

## Re-Imagining Futures in Business Anthropology

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Throughout this long season of suffering and anxiety, the entire world needs comforting. At the same time, I have found that the pandemic has been a moment of opportunity for professional anthropologists in the business world. That's not to say the pandemic has been entirely beneficial, easy, or healthy, of course, for anthropologists or anyone else.

Here I want to point to ways the pandemic has created some unique opportunities for business anthropology, as I've experienced it. I'll briefly document some broader work trends I've taken note of and heard about from colleagues, and then share my personal experiences, before and during the pandemic. I'm coming from the perspective of an independent ethnographic consultant with a background in cultural anthropology, who has worked in recent years on my own projects, partnership projects with other consulting groups, some in-house work, and also startup teams. I'll explain how I've navigated challenging career decisions in the last few years, while also studying the evolving culture of work.

One common theme I want to hit on is how we, as business anthropologists, narrate our career stories, navigating and making sense of our work by doing so. This issue of storytelling is something I've studied and used in some of my work projects, as well as something I've reflected on personally and in conversation with colleagues. In particular,

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I want to explore how this unpredictable moment has made us more aware of the plurality of potential pathways, a realist mode of narrative creation that literary theorist Gary Saul Morson has called *sideshadowing* (1994).

### **The Expanded Field & The WFH (Work from Home) Moment**

The emergence and expansion of the interrelated fields of user experience, user research, design research, human factors and a few other increasingly popular professional disciplines has broadly impacted job prospects for business anthropologists in ways I could not have anticipated as recently as when I got my Ph.D. in 2006. This shift (explained with more detail and eloquence by many others, e.g., Baxter, Courage and Caine (2015)) is not simply the recognition that companies need to understand their users better through behavioral research, but rather, I think, part of a larger shift towards *product* oriented business and design approaches.

The product approach requires more integration of ongoing research into product development, and user experience research is uniquely suited to this task because of its iterative, flexible, and potentially short time span for reporting. That's distinctive from a research *project* approach where I got my start in business anthropology. Again, there's much more written about this with more articulation elsewhere, but let me provide a personal example. Many of my earlier ethnographic projects in the business world involved strategizing and then designing prototype grocery store and shopping experiences for existing brands that were either struggling or looking to enter new markets. These projects, which began with a discovery and research sub-project, grew and developed separately from the ongoing cycles of store development and maintenance happening elsewhere in our clients' chains. Typically, only after the project was complete and reviewed would the organization consider translating innovation, either in part or wholesale, from the prototype to the rest of the chain. The strategy and design firm I worked with had a specific project focus—the prototype—with the opportunity to later do some initial renovations and brand standards work. The client took it from there. Some clients would return 5-10 years later for another project round.

Product cycles, on the other hand, require agile teams on hand to constantly iterate and innovate, while also constantly updating versions of the product. Rather than outsource this research, increasing numbers of organizations have been developing these teams in house over the last decade. To be clear, these are not completely or necessarily teams of anthropologists. But business anthropologists certainly have or can develop the skills to match these positions. A cottage industry seems to be

developing around the transition from anthropology to UX careers, and its growth has seemingly accelerated during the pandemic.

Again, others will tell this industry story differently, but the point is that business anthropologists are witnessing a proliferation of employment opportunities, as well as a sense that a legitimate career trajectory exists in the corporate world through the UX lens. I will set aside the debate on whether UX is the best lens for our presence and growth.

Furthermore, while this proliferation of opportunities began in the high-tech world, it has now infiltrated many more industries. Right now, virtually any industry that might conceive of their offering as a product may also be hiring for research positions to be filled by business anthropologists (see Megan Neese's insightful 2015 EPIC article about the automotive industry, for example).

I couldn't put my finger on how exactly the pandemic has impacted product cycles or product team development. What I do know is that moving to remote work has opened up this world of product-based user experience research opportunities to anywhere in the country, if not the world. For me, based in Houston (known as the "energy capital of the world"), that has represented a significant change.

Prior to the pandemic, my UX and product research opportunities were mainly limited to the energy, oil & gas, and petrochemical industries. Since the pandemic began, the range of potential companies and industries I can work with has expanded greatly. I have worked with clients, partnered with research consultant firms, and had job interviews with organizations in California, Ohio, Texas, Illinois, New York, Florida, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Few of these partners are even asking about where I reside, except as small talk. I have never met many of my new colleagues in person. While there are certainly downsides to this development, it also represents an enormous shift in my field of opportunities as a professional anthropologist, such that I never realistically imagined pre-pandemic.

### **Arriving at an Unexpected Place**

Following a Ph.D. from Rice Anthropology in 2006, I lived in Los Angeles and worked with a strategy and design firm, focusing mainly on retail and architecture projects. Upon moving back to Houston in 2015, my work with the design firm slowly wound down, as I found work on collaborative projects with other Texas-based professional anthropologists and a couple of Houston startup companies.

One relevant project for this essay is a small startup company based in Houston I joined in 2019, called Talinnt. The genesis of Talinnt came from one of the founder's organizational consulting projects several years prior. In the project's recommendations, he had offered his client a "future-facing resume" tool that job applicants would fill out, allowing the client organization to better imagine how candidates hoped to navigate their future career and how that future career might intersect with the organization's future aspirations. This client continued using the tool after the project with great success. The founder decided to develop the tool into a product-based startup, which could evolve into an HR tech solution.

In a successful pilot project conducted pre-pandemic, Talinnt helped a client hire for two positions at a legal non-profit organization. In addition to regular resumes, candidates who made it through initial pre-screening also submitted future resumes, responding to a product designed by Talinnt. The hiring manager said her hiring process was expedited as a result, because it was easier for her to imagine a common trajectory between appropriate candidates and hoped-for organizational outcomes. She also said the future resume helped her dispense with many of the routine hiring questions and arrive more rapidly at conversations about how the candidate could actually contribute to the organization.

In one specific example, the hiring manager chose a candidate whose traditional resume suggested a lack of experience, but whose future resume demonstrated a desire for greater responsibility and more ambitious projects. In their job interview, the candidate explained that, as a woman of color, she felt she had been discriminated against in prior roles and was held back from pursuing more challenging duties. While the future resume cannot predict whether a new hire can actually achieve their future goals, it offers a forum for candidates to articulate their wished-for opportunities in new ways.

Talinnt began, for me, an engaged and ongoing research project on career-building and employment trends, which serendipitously became an obsession for the professional world as the pandemic unfolded. I had already begun digging into research from the worlds of HR, organizational dynamics, and social psychology. Questions around an individual's imagined career trajectory and its relationship to psychological disassociation, anxiety, and/or sense of self were directly informing Talinnt's potential product development path (especially the work of the social psychologist Anthony L. Burrow (e.g., Ratlin and Burrow (2021))).

While I dug into research on employment trajectories, I also took note of the subjective experiences of imagining and telling future stories, more generally. What guided me in this personal narrative aspect of the Talinnt project was the concept of sideshadowing, as described by Gary

Saul Morson in his 1994 book *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*. In that work, Morson distinguishes sideshadowing from foreshadowing, as storytelling devices. Through foreshadowing, events are prefigured or destined in stories. This seems often the case in many personal career narratives, where people recast their stories as somehow or nearly fated, whether determined by individual talent, market shifts, good fortune (or ill), or some other external social structures. In doing so, Morson argues, “foreshadowing robs a present moment of its presentness” (117). Foreshadowed stories are told as if time ran in a linear pattern, with hints of inevitability.

In sideshadowing, some other future was always possible and had to be negotiated as we stumbled through a series of decision-making opportunities. Morson draws on examples of sideshadowing in the literary works of Russian writers such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekov, and extends the concept broadly to writers and thinkers, from William James and Mikhail Bakhtin, to contemporary television series, detective stories, and sporting events. He explains:

In sideshadowing, two or more alternative presents, the actual and the possible, are made simultaneously visible. This is a simultaneity not *in* time but *of* times: we do not see contradictory actualities, but one possibility that was actualized and, at the same moment, another that could have been but was not. In this way, time itself acquires a double and often many doubles. A haze of possibilities surrounds each actuality. (118)

Fine enough, and perhaps this captures the reality of present moments—it certainly feels like truth for my own experience. But to what end or purpose? Would Talinnt need to start spinning future career narratives as if told by Borges, in his “Garden of Forking Paths,” an endless labyrinth of possibilities? No, Morson emphasizes that, “sideshadowing restores *the possibility of possibility*...In permitting us to catch a glimpse of unrealized but realizable possibilities, sideshadowing demonstrates that our tendency to trace straight lines of causality (usually leading to ourselves at the present moment) oversimplifies events, which always allow for many possible stories” (119). Put differently, the act of planning for the future, and doing so realistically, requires that we consider multiple futures simultaneously. However futile the attempt to tell the future story, there is value there. For one, we might circumvent some anxiety of unknowing. And we may simultaneously steer away from over-confidence in a single path, especially in a social context of persistent vulnerability and unpredictability.

### **Recasting an Anxious Future**

Like many others, my pandemic has been a challenging period, especially at its onset: filled with disappointment, fueled by anxiety, and pushed by

challenges. We have two young children, no family nearby, and my partner is employed full time. We are a privileged middle class white family with safety nets in place and advanced degrees. Our schedules were already tight before the pandemic. And thankfully, we own a home with a small yard, I have my own office in a separate room, and my partner has a personal office at the University of Houston, just a mile away from our home. The situation for many more people was certainly more dire than ours.

When the pandemic began in 2020, the recession led to millions of workers let go from their jobs. Talinnt paused. Who wants to even investigate a hiring tool when the biggest challenge was keeping business afloat and not letting too many talented people go?

Alongside the startup project, I was also pursuing a set of consulting and research projects. However, in mid-2020, I was coming to the conclusion of a lengthy ethnographic project and didn't have a next project in place. The immediate economic recession led to project cancellations and delays in project development for the groups I partnered with. This ebb and flow is typical among independent consultants, but the pandemic-induced recession compounded the challenge.

Around that time, a former architect colleague called me to join a design firm she moved to a year prior, which focused on office design. This was the early summer of 2020, when confusion over vacant office spaces was beginning to reach a fever pitch. The firm brought me on to help them develop plans and service offerings for Work From Home, Return to the Office, and/or some kind of hybrid office future. With prior experience in design research for architectural projects, I could comprehend the challenge. But admittedly, work and office environments were new to me.

I soon learned that the challenge of launching anything at the office design firm was more complex than anticipated.

For one, the firm was not prepared to rethink its approach to office design, which had been successful for many years. They were a service provider, a boutique architecture team that designed smart spaces, always on-trend for aesthetic experience. Secondly, clients didn't think of the firm as a thought leader or source of new ideas about how to work. Introducing practices of discussing cultures of work and changing that identity was not just a challenging task, leaders in the firm were either reluctant or resistant to a new approach. As a result, any new potential directions for rethinking work at the firm were either blocked by design leaders or recognized as impractical from an operational perspective. My role quickly evolved into a marketing function for ongoing sales efforts. Thankfully we parted ways after several months, as 2020 was winding down.

As 2021 began, still facing the recession and lost project prospects, I took time to rethink my pathway. I read a lot, and took time to reconnect with friends and colleagues. Admittedly I was having some second thoughts about pursuing independent consulting, or continuing to pursue business anthropology at all.

A mutual colleague put me in touch with Tracey Lovejoy. Tracey is an anthropologist by training, with years of experience in the corporate world both as a researcher within organizations and independent consultant. More recently, she has turned to career coaching and published a book *Move Fast, Break Shit, Burn Out: The Catalyst's Guide to Working Well* (2020). The book describes and offers insights for a category of professional that she and her co-author Shannon Lucas call "catalysts." Catalysts are change-minded professionals who share common work traits and skills, and also suffer from common bouts of confusion, burnout, and moving uncomfortably fast for many of our colleagues. I read Tracey's book and identified myself as a catalyst, and I imagine many other business anthropologists would fall into this category, too.

That identification was therapeutic in itself. I decided to work with Tracey as a professional coach because she not only could articulate my passions and challenges as an organizational catalyst, but also because she understood the unique elements of my situation as an independent professional anthropologist. The coaching intervention helped me enormously, both professionally and personally.

Perhaps my biggest breakthrough in working with Tracey came in the form of a spreadsheet. Up to this point in my career, I had certainly been planning projects, and attempting to string together multiple projects that could sustain my career trajectory. I had a sense of where my future career would lead, but never felt comfortable with any singular vision. There were too many unknowns that kept cropping up, such as moving to Houston or the pandemic-induced recession. Even before that, I had stumbled through the financial crisis recession of 2007-2008, not to mention discovering unexpected footholds in professional life after graduate school.

What Tracy helped me do was map out my world of possible project directions into the future. She custom created a simple spreadsheet, and I populated it on the y-axis with potential industries and project directions, and then on the x-axis with categories and measurements both objective and subjective that sought to describe the value of those directions. How passionate was I about the direction? Can I have impact there? Is there potential to make money doing this? How realistic is the opportunity and how long would it take to develop? What are the next steps?

The spreadsheet helped frame my ongoing conversations with Tracey and others about the nature of opportunity in business anthropology consulting spaces. Even in the face of a massive recession, Tracey expressed confidence that such a path was generally possible, assuming I truly wanted to pursue it. And she was right.

Alongside practical help, I felt that Tracey's other primary goal was to help me discover intentionality in my pursuit of potential career futures. Paradoxically, I found I could make discoveries alongside the darkness and anxiety of an ultimate future goal. If I could develop some sense of comfort with, or better yet, recognize the value of my anxious imagination, perhaps I could manage that energy and use it as fuel.

The spreadsheet didn't find work for me, but armed with this broader perspective, I came to my project hunt with renewed energy, prepared to more flexibly approach opportunities that emerged. Instead of a strong sense of what I *should* be doing or what my future career trajectory *should* look like, I felt more open to what the world had to offer, within the boundaries of my experience and background.

I started imagining, for example, what type of career trajectory might unfold if I pursued more workplace projects or office design. And at the same time, I made space to imagine food retail and grocery store consulting. One colleague I spoke with helped me imagine a trajectory as a food retail expert for private equity firms. I considered architecture and design. I also considered more non-profit projects. Building on a voting study I had recently collaborated on, I considered more political or government projects. And while looking at the general growth in business anthropology more broadly, I considered design research and user experience projects in all industries experiencing growth. As a result of conversations with professional colleagues, I also considered projects in environmental design psychology, as well as financial services. And alongside all of this, I had space to consider what might unfold with Talinnt and other existing consulting partnerships.

Through these acts of imagining, I engaged in sideshadowing. And that helped me feel both grounded in reality and empowered. There's a certain irony in that, of course, because this process was fueled by imagination, hope, and a healthy sense of anxiety.

I can't say that this process has led me to great success, that would be premature. But it's led to positive results. I've discovered new projects in health care and transportation, while also developing potential further projects in career training and workplace cultures. This process that Tracey helped ignite has armed me with a new lens to imagine my potential next steps, which has generated more potential opportunities than I had previously seen or considered.



### A Sideshadow Moment

I can't speak for others, whether business anthropologists or the workforce as a whole, as to whether they're feeling similarly empowered at this point in the pandemic. Many certainly aren't, including junior anthropologists seeking their footing and working-class people concerned about their health and well-being, to name just two groups.

But my hunch is that, as the pandemic lingers on and the worlds of work evolve, this may be a *sideshadow* moment. By this I mean to suggest that reimagining our future career narratives is an increasingly prevalent theme. We might consider this as a part of the cultural dimension of the "Great Resignation" which began in 2021.

Obviously, the future remains uncertain, we've all learned this repeatedly and on a daily basis throughout the pandemic (not to mention the carnage of the Trump presidency and its aftermath). Charting a course forward is always worth it, and the capacity to imagine potential futures is likely part of what makes us human. This is a unique storytelling moment, not just around what happened to us, but also how we tell our future stories.

In this, I'm reminded of a podcast interview with another mid-career business anthropologist, colleague, and friend, Charley Scull, who spoke with Matt Artz on his "Anthro to UX" podcast in late 2021. Charley was speaking about finding his way to his role as a "Pathfinder" at Meta (formerly Facebook), by way of a circuitous path:

I couldn't have predicted this pathway. That's what my dad used to say about narration. Earlier in life, trying to figure out what my path was going to be—and I was feeling kind of sorry for myself—and I said, 'look at all these people who look like they always knew what they were going to be.' And he said, 'well that's the nature of storytelling. You tell the story about how you got to where you are today, and everything indicates why you arrived there.' So, all of these stories when told in short time frames are indicative of an uncomplicated path. How could I be anywhere else than where I am today? But that's just the human impulse to impose order over what was at times a chaotic journey. It always makes sense after the fact.

The failed paths, failed attempts, and tough decisions tend to get filtered out of our stories. That's unfortunate, because it's often these inflection points where a career story starts to make any sense.

In managing our personal narratives through sideshadowing, we might have an opportunity to reduce the suffering of endless anxiety and paranoia, and potentially endless second guessing. We can also break down the confidence facade required to suggest that our pathway is determined or fated by individual will. Here we can discover our social

reality, too. This reality lies between, in this middle ground, where we might describe the imaginative fields that allow us to continually stumble towards our future.

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