



## WHY BUSINESSES ARE HIRING ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND LOVING THEM

Unlike most people's images of where to find anthropologists these days, they are actually more often found in corporate offices than in remote villages. To give just a few examples, Intel has over 100 anthropologists studying how people in different cultures work with, or avoid, technologies. IDEO's design methods incorporate anthropological methods, particularly ethnographic or observational research, into their approach, providing exceptional and innovative ways to reinvent products and solutions. Banks, furniture

companies and even automobile manufacturers are embedding anthropologists into their organizations to improve their understanding of their customers and to advance their own organizational effectiveness.

Why is now an important time for all businesses to better understand the concepts of anthropology? And how could a “little anthropology” help companies—maybe yours too—just “do better”? I’ll explain.

## **People don’t know why they do what they do. Could a little anthropology help?**

Corporate anthropology arose from the realization that the theory, methods and tools of anthropology could be effectively applied to business. After all, businesses are small-scale societies. Just like exotic far-flung cultures, they create their own unique ways of doing things. Workplace beliefs, values and behaviors become “sacred” to the people who work there, even when those behaviors cease to be useful in a changing business environment.

So why have corporate anthropologists recently become hot? There are many reasons but primarily, “user experience” experts have long realized that asking people what they were doing when using a product or shopping for a solution to their problem got pat answers, designed to please the researchers, not reveal *the reasons* behind the behavior.

Instead, by observing behaviors, anthropologists see the things people are actually doing in their business processes that they don’t even know they’re doing. This is why observational research (rather than surveys or focus groups) is essential to better understand why people do what they do, as related to a company’s products or services.

And yet, businesses often cannot see what is all around them. That’s why leadership needs to step out and become a customer or client and try to buy their own products, call their customer service line or use their solutions. They need to stop assuming they know what is happening. Instead, they need to do observational research, with or without an anthropologist alongside them so they can see things in entirely new ways.

The result: lots of new observations that could turn into innovations. And taking their employees out with them to see what is really happening among clients, as well as in new and existing markets, could effectively engage their employees in the change process.

## **Are your stories in need of a new story?**

In anthropology, you learn that people have different ways of “seeing” things that are all around them. Some have their antennae up all the time, ready to pick up on coming changes or disruptions. Others just keep their heads down, doing things the way they’ve always done them, ignoring new ways to do things better or to become more competitive as society changes.

Along these lines, the neurosciences have been shedding light on how people's brains organize "reality" so that it conforms to their "stories" of how things should work. The challenge for businesses is that they tend to bring together people who are very similar to each other, especially when it comes to delivering desired results. This works great in stable environments when neither the customers nor the technologies are rapidly changing.

But in today's business environment, the fast pace of change is forcing companies to realize that they need people who can see things with fresh eyes. Like anthropologists, these types of people are the discoverers who can observe how customers are "really" solving their problems. By observing them, listening to their stories and participating with them as they try to use different products, these discoverers are able to set aside long-standing "truths" and better anticipate the future unmet needs of customers and the potential value of new ways of getting things done.

Thus, companies need a new "story." And those come from people "seeing things with fresh eyes." But that story in their brain is so comfortable that it is hard to see what is all around them. It becomes a habit that anchors their thinking and their actions.

For people to change, they need an "aha" moment where they realize that more of the same, what they have always done, is not what is needed for the future. Each time we work with a client that goes exploring with us, sees things with new "eyes" and has their "aha" moment, we can step back and watch them "soar" into new lines of business, new ways of doing business, and new, exciting possibilities.

## **Observational research enables you to see what's REALLY going on**

I'm not saying that surveys and statistical data are bad. What I *am* saying is that observational research offers a very different perspective on what is taking place.

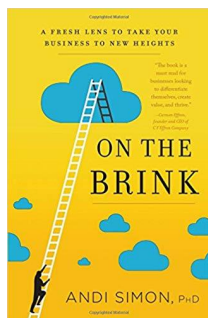
Whether you are watching how people use a website to find the answers they need or how they are interacting in a business meeting with a client, you'll find that what they tell you and what they do are not the same. In many cases, they don't really know what they're doing.

Several years ago, we had Centenary College in New Jersey as a client. The institution had literally stalled, and they engaged us to help them turn it around. What did we do? We hung out—which is often what anthropologists do. We listened to the stories that faculty were telling us about "those students" who didn't like to work individually any longer. They only knew how to play on soccer teams.

We listened to the stories of students who were trying to figure out how to learn in a small liberal arts college with not a lot of fun things to do at night. They helped us see the institution from their perspective.

And then we saw the gaps. Faculty taught as they always had. But the students needed to learn in entirely new ways. Growth was going to have to come from change, and it wasn't going to come from finding students who had grown up (and learned) like their parents had.

To set the college on a new path, we went out into the market and started to tell a new story: "Centenary College teaches you the way you learn." And it did. The college introduced an entirely new idea for its time. Every student had a laptop—which today seems rather ho-hum but was very innovative then. Faculty began to embrace highly collaborative educational models with freshman year-long initiatives. Before long, the college had a waiting list.



You can read the entire story along with seven others in my book, [\*“On the Brink: A Fresh Lens to Take Your Business to New Heights.”\*](#)

### Stumbling blocks to innovation

Change is hard. People hate change. The brain hates change. Why? Change is literally pain. Not fun!

Consequently, there are four big hurdles that businesses face when trying to bring innovations into their organization. Unsurprisingly, these hurdles stem from people's resistance to change. As a well-known quote goes, "People are not against change; they just don't want to be changed."

The four hurdles are:

- 1. Cognitive hurdle:** People tell you they don't understand what you want them to do.
- 2. Motivational hurdle:** People are simply not willing or interested in changing.
- 3. Resources hurdle:** People use this as the reason they cannot or have not changed. No time, no budget, no resources, no interest in change.
- 4. Political hurdle:** People are more afraid of who they will irritate than how to embrace the changes and stand apart from others.

When faced with change, people will actually act out these resisters. You are going to hear them say, "Of course we have to change the way we hold meetings to build a better team culture." Then you will watch them do it the same way they have always held meetings: in silos with limited collaboration or conversation.

We watched one client struggle with the resources hurdle. It was a healthcare client so perhaps they did not have enough time or talent to get a new process implemented that would improve patient care.

We watched them map out a typical day in their medical center and as they observed their own behavior, they saw (they were forced to see) several important things happening that

were sapping their time and effort. People were not well-organized. Each individual did their job but then had to wait for someone else to get done with their portion, or to pay attention to what was needed to complete the task. Do-overs were common. Half-completed tasks were causing redundancy.

It didn't take long for them to see what we were seeing. There were, in fact, a lot of time and people available to change the processes if only they would stop doing what they had been doing in the past. Also, the lack of respect for each other was a subtle factor undermining their entire organization of that unit.

Once they saw what was possible, things began to change. And quickly. And together.

These were not bad people. People are never "bad." They are following their habits which have been honed over time. They are each doing their own thing, together. And it rarely works well. But for people to change, the pain of doing what they are doing now has to be much bigger than the pain of changing.

## The power of habits

Let's talk about habits.

For thousands of years, humans have survived with other groups of humans in cultures with shared habits, values, expectations, beliefs and behaviors. Our brains use 25% of the body's energy, which is why they are much more efficient when they allow habits to take over and control our thinking and behaviors.

That's also why the brain doesn't like things that disrupt its habits. But at times, habits are extremely valuable—they reduce risks, enable fast responses to challenges, and create the comfort people seek in their daily lives.

However, especially in business, those same habits are not very useful when things are changing. People like to work and live in groups where they share the same ideas about things. The biases are so strong that we tend to delete or discount things that are unfamiliar, uncomfortable or just irritating to our normal way of doing our jobs.

But folks, the times are changing. If we don't take it upon ourselves to better understand clients and their unmet needs, we may not have any clients in the near future.

## How many times do you hear these words: "No, we don't do that"

Businesses today are being strangled by the reluctance of their staff to change. We know the brain hates to change. Habits are so much more comfortable than learning new ways to get your daily job done. But as I've said, these are fast-changing times and the old ways of "how we've always done things" are quickly fading into obsolescence.

When change is essential, and the corporate culture has to evolve, getting employees on board can be a challenge. However, if company leaders can provide purpose to the changes—by showing employees how the changes will improve business and create stability after the initial transition—they’ll have a better shot at a quicker buy-in.

Explaining “why” is extremely important, but not enough. Employees have to experience the changes and see with their own eyes what they will mean for their jobs, their customers and their company.

## **The tremendous value of anthropology in business: helping people see things with fresh eyes**

When e-commerce was just beginning, we would install cameras to see how people bought things online. They would tell us in person what they thought we wanted to hear, making themselves the “heroes” in their stories. Then they would actually buy something and we would video them. What they said was nice. What they did was very different. Habits took over and they solved their problems without thinking about “how they should do it.”

The same may be true in your organization. Your folks may be telling you what they do and why they do it that way. But this may not be what is really happening at all. Believe me, they tell you what they think you want to hear. You have to become “Undercover Boss” and go hang out and watch them to get the real truth.

## **Become an amateur anthropologist! Four things from our [anthropology tool kit](#) for you to try:**

- 1. Sit on your customer service phone lines and listen to what people are asking for.** Spend a couple of hours there and you’ll learn a great deal about customers’ needs and how aligned you are—or are not—with them. We had one client who did this for two hours and heard so many opportunities coming to him that he paused, redirected his organization and started to produce what people were asking for. You too may see great business potential coming right to you.
- 2. Spend a “Day in the Life of a Customer.”** Literally, get one of your customers to let you shadow them. Observe how they are using your products or services—which ones are working well for them and which ones they don’t use at all.
- 3. Here’s a really easy one: culture probes.** Go have a “lunch and listen” with a prospective client. Don’t try to sell them anything. Instead, ask them to talk about their challenges and pain points. In their stories, you will hear lots of potential ways you could rethink your own business and grow innovatively.

**4. Be an “Undercover Boss.”** Literally. Go watch your staff do their jobs. Go out with sales folks and listen to what customers are saying. On one such occasion for one of our clients, a sales manager listened to a customer repeatedly say “what if” or “could you” or “have your seen this done?” The salesman did not hear anything the customer was saying until he had his “aha” moment. That came when he realized that the customer was, indeed, going to buy the product. But, the customer needed so much more than the salesman and the company could provide, and great profit was sitting there staring them in the face.

## I encourage you to try these tools for yourself

Who knows, you might just find that “a little anthropology” could really help your business grow. So, get out there and start observing! You will find that your “observations turn into innovations.”

*To learn more about what anthropologists can do for your business, please contact us.*

[Contact Us](#)

[Simon Associates Management Consultants](http://www.simonassociates.net) (www.simonassociates.net)  
1905 Hunter Brook Road  
Yorktown Heights, NY 10598  
(914) 245-1641  
[info@simonassociates.net](mailto:info@simonassociates.net)

*To order my book, “On the Brink: A Fresh Lens to Take Your Business to New Heights,”  
click on the image below:*

