• Ideological opposition by many faculty and students to teaching or learning about domain• Ph.D. student training largely focused on academic employment, for which there are few jobs• Lost opportunities to learn to apply anthropological training to real-world problems, and to raise awareness of anthropology's relevance• Some inability to publish all work due largely to intellectual property and reputation concerns
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scholarship continuing to show promise• Growing faculty concerns about employment prospects for their students• Benefits to academic depts. through increasing enrollment; class projects, internships, and employment for students; faculty consulting• Practitioners, including alumni and adjuncts, are often able to provide support to academic depts.• Rise in partnerships with business schools (e.g., cross-listed courses, collaborative projects)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aspects of anthropology's history of applied work used to justify devaluation of anthropological application and practice• Belief among many faculty and students that academic depts. emphasizing theory and basic research are higher status than those balancing theory and application• Expressions of resistance to practitioners characterized by indifference, lack of openness, ignorance, and sometimes hostility

Figure 1: SWOT Perceptions of Business Anthropology by Practicing and Academic Anthropologists Active during the Business Anthropology Community's Formation.

Figure 1 shows some key findings based on our perceptions and experiences. The strengths and opportunities reveal business anthropology's pragmatism that typically incorporates both theory and application, rather than only application. It is oriented to better explanations of cultural phenomena and focused problem solving on organizational and community issues. Numerous strengths include the growth of scholarship resulting from anthropological practice, using the anthropological toolkit to "do some good" (thereby expanding beyond the principle "do no harm"), and initial engagement in anthropological practice through internships. We note the increasing worry expressed by professors about employment prospects for their own students (trained for academia but for whom there are insufficient positions). At the same time, we see more anthropologists accessing anthropological networks for support, employment, and consulting, and creating bridges to business schools.

The resistance to business anthropology illustrated in the SWOT is striking. Words such as "opposition," "devaluation," and "hostility" appear under weaknesses and threats. Some in academia have been ideologically opposed to business anthropology, others possess little knowledge of it, and still others exhibit a strong preference for academic over professional anthropology. Those tendencies have had a long-term negative impact on the discipline, including shortchanging the value of the practice and the relation between theory and practice, loss of anthropology's potential to affect organizations and communities positively, and unhelpful status distinctions within the discipline (i.e., the belief by many that those employed in the academy hold higher status compared to practitioners).

Yet, each of these weaknesses and threats is actually an opportunity to identify and address misperceptions. The Business Anthropology Community's purpose and goals emphasize the importance of engagement in meaningful dialogue; we have created a discussion forum on the businessanthro.com website.

The SWOT analysis identifies employment as one of the most pressing issues facing anthropology. It is in anthropology's interest to offer vibrant programs that can maintain and, better still, increase enrollment. Many of the 30+ [COPAA](#) (Consortium of Practicing and Applied Anthropology) programs are spearheading ways of preparing students, particularly MA candidates, for meaningful employment in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors ([Briody and Nolan 2013](#)). Word spreads as their students find work; internship and employment networks expand. By contrast, many other anthropology departments, including those at flagship universities, are unable to help the majority of their graduates find work following graduation. There are too few academic positions for the number of graduating PhD students and too little emphasis on collaboration and solving practical problems ([Ginsberg 2016a](#); [Price 2001](#)).

On the other hand, employers are increasing aware of the value of ethnography and an anthropological perspective, particularly in marketing, user experience, and design (Denny and Sunderland 2014). Almost two-fifths of non-academic employers were in the private sector and/or consulting (Ginsberg 2016b). Moreover, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics expects job opportunities for anthropologists to grow in business and consulting. Some US business schools have been hiring anthropologists, expanding anthropology's reach into another discipline and providing opportunities for cross-disciplinary work in corporations.

A desire to partner

The new Business Anthropology Community is open to anyone interested in

- integrating application into student learning experiences
- tying theory and practice together in scholarship
- identifying employment and consulting strategies
- establishing connections with anthropologists in the network
- engaging in discussions about contemporary issues

This community is a hub of information sharing, communication, reciprocity, and excitement. Student volunteers have played an integral role in its formation, generously applying their technical skills in website design, social media, marketing, and graphic arts. Their vitality and hard work, along with the leadership-group efforts, reflect a commitment to inclusivity, openness, and disciplinary impact.

Too often, "camps," "silos," and other barriers get in the way of communication, exchange, and useful interaction. The Business Anthropology Community's goal is to advance the field of anthropology—in education, research, and work. Building more bridges between theory and practice and reducing perceptions of difference between academics and practitioners can help strengthen and unify the discipline. Let's encourage some conversation starters, shall we? We have nothing to lose and much to gain. To add your voice to the conversation, visit businessanthro.com.

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