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Ready for Business: An Anthropology Graduate as Change Management Consultant

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Abstract

This paper is a historical, confessional and ethnographic account of a former change management consultant in a global consulting firm who later went on to complete a PhD in social anthropology. Locating herself as both the researcher and informant, the writer gives her 'native' account of one model of management consulting that was based on a proprietary 'method'. She notes how her undergraduate training in anthropology made her a more effective consultant as she tried to make sense of the culture of various client organizations for the specific purpose of designing and developing training materials. By mapping the ways in which anthropological theory and methodology could be aligned to meet the business goals of her clients, the paper aims to persuade both prospective employers and students alike to see how anthropology can be applied effectively in the business world.

Keywords

Management consulting, undergraduate training

Introduction

Anthropologists face many obstacles when attempting to study business organizations particularly when it involves participant observation over a long period.[1] Van der Waal (2009) and Moeran (2009) have documented the difficulty with gaining access. Nader (1969) has noted the challenges to 'studying "up"' when researchers are considered to be of a lower social status than those they are studying. Perhaps tongue-in-cheek, Chapman (2001) has proposed that researchers simply do not bother to tell organizations concerned that they are being researched, although this is now unlikely to be approved by research ethics committees. Riemer (1977), following the admonition by C. Wright Mills to 'learn to use [our] life experience in [our] intellectual work' to 'continually … examine and interpret it' (1959:196), advocated the use of serendipitous and personal circumstances to conduct 'opportunistic' research. This paper is retrospectively 'opportunistic', written by an armchair anthropologist who, due to health and family reasons, had been homebound for some time. By reflecting on – that is, continuing to examine and interpret – my own position in a global company, I am attempting an exercise in 'studying up, down, sideways and through' (Bowman 2009:1), with the objective to add to earlier discussion in this journal on 'what is business anthropology'.

Alan and Josephine Smart (in Moeran 2012:282) alluded to the difficulty anthropologists face in gaining access 'to executive meetings and industrial secrets that define their competitive edge in a dog-eat-dog world of global business'. As an employee, not only was I trained to understand how a proprietary and therefore 'secretive' system works (I will refer to this as 'Method T' in this paper), I practised its application on several projects. I was therefore able to 'study sideways' in the sense of being able to examine the 'practices of [my] peers' (Bowman 2009:7). It is also worth noting that, given the level of impression management in this business (see below), consultants are used to dealing with clients and other 'outsiders' who work alongside them. Anthropologists would find it quite a challenge (but not impossible) to get past this constant façade within the timeframe normally permitted by academics to conduct research. As such, this case study presents a unique perspective of how one type of management consulting is 'done', and how anthropology training had a positive effect on it. By demonstrating the huge overlap between business and anthropological research methods, I aim to persuade anthropology graduates to consider working in business, and to convince employers that anthropology graduates are ideally placed to work in any industry that requires making sense of culture when a group of people work together.

As an historical account, this paper bears all the shortcomings of relying on recall. Even though it represents a memorable period of my life

[1] The author would like to thank Brunel University for access to their library, the editor Brian Moeran and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, as well as Christina Garsten and Elizabeth Briody for their kind encouragement.

(1989-1991), as I had no intention of writing about it then, no notes were taken. It is possible that, with selective memory, the most traumatic and trivial bits of memory had been forever erased, leaving only the more 'middle-of-the road' tales that one dares to recount to strangers. I did not see myself as 'entering the field', so no theoretical slant was adopted. It was simply a matter of making a living, with all the attendant complexities of managing my finances, deciding on where to live, planning my career progression, playing the office politics, and so forth. Perhaps such methodological naïveté could count, retrospectively, as a version of grounded theory.

While this paper is autobiographical, it does not fall neatly within the genres of autoethnography or 'anthropology at home'. Clearly it is not reasonable to claim this is a study of my 'own people' (Hayano 1979:99) as it is not possible to be born a consultant. Neither did I make use of myself as an insider to direct research. Rather, I am giving 'authentic first-hand knowledge of the culture' (Reed-Danahay 1997:7) of working as a management consultant as if I were giving an account to an anthropologist. Thus, by blurring the lines 'between analyst and subject of inquiry' (Maurer and Mainwaring 2012:181), in being both the subject and researcher, I strive to tell a 'realist' and 'confessional' tale (Van Maanen 2011). The twist is that, despite my not being born into this group, I was a 'native' insofar as there was no 'alter-native'; it was my life.

Also, this account is by a woman who trained in a Singapore university and then worked there for several years before coming to live and work in the UK, during which time she completed her PhD. It was first drafted after I had lived in the UK for 20 years and discovered, as Ulf Hannerz (in Moeran 2012:255) noted, that many academic anthropologists 'have fairly general anti-business inclinations'. This view had clearly been instilled in several British anthropology graduates I met who said that they had *never* considered working in business organizations 'for moral reasons', implying that it was immoral for anthropology graduates to ply their trade in profit-making, capitalist and commercial concerns. In contrast, sociology and anthropology graduates in Singapore did (do) not face any stigma on entering the world of commerce. At no time did I ponder the morality of working for a profit-driven company and its big business clients as this was what the majority of graduates do: find a job, any job. Only on one occasion did I have to confront the issue of ethics when we were told that we might be landing an account for a large hamburger chain. I made it clear that on the grounds of my personal environmental concerns – not as an anthropology graduate – I could not work for this client. My company did not win the account and I remained in post.

Anthropology in business

This anti-business influence is obvious when we look at 'careers' pages in British anthropology department websites. We see graduates gravitating towards the public sector, non-government organizations, health organizations and museums. British anthropology graduates also work in the private sector in journalism, public relations, advertising, marketing and human relations. There are not many references to graduates in the big 'City' firms, in business management and/or design, product and management consulting. We know, though, that there are post-PhD consultants who dispense advice in areas concerning mainly or solely with their doctoral research backgrounds (for example, as expert witnesses in asylum cases and in development agencies, see Spencer *et al* 2009), or even in commercial environments in more recent years. It does not appear that graduates with a first degree in anthropology[2] – the focus of this paper – have been moving into business consulting. If they have, they have not been forthcoming in notifying their old university departments of this.

This anti-business stance is possibly due to the particular trajectory of anthropology in the UK where business is very much on the periphery of anthropology, and vice-versa. Mills (2008) documented how the pioneers of British anthropology at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) resisted the opportunity to align the discipline with business when courted by leading industrialists in post-war Britain. Business anthropology is also conspicuous by its absence in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Anthropology* published in association with the Association of Social Anthropologists of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth (Fardon *et al* 2012). In her keynote address to a 2012 RAI conference, Tett recounted how a colleague at the *Financial Times* 'derided anthropology as being "rather hippy"' (Lee 2012:27), implying that anthropology graduates are typically viewed by people in commerce as being concerned only with the exotic and are not terribly grounded in the pragmatic and mundane necessity for economic survival. Few British employers – apart from the most enlightened ones in more recent years – actively seek out anthropology graduates. Anthropology graduates and private business employers see each other as being too 'other-worldly'.

In *The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, Deal and Kennedy (1988:5) note how a second-generation Proctor started working for Proctor & Gamble 'at the lowest level of menial factory labor', even to the point of eating lunch with the other workers while sitting on the factory floor. Similarly new IBM high flyers were set to answering customer complaints to ensure that as future leaders they understood that their business thrives on the satisfaction of customers (Deal and Kennedy 1988:49). They might not have been labelled as such, but these were effectively participant observers, demonstrating that anthropology (specifically ethnography) was being practised in many places outside the academy.

Although the term 'ritual' may not be used, rituals have been observed to police behaviour in schools. For example, young children are made aware that if they behave and/or put in the effort they would be given a prize in a

[2] I use 'anthropology graduates' to refer to graduates with an undergraduate degree while 'anthropologists' refer to those with PhDs.

special ceremony at the end of the day, the week or the year. Ritual and ceremony help them to identify where the boundaries are and also to what they can aspire. The use of the anthropological concept of 'ritual' to view certain practices helps in business management. There are rituals at retirement and when employees leave. Deal and Kennedy (1988:73) warn that employers who tamper with transition rituals such as the 'exit memo' (or these days, email) risk 'uncertainty and confusion' amongst the employees left behind.

Yet many mundane situations with a cross-cultural element would benefit from evidence-based input or theoretical insights from anthropologists. When users squat on toilet seats – leaving footprints – why are printed notices admonishing or imploring them to refrain from squatting ineffective? While sitters wonder 'How could anyone be so unhygienic?' squatters cannot understand how anyone could sit – make skin contact – with a toilet seat that has been used by innumerable unknown strangers. It is only through appreciating how 'sitters' and 'squatters' have different cultural yardsticks in measuring 'cleanliness' that we are able to devise appropriate strategies to resolve this problem.

We know from existing literature (notably Baba 2006) that business anthropology has long been a thriving sub-field 'in corporate America' (Bate 1997:1149) and, although it is often conflated with organizational anthropology, it is growing in parts of Europe (van Marrewijk 2010), and in Scandinavian countries in particular (Moeran 2011, Krause-Jensen 2011). Yet only three British anthropology departments offer courses related to business and organization, and it appears that when graduates (with or without PhDs) are absorbed into industries they are generally 'reticent about their background in anthropology', thus rendering the 'everyday, but very substantial, impact of anthropology hidden and invisible' (Lee 2012:28). As a result, 'organizations still do not recognize the competencies of business anthropologists' (Van Marrewijk 2010:35). Also, the way anthropologists 'who choose to return to academia after a stint in industry are likely to "resurface" in departments of design, business or indeed any number of different disciplines, but not anthropology' (Lee 2012:28), might go some way in answering the question by Orvar Löfgren (in Moeran 2012:262) as to why the 'dialogue' between 'traditional academic research and applied studies by consultants and business ethnographers' is so weak.

It is particularly urgent within Britain to bridge the chasm between academic anthropologists and their students, on one hand, and on the other, the world of business, with the potential of hiring young anthropology graduates because the new tuition fees regime means that employability is a major concern. At the close of a 2013 'A' Level student conference (organized by the Brunel Department of Anthropology in Greater London and the Royal Anthropological Institute) the only question from the floor was, 'What can you do with an anthropology degree?' Due to the peculiar way university education is funded in the UK, if anthropology graduates are perceived to be unemployable potential students would gravitate to other courses and the funding for anthropology departments would, correspondingly, decline.

Stumbling in

The following is an ethnographic account of my experience of being a change management consultant in what was then one of the 'Big Six' accountancy firms. My journey into the world of management consulting really began years before I went to university. At the age of 16 I wrote a column for the only local teenage magazine in Singapore. After my 'A' Levels, this paved the way to a copywriting job at what was then the fourth highest billing advertising agency in the world. Despite some early success in advertising, including winning industry awards, there was growing unease as I observed that non-graduate colleagues were being passed over for promotion in favour of inexperienced graduates. So I applied to go to university, where I eventually majored in Sociology in a department which required all students to study Social Anthropology as well. I always chose courses which required students to conduct supervised fieldwork. By the fourth year in the Honours degree course (which only the top final-year students were invited to join), I was engaging in fieldwork for the third time. This was followed by a Master's degree (by research) which was partly funded by writing a social analysis column for a Sunday newspaper and teaching in the department. After a month of participant observation in a garment factory I realized that the 'real world' was far removed from my very comfortable but rather insular experience of research, writing and teaching. I opted to leave academia at this point instead of proceeding with my PhD, with a view to returning to academia at some point in the future.

Management consulting did not feature on my career radar. The word 'consultant' conjured up pictures of the hospital consultant with years of experience. How could I possibly become a 'consultant' in the business world? I was not an expert. I was not even a business graduate. However the job advertisement that caught my eye clearly dispelled any preconceived notion that business experience was necessary, stating instead that the major requirement was for good spoken and written English and a readiness to learn and adapt. The company promised comprehensive training for the right candidates. I applied.

The interviews

The first screening interview was with two female staff members who explained that they were about to start a new CMS (Change Management Services) practice group in Singapore parallel to the IT (Information Technology) practice, as part of the MCD (Management Consulting Division), and they already had their first client lined up. A project team was being put together and some experienced CMS colleagues from American and Australian offices were arriving to help establish the practice. This 'borrowing' of consultants from different countries was standard company practice. They were recruiting local consultants to ensure the posterity of the group. Was I a good team player? Was I willing to work long hours? Was I prepared to travel? A few days later I had a 'full office': a full day interview with four male members of staff representing the different levels of consultants: Staff, Senior, Manager and Partner.[3]

As the local CMS was not yet in operation my full office was conducted by IT staff. The Manager checked that I had indeed completed my Masters research. Then a Staff consultant showed me round the office (including the 'pig pen' where consultants were coding, hunched over their computers), explaining the different functions of the offices. He was joined by a Senior (consultant) and they took me out to lunch. Lunch was an integral part of the interview process because lunch was an integral part of team working as well as client relations. Over lunch, therefore, they tried to establish whether I would fit into the 'culture' of the company, as well as answer my queries about working patterns. Apparently I managed my chopsticks competently enough. We returned to the office and I was asked to wait. It was after I had subsequently taken prospective staff to interview lunches that I realized that a report on whether I would fit into their 'company culture' was being cobbled together by my interviewers while I waited.

The interview with the Partner went very well until he said, looking at my university transcript, 'But Miss Lee, we need people who are good at English and you only got a "D" in English Literature.' At this point I presented my portfolio of advertising, newspaper columns and other published freelance work, and explained how studying English Literature formally at university killed my interest and so I dropped the subject instead of majoring in it after my first year. The Partner flicked through the folio, put it down and then asked when I could start. He instructed the administrative staff to send in the papers and I was hired on the spot.

"Androids do not totter"

My first day at work happened two days before the agreed start date. I received a phone call asking if I was able to attend a launch meeting with the client team, even though I was not officially employed. My gut instinct was that it would be a career limiting move to refuse. My problem was that I owned nothing in my wardrobe that seemed suitable for meeting clients. At my interviews I had been assured that I was not expected to face clients during the induction period. I had not been paid and did not have the money to buy a new outfit. (In the end, I wore a mid-calf length skirt with a floral pattern, given to me by a friend who worked in the UK and a light-weight knitted top, one of the many hand-me-downs that friends and family were prone to give me. I never wore these items to the office again. See below.) My

[3] This structure has since been changed to Analyst, Consultant, Manager, Senior Manager, Senior Executive.

concern over unsuitable clothes, however, quickly evaporated when I noticed within the client team a familiar figure who just happened to be my 'A' Level Biology teacher. This was the person who taught me how to use a binocular microscope, identify the entrails of a cockroach, calculate the magnification of my scientific drawings, and other laboratory skills. I was now her 'consultant' and I was to 'advise' her. It was a role reversal I least expected.

My first few weeks at work were focused on 'green books'.[4] These were comprehensive in-house training materials that all new hires had to work through. Five new CMS recruits were hired at about the same time, but only two were in my project team. This first batch of CMS colleagues came from computer science and natural science backgrounds. Subsequent hires included graduates from a wider range of disciplines (including law and business). 'Professional support' (the administrative division) gathered us together with the newly hired IT consultants to instruct us on local office procedures and the importance of managing our impressions which, even then, brought to life Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

We were reminded to be formally dressed at all times, even when no client meetings were scheduled, as we could be called upon to meet a client at short notice. For men, the dress code was light coloured shirt, darker coloured trousers, socks which had to be darker in colour than the trousers and black shoes. They must never, on any occasion, wear a yellow tie – for no apparent reason other than the American managing director had decreed yellow ties were taboo. For women, no 'outlandish' clothes (short skirts and low necklines) were allowed and we were told of an ex-colleague who was sent home to change because her attire was deemed unsuitable. Women must never wear trousers, shorts or even 'culottes' (divided skirts), and should instead wear dresses or preferably skirt-suits in muted colours and of an appropriate length. This dress code was so strict that on occasions when my project team had to move to new offices (involving the transfer of filing cabinets, computers, the lot), the women were still not allowed to wear anything other than skirts, because there could be clients of other project teams on site. Women were encouraged to wear scarves or other fabric accessories around their necks to mimic the neck-ties worn by men. Our American director had also banned women from wearing sheer black tights because they were (in his view) 'sluttish'. Very high heels (anything above two inches) were also banned because '"Androids" (as staff at this company were nicknamed) do not totter'.

Moreover, to maintain the image that we were always hard at work, we were to be at our desks by 8.30 am, no matter what time we left the office the night before, just in case a client phoned. This was the era before the mobile telephone and the pool of super-efficient receptionists (some of whom were probably better paid than the consultants) was a significant part of our impression management. They were always at the front of our Goffmanesque

[4] All book- and paper-based procedures have since been digitized.

stage, and it was to these receptionists that we reported our movements (for example, when calls were not to be put through while at meetings, or when we were out at client meetings, with our expected time of return). We were used to visitors – suppliers, caterers, our own clients and those of other teams – wandering around our offices and only on very rare occasions did we let our guard down as far as our 'performance' as a consultant was concerned.[5] This poses an additional challenge to anthropologists who wish to study management consultants, as noted in the introduction.

Singapore staff had relative freedom when eating outside the office, compared to some American colleagues who reported how their local Managing Partners had banned them from eating at fast food chains, possibly because this projected the 'wrong' image. When eating with clients more upmarket eateries were chosen, unless the client chose otherwise. However, there were definite boundaries as to what we could talk about over meals. Client matters were never discussed in any public space and clients understood that this was necessary to maintain confidentiality. Working on and discussing client matters on public transport were forbidden, although we often worked when we were being chauffeured in private vehicles.

Training CMS consultants

As much of the fledgling CMS work in this office concerned 'knowledge transfer', an understanding of instructional design was imperative. Apart from 'green books', my team and I were given additional training by the American project manager who held a postgraduate degree in instructional design. This required us to put in place a structure to help learners learn. It assumed that people learn in a linear fashion ('learning hierarchies'). We were introduced to Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom *et al* 1956) of the different types of learning (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and learning how to phrase learning objectives using the appropriate language, depending on the category of knowledge. Thus, learners might be asked to 'list' parts of a computer to demonstrate 'knowledge', 'explain' how each part fitted with the others to show 'comprehension', and 'input' data into a system to demonstrate 'application'. Only after we had categorised the different types of knowledge that needed teaching were we able to start writing coursework, role plays and exercises, bearing in mind tools that we could use (such as mnemonics) to ensure that learners progressed systematically towards their terminal (final) learning objectives.

With our first project being a certificate course the standard of testing had to be rigorous. As an example of the 'comprehensive training' promised, I was despatched to an external course provider to learn generic principles of

[5] There were occasions when we were taken away on 'division' and later 'practice meetings', secluded from any possible intrusion by clients. This was about the only time during which we were able to, *en masse*, 'let our hair down'.

testing, matching the type of knowledge to be learned (as per Bloom's taxonomy) with the relevant tests to be written. With this training under my belt I became more confident in talking with our clients, often walking them through every single concept that needed to be taught and tested to make sure that the course materials complied with the standards set by the client organizations.

What is management consulting?

Fincham and Clark (2002:2) admit that 'defining' the nature of management consultancy is a 'contentious task' as this area is 'constantly transforming', partly because of the 'steady flow of hype, flavour-of-the-month management concepts' (Krause-Jensen 2011:267). In my experience, while consultants were often hired on the basis of past experience, it was not always because they were experts in any specific business area. The real solutions had to come from the clients. This is logical. If Company A pays Consultant X a lot of money to resolve a problem, they will not be happy if Consultant X then charges Company B a huge amount of money for the exact solution that has in fact been paid by Company A to develop. There are legal and ethical issues here concerning intellectual property, trade secrecy and confidentiality. Our company approach conforms to that of Clegg *et al* (2004:31) who assert that the task of the consultant is to 'chart the contours best able to deliver [better performance in economic terms], to advise the misfit [between structure and performance], and generally assist in the achievement of better performance'. As such, consultants merely 'facilitate an organization in being able to redefine and reframe the ideas and visions that inform its existence' (Clegg *et al* 2004:32). Rather than acting as the medical consultant who decides on what is the correct diagnosis and then prescribes the treatment, it is more accurate to think of the management consultant as a midwife who delivers a set of solutions that they have previously empowered the client to develop.

Instantly we can see how and why projects would fail when a client (whether a failing government department or corporation) thinks that, by calling in some expensive consultants, it could sit back idly and simply let the consultants do all the hard work and, in due course, expect their solutions in a neat package, a case illustrated perhaps by Howard Becker (in Moeran 2012:250) who met a CEO who boasted of how an 'expert on culture' had helped them 'work out what the new culture would be and how to explain it to the employees who would thenceforth enact it'. We often explained to potential clients that any consultant that promises a 'sitting back' approach with vaguely-worded goals is to be avoided like the plague. It was important that we set definable targets (KPO's and KPI's: Key Performance Objectives and Key Performance Indicators) and clear deadlines because this was the only way for us – and the clients – to measure how well we were progressing.

Therefore, when corporate clients paid top dollar for our services, they were actually paying for the experience, expertise and promise of keeping within the boundaries of our company's own 'methodologies', and the assurance that the process was moved along at the most efficient pace and in the agreed direction. If consultants were able to boast about expertise, it was that they had gained the expertise to use a certain set of skills or a software programme, or simply in project management. For example, my colleagues and I used a particular software package to build computer-based training (CBT) and interactive video disk (IVD) training. Through sheer practice, we had learned numerous short cuts to speed up the process. The company was then able to 'sell' this ability as a specific expertise. The company 'methodologies' also featured numerous checks and balances that I am not allowed to talk about, but these proprietary 'frameworks of understanding', as I prefer to call them, was what the clients were paying for, not the specific expertise of the individual consultants.

Until recently it was not possible to discuss these proprietary frameworks, but readers can now refer to various brochures widely available on the internet[6] (as free downloads) showing a 'Method' that *approximates* the 'Method T' I used. It shows the project phases as: Plan – Analyze – Design – Build – Test – Deploy. Within each phase there are very specific questions that need to be answered by the client and very specific deliverables to be produced by certain deadlines by the consultant (these details are not in the brochure). Interestingly, a design company advertises its own very similar approach as: Understand – Conceive – Evolve – Prove – Apply.[7]

'Method T'

Plan

As an entry-level junior consultant I played no part in the Plan phase, which was usually overseen by a Partner and Manager who had a substantial amount of experience in project management. Together with the leader/representative of the client company, they worked out the new contract terms based on detailed data gleaned from past projects across the world. Then the project teams were formed, taking into consideration all the skills-sets required and the availability of staff. Being an international company, teams often included staff from overseas offices who either had related expertise and/or wanted the experience of working in Singapore. Local staff were drawn from teams that were close to finishing or had finished their latest project. Given that we had a 'firm-wide culture' where we used the same terminology and methodologies, all of us were expected to make a seamless transition from one project to another, crossing national borders where necessary, as soon as possible. Members of the consultant project team (Partner, Manager, Senior and Consultant) were mirrored by

[6] http://www.accenture.com/SiteCollectionDocuments/PDF/Accenture_Delivery_Methods_and_Tools_for_SAP_Final.pdf (accessed 8 April 2013).

[7] http://www.pdd.co.uk/approach/ (accessed 27 October 2013).

members of the client project team, from the most senior to the most junior levels (compare Clegg, et al 2004:38).

At the start of a project, a combined launch meeting (like the one I was summoned to attend) was held. Sometimes team members still working on other projects also took part, but they were not expected to start until their current projects were completed. The leading members representing the client and consultants made short speeches to lay the groundwork for what could be months of very close working relationships. There was often some food involved: biscuits provided in-house at our office, finger foods provided by an outside caterer eaten in the conference room either at our own or the client's office, or a sit-down meal in a private room at a conveniently located restaurant. The emphasis was on privacy to ensure confidentiality about the project. Anderson (2005:125) noted how in Chinese society 'no important deal can be concluded without food and drink'. Launch meetings are not examples of such events as the deal would have already been signed. While these food events gave us first opportunities to meet and understand how our clients ticked, the aim was not to 'bond' as a team or even an exercise in 'sharing food'. While 'sharing' implies a degree of sacrifice on one's part and therefore a degree of reciprocity is expected, team meal events are usually charged back to the client or to an allotted 'expenses' account. None of the meal participants was personally out-of-pocket. Bonding could, theoretically, had been achieved over a round of golf, or a game of Monopoly. As time was limited, eating was chosen instead as it was functional: we all needed to eat. So a launch meeting meal was simply a matter of pragmatic multi-tasking. Significantly, for the consultant role to work, the client had to remain at a suitable, and suitably safe, distance.

Analyze

After such launch meetings, team members set out on the critical Analyze phase. This was where being the well-trained anthropology graduate came in useful. Consultants were, where possible, taken on a tour of the shop floor (or clean room, or office floor) to observe the different processes first-hand, and we were given access to members of staff who had been long enough on the job to tell us *exactly* what was involved in the different parts of the work process. As such, the management consultant became the 'anthropologist', and the shop floor worker became the informant or 'subject matter expert' (SME). My projects mainly required me to 'study down' although there was also an element of 'studying up' in managing relationships with executive level clients who very often had very clear ideas as to how and to what standards procedures should run. However, as Ould (1995:14) pointed out, it is 'surprisingly common' for an organization to find that employees often just 'fit in, work things out, develop their own patterns of behaviour and pass them on'. Simply by being an outsider, management consultants are better placed to distinguish what was supposed to be done (the 'do's') as opposed to what was actually done (which might become the 'don'ts'), not unlike the anthropologist who has the ability to make the familiar strange in understanding a different culture.

The deliverable at the end of the Analyze phase was a TNA (Training Needs Analysis): a map or blueprint of the relevant business processes and the corresponding training needs in the client company, which then needed to be evaluated by the client. This report demonstrated to the client that the consulting firm knew exactly how the client operation ran, sometimes in the minutest of details. For example, on a project to convert a bank tellers' classroom training programme into computer based training (CBT) modules, we learned not only the different techniques of counting dollar bills (for example, 'walking' or 'thumbing'), but also that the teller must either counter-check one method with another, or repeat the same method at least once. We also established the standard to which this particular bank wanted the tellers to work, such as requiring them to count in multiples of the denomination and never numerically ('values, not numbers') not only to save a few seconds of time, but to ensure that the correct value of cash was received or disbursed. For a hospital project aimed at non-clinical staff, even the way a telephone call was to be answered (how many rings before it must be answered, issues of confidentiality and what information to divulge, when to put caller on hold, and so on) had to be carefully noted.

Design

Based on the Analysis, the following three phases could then be scheduled and preparatory work (such as agreeing dates, recruiting staff to test output, booking premises) begun. In the Design phase consultants divided the project into workable chunks, taking into consideration the platform/s (classroom, textbook, self-study coursework, video, CBT, hands-on training) for delivery of the project. The RSA (retail sales assistants) project was commissioned by a government agency to develop a course where RSAs were sponsored by their employers to attend instructor-led classes, practise skills in a mock-up shop and undergo various theoretical and practical assessments over two years to gain a nationally recognized certificate. The course covered wide-ranging aspects of the retail trade from the theory of the retail and logistics cycles to the use of equipment and customer service skills. The client wanted to sequence the course one way, while we recommended another. Both approaches were discussed, but eventually the client stood firm on its decision. Such discussions and the resulting decisions had to be carefully documented. For every project we had a huge cardboard box marked 'OBE' (overtaken by events) containing every single document seen by clients and the corrections they requested, just in case a client went back on its word. The client's sign-off, documentary proof that work had reached the contractual requirements, at every stage of the project, was of paramount importance.

The RSA project required us to gain very specific knowledge about customer service, dealing with difficult (awkward) customers, consultative selling, and so on. My colleagues and I fanned out across Singapore to spend time observing in different types of retail outlets (from independent shops to major chain stores), and interviewing RSAs. With my ethnographic leanings and 'wardrobe anxiety', I offered to be a participant observer and had a personal shopper pick out my office wardrobe to learn how 'consultative selling' was done. On another occasion, I observed an RSA helping a customer find the right size for an item of clothing. When the customer left I asked what specific questions she normally used to check that an item of clothing was not too tight/too small. She looked at me in horror, 'Oh no!' she exclaimed, 'We *never* ask if something is "too tight".' She then lectured me on how the correct question was: 'Do you feel comfortable in this?' or a variation of the question. In their aim to 'size' a customer they had to avoid terminology that might suggest that the customer was either 'too fat' or 'too skinny'. This was 'local knowledge' to an experienced RSA that neither the client nor the consultant was aware of until my report was submitted, and this was incorporated into the final Design.

The design of audio-visual components also had to be stipulated. Earlier, I had studied a series of instructional videos on serving 'awkward' customers (for example the indecisive, angry, impatient, rude, 'know-all' customers). The client did not like the term 'awkward' and, after discussion, the term 'difficult' was chosen instead. My task then was to distil the principles from the video content and other printed sources, and make them more 'culturally appropriate' (for example, type of objects being sold, language used, references to local knowledge) when writing our 'video treatments'. These were documents which specified learning objectives, subject matter and precise examples (for example, how to help an 'indecisive' customer in the selection of a pair of shoes), based on what the SMEs said would be the correct way to handle such customers. These had to be vetted by the client. At the end of the Design phase we had a detailed programme of what was needed in the Build phase, to what standard these details were to be converted into textbooks, software, training programmes, job-aids, and so forth, and the agreed protocol to which these were to be Pilot-Tested and fine-tuned (such as who would be testing the materials, in what sort of environment, and who would be observing and vetting the tests).

Build

When the client signed off the Design phase we were ready to start on the Build (or Develop) phase. This was a very laborious phase of ticking off all the boxes to ensure that every definition, role play, training video, or computer page required by the client was in the next set of deliverables. Video treatments had to be converted into scripts by professional script-writers and every word and instruction had to be approved by the client. Consultants liaised between the client and the 'creatives' (scriptwriters, producers and directors), keeping the two groups separate, to ensure that the creative process was not compromised. This was similar to the way advertising ‘account executives’ liaised between the clients and the creative teams.

I was often required to oversee the filming of training videos to make sure the correct gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice were used by the actors. By this time we would have become more of an expert, having spent many hours with the SMEs going through the fine details of how the organization worked and the standards that they worked to, and not least of all the final wording of the scripts. Just like anthropologists in the field, it was important that we understood hierarchy and protocol in always communicating with the director and never tried to instruct the actors ourselves, unless invited to do so, which was rare. Post-production meant vetting hours of video and then going through problematic bits with a video editor. I had to be meticulous about the precise point at which to insert a subtitle (of the teaching point) or freeze a frame, knowing that failure to do so would mean the client requesting a change further down the line.

Test

As and when the different modules of training materials, software, videos, and so forth were ready, they were Pilot-Tested by targeted end-users and counter-checked by the SMEs. Even at this point significant changes might be required. At a Pilot Test session I noticed that the RSAs introduced themselves as, ‘My name is Paul (or Sally, or Janet). I am in charge of the household (or cosmetics) department at such-and-such department store.’ The recurring ‘in charge of’ used by these lowest-ranking and very junior RSAs reflected a sense of ‘powerlessness’ in the environment in which they worked, a sense of resistance to being at the bottom of the pile, and doing whatever they could, even if only in a manner of speaking, to salvage a smidgeon of power. These RSAs were ‘in charge of’ insofar as they might be the only ones who had the knowledge of where a particular item required by a customer was kept. To some extent this is an example of ‘studying through’ (Bowman 2009:8) as we sought to understand ‘the ways in which power creates webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space’ (Shore and Wright 1997:11). It also illustrates Spector’s point (2007:59) that a ‘well-trained observer’ was needed to watch the interactions through ‘participation in meetings, problem-solving groups, and the like’.

We did not have to give the client team a Foucauldian analysis of power and resistance. They agreed that this need for recognition and self-esteem was well-observed and correctly analyzed. As the business objective of the course was to empower the RSAs, to help them see how they could have a rewarding career in the retail sector which drives, and is at the same time driven by, the huge tourist industry in Singapore, we incorporated this into the coursework where appropriate. The need to understand our client’s business goal was drummed into consultants from the onset, and as an anthropology graduate (trained in fieldwork) I was able to recognize the significance in the language observed. Familiarity with anthropological theory was important, but the ability to align these ethnographic insights with the client's ultimate business goals was equally significant.

Deploy

Issues identified in the Pilot-Test as needing change had to be worked on and the different modules of the project had to be connected up and tested exhaustively before it was handed over to clients. Compared to our IT colleagues where 'going "live"' ('Deploy') was a nail-biting event with the whole team on standby just in case the system 'falls over', CMS handovers (training materials on disks, books, or other platforms) were often an anti-climax. After countless (sometimes daily) meetings with clients over every small matter in the Analyze and Design phases, and endless hours of testing, debugging and proof-reading in the Build and Pilot-Test phases, the close of a CMS project meant tidying up the filing, clearing our desks, and sending the OBE box/es to storage (for three to six months before disposal) as we moved swiftly and seamlessly on to the next desk, the next team, the next project.

Conclusion

I have tried to show to both employers and students that anthropology graduates are well placed to meet the demands of the business world. While the words 'anthropology', 'ethnography' and 'participant observation' were never used at project meetings, the knowledge, tools and methodology learned in anthropology were often employed. Particularly when projects focussed on a small aspect of the sum of processes in an organization, the consultant's ability to adopt a holistic view vis-à-vis the clients' business goals becomes even more valuable.

However, the grounded theory approach preferred by Chapman (2001) is a luxury that many business consultants often cannot afford. Though it would be ideal to 'funnel' the data to arrive at a theory (Agar 1980:13), in consulting we had to 'filter in advance' (contrast Okely 2009:2). Such filtering has been called 'time-deepening strategies': making 'choices about what to study, who [sic] to observe, what activities to record, and how to analyze and integrate the data into valuable insights' (Millen 2000:280). In my experience time-deepening or filtering was guided by our company's own (secret) 'Method T'. However, despite being given the overarching questions that needed to be answered at the Analyze phase, it was also down to the consultants to brainstorm as a team in order to formulate the essential set/s of questions to be explored.

Even though our 'green books' taught us basic interview techniques, as an anthropology graduate I was able to add to my very young CMS team the specific skills of preparing for and conducting ethnographic interviews. In following the advice of Spradley (1979), for example, I noted what types of responses could be expected, what types of follow-up questions could be asked, and how to help interviewees recall and formulate information. Sometimes a most mundane question (such as 'How do you "size" a customer?') could reap the most inspired answers, thus giving us the best 'stories' which came in useful when designing role plays and video treatments. Such rich and varied data had to be balanced with precision as consultants also needed to drill down to the tiniest and most obscure of details concerning health and safety or security (such as how to spot forged bank notes, deal with suspected shoplifters).

The actual development of training materials was often tedious, but the discipline of anthropology is no stranger to tedium, as data need to be checked and counterchecked meticulously, often with different study participants, during research fieldwork. Using technology (particularly computers and videos) I became part of project teams that made it possible for employees to learn new skills, gain certification, and work on the shop floor, in a hospital, or behind a till with confidence. I did not see any ethical conflict, for example, in ensuring that employees felt competent in handling sophisticated equipment or large amounts of cash, and were astute in dealing with difficult customers or colleagues without feeling threatened by them.

This case study showcased how training in a very hands-on anthropology course had added value to the design and development of training materials in change management. It would seem reasonable to assume that the same hands-on training would also be similarly valuable in product and process design. The advertisement I answered required applicants to have a 'readiness to learn and adapt'. Whether in anthropology or otherwise, the formal end of university training does not signal the end of formal learning at the workplace. For me, coming to grips with how debits and credits relate to assets and liabilities posed a challenge. Nevertheless, we needed to acquire such basic business knowledge just as colleagues from accountancy and computing backgrounds needed to learn interview techniques. Employers would probably have other specific ideas as to how undergraduate anthropology training can be further refined to fit with the needs of the business world. It is hoped that this case study might play some small role in stimulating dialogue between business leaders and (British) anthropology departments.

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