

Building Bridges between Management and the Workforce

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This paper examines the sales force in a retail setting, considering how Business Anthropology can enlighten managerial practices as a means to defining organisational strategy. Specifically, we look at sales force engagement, motivation and reward – considering how to build bridges in the management-employee relationship and shed light on the sales force culture. We will look at anthropology’s position in relation to key business activities using the service-dominant logic to understand how individual sensemaking and perception of power can influence internal and external relationships in the value creation and realisation process, examining engrained paradigms and using Corporate Ethnography to offer new insights and perceptions on organisational culture, power and hierarchies.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, it is our aim to demonstrate how insight into corporate culture, employee mindset and drivers of behavior can be leveraged as resources for differentiation and competitive advantage within business. Using the case study of a recent project done by A Piece of Pie, we will examine the use of ethnography as a methodology to define business models and manage the culturally delicate process of business transformation. Furthermore, we will delve into the strengths and weaknesses of Corporate Ethnography, offering a detailed explanation of our methodology, to demonstrate how Anthropology can be used to solve complex business problems. In doing so, we will investigate uses of Corporate Ethnography and Business Anthropology, and offer our thoughts on how Business Anthropology can “one, do research that provides insights into corporate structure and process and two, provide real-world solutions to problems that arise in business and industry” (Jordan 2013).

A Piece of Pie is a Strategy Consultancy using Applied Anthropology to define Corporate Strategy and Business Innovation. This year, we were engaged by a leading Luxury Brand to undertake a global project for them, studying their retail (front-line) sales teams to uncover key insights and define a multi-country engagement program overseeing sales force training, career development and performance management. The client was yet to develop a consistent approach to managing their multi-country sales teams and, given that retail sales associates acted to promote the public-facing image of the company (and accounted for nearly 40% of the workforce and 80% of company sales), viewed this project as critical to successful implementation of their competitive strategy.

In many organisations, Salespeople are separate from other functional teams within the business – both physically and culturally – moving about independently with little interaction between supervisors and other employees within the business (Dubinsky et al. 1986). They are, however, a critical component in determining the commercial success of the business, representing their organization in front of customers and proactively driving revenues. This

makes understanding their culture and motivations – as a means to developing appropriate management processes, tools and incentives – a critical task. It is essential, therefore, that Culture be considered central to informing a Salesperson’s behaviour as part of the strategy formulating process (Webster 1991).

In the corporate world, it is widely accepted that “the essence of strategy is choosing a unique and valuable position rooted in systems of activities that are much more difficult to match... choosing to perform activities differently than rivals do... deliberately choosing a set of activities to deliver a unique mix of value” (Porter, 1996). In the Service Dominant Logic, value-realisation (price-paid/revenue-earned) arises through a two-party process between company and customer. On one hand, the business operates a series of complementary services (procurement, operations, logistics, finance, HR, marketing, sales, etc.) that each contribute to value-creation or a final unit of output bought by the customer. On the other, value-perception, from the customer view-point, is created through the measurable benefits (time-saving, efficiency gain, cost reduction etc.), intangibles (brand, social connectedness, meaning etc.) and experiences offered by the company to the customer, who applies their own significance and meaning to criteria of importance before agreeing a price they are willing to pay for the final unit of output (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). By this process, Service Dominant Logic views all businesses as service companies (whether or not the final unit of output is a product or service) and determines that the value-realised results from a circular process combining the services that deliver a final unit of output with the transfer of significance, meaning and benefit that this offers. Hence, “S-D logic views service (a process) as the application of operant resources – dynamic resources such as competences (skills and knowledge) that are capable of acting and producing effects in other resources – for the benefit of another party” (Lusch, Vargo and O’Brien, 2007).

In the S-D logic, “human resources [like natural resources are] viewed as operant and acted upon [to extract] value from them. Thus, competition is about creating relative advantage through hoarding resources” (Lusch, Vargo and O’Brien, 2007). Herein, Anthropology is complementary to defining corporate strategy and new business models. For example, given the commercial pressures and changing responsibilities of a sales role, there is a strong likelihood for the incidence of job stress (Behrman and Perreault 1984). Within the Service Dominant Logic this could have several foreseeable results. The company could experience loss of productivity, at an individual level but with threat of contagion to neighbouring teams and the organisation as a whole. In addition, there could be negative effects on the quality of products, services and experiences customers receive. The final outcome being that declining productivity could increase the costs required to deliver an individual unit of output, whilst declining quality could reduce the price customers are willing to pay (and therefore reduce revenues earned by the company). Ultimately, both factors would conspire to reduce profits and damage the company’s ability to compete effectively. Anthropology, therefore, can illuminate organizational culture to impact sales force productivity through initiatives that affect the socialization of new employees (Webster, 1991) and influence their perception of personal status within the organization (Weick, 1995).

In our case study, the client decided they needed to improve how they engaged their retail associates with the purpose of creating an engagement program to reduce staff turnover and increase productivity. Our project would set out to 1) deliver ethnographic insight into the work, mindset and motivations of retail associates (capturing latent knowledge lying in the minds of employees); 2) use these insights to break managerial

assumptions and ideate potential solutions and strategies that would form the basis of a global engagement program; 3) re-engage retail associates to ensure ideas were relevant and useful in the eyes of the people they were for; and 4) use our learnings to define a global engagement program, improving performance and staff retention. Through a process of Co-Creation (between A Piece of Pie and Senior Management) we would incorporate our findings into organizational thinking and use Ethnographic insight to define a comprehensive "engagement" strategy that would revolutionize the company's methods for working with retail associates – helping them to become the employer of choice for retail sales professionals in the Luxury sector. The program would consider the needs and motivations of retail associates, using Ethnography to examine the day-to-day world of the salesperson and understand how they make sense of what is around them (Dietz, Prus and Shaffir 1994) – enabling the capture of insight into what people infer from their environment and how this influences their behavior (Biggart 1989). In turn, we would use our learnings to break the conventional management structure and create a unique employee engagement program, providing a source of company differentiation to deliver competitive advantage.

This paper sets out to detail our methodology, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of Ethnography in a corporate setting, looking into the benefits Business Anthropology can have when addressing complex problems, strategic decisions and culturally sensitive business transformation – helping management to develop strategic initiatives that build bridges with the workforce.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

Ethnography sets out to understand how individuals (or groups of individuals) interpret social circumstances, cultural symbols and the physical environment, therein offering insight into the tangible and intangible factors that shape behaviour (Dietz, Prus and Shaffir 1994). Our study would be an in-depth look into the client organization with the aim to understand sales force motivations as a means to boosting productivity and reducing staff turnover through greater engagement.

Aligning with top management

Traditional ethnography, as “an open-ended emergent learning process, and not a rigid investigator controlled experiment” (Whitehead 2005), implies that the researcher should be free of restrictive oversight to explore lines of inquiry both parallel and tangential to the initial research plan – using inductive methods to understand how people experience their circumstances and give meaning to a given setting (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Whilst this may be possible for academic Ethnographers who study the business enterprise, in our case study the Business Anthropologist performs a dual purpose; employed both as Ethnographer performing a cultural study of the business enterprise, and Strategy Consultant working with Senior Management to leverage insights in ways that will be profitable for the business. For the Anthropologist at A Piece of Pie, the final outcome of a project is not the research learnings; it is an implementable strategy that will bring positive returns for the business.

In practice, this means we must perform Ethnographic research, not for academic enlightenment but to seek knowledge that will bring competitive advantage in a manner that is both cost-effective and recognizable for its value by the client. This adds a further layer of complexity to the job of the Ethnographer, who, on one hand, must remove biases insofar as is possible (Dieble 2008) but, on the other, must satisfy the expectations of Senior Management who may hold strong opinions, coloured by past experience. The challenge is further complicated should insight running contrary to established organizational truths be discovered, and, hence, the Business Anthropologist must find an equilibrium between the commercial restrictions imposed by profit-minded clients and the need to do an academically rigorous ethnographic study.

In light of this, communication and alignment with client expectations is key. Business Anthropologists, working as Strategy Consultants, must learn how to effectively report on progress, manage client expectations and deliver complex projects within set parameters (and budgets) within an environment that is “distributed around the world, across multiple boundaries, in a rapidly changing context, and where human interaction is mediated in technology” (Gluesing 2013).

To engage the client, facilitate knowledge share and align on key objectives, we began with interviews, engaging senior stakeholders and all key persons involved in the project (those with managerial responsibility for the implementation of strategy) – C-Suite Executives, Vice-Presidents, Directors and General Managers – to identify their strategic vision, objectives, concerns, capabilities and expectations of the project. These are high-level, discussions with broad and open-ended questions to engage management and create a unified vision for the project – offering understanding of the individual (or departmental) viewpoints and agendas that may lead to cultural skepticism and resistance to change when deploying new initiatives and business models.

During the early stages of a project kick-off, the Anthropologist must be wary of cultural standards and “needs to be alert to how they are gaining access into an organisation and what their position may entail” (Kraus-Jensen, 2013). With this in mind, introductions to top-line managers were done by a senior ranking person within the client company structure (the global project leader based out of company HQ) to help transmit a sense of importance for the project, and to share the strategic outcomes they hoped to achieve. Whilst this certainly made it easier for us to gain access to senior people, as observed by others, we still found that senior business people were often less accessible to traditional ethnographic methods than their junior counterparts (Davies and Spencer, 2010). Scheduling conflicts were frequent and availability often changed, and when we were finally able to meet often found our time with them limited, regulated and timed (Gusterson, 1997).

To facilitate interviews with top-line management, we needed to be flexible, adapting our work schedule to conduct interviews in the late evening or early morning. We also needed to be respectful in our line of questioning, not too forceful, but still seeking the information we needed. On numerous occasions, it was apparent that the client project lead had not properly communicated details of the project to interviewees, leading to an awkward situation where the person being interviewed was unsure what they could disclose and what was confidential. Finally, communication proved troublesome as there was no common language within the company, and, at times information was difficult to decipher when multiple terms were used to describe the same objects or processes.

As the project advanced, we realized that there were different views spread across the organisation, and that different departments had varying views on the effectiveness and how to manage the retail associates. Practices which worked well in some geographical groups were not shared with others, and ideas relating to training and compensation were not shared. At an organizational level the training, management and incentivisation of retail associates lacked standardization – a common issue in companies where culture and flows create a “radically reflexive environment market by power plays, different interests and hidden agendas” (Krause-Jensen, 2013). Our challenge was to be attentive to the different interests, needs and sensibilities of everyone involved in the study. Though we were working for one company, we had many clients and needed to be “politically sensitive” with regards to the various demands directed at us throughout the project – contrasting the roles of Business Anthropologists, who need to beware cultural landmines for commercial reasons, with that of the Academic Ethnographer who worries of being branded “insensitive” for fear of being culturally closed out of the business and unable to find informers willing to share openly their experiences for ethnographic purposes.

An Ethnography of Retail Associates

Our approach to understanding the retail associates began with interviews of top management, from where we gained an understanding of how retail associates were perceived by others, from the outside. The next step was to conduct an ethnography of the retail associates.

The core ethnography was based on participant observation and selected methods including interviews, card-sorting, mind-mapping, collages and shadowing – our aim being to observe retail associates in their work environment, at point-of-sale locations, using inductive reasoning to derive insight on their natural state (Garsten and Nyqvist, 2013). Through an in-depth study, we set-out to identify reasons explaining the motivation and behaviour of retail associates – beyond what is explicitly said – to define key levers that would enhance employee commitment and productivity as part of the engagement program to be co-defined alongside senior management. Key areas of interest included:

- Personal & Professional Context: Educational, Family & Societal backgrounds
- A day-in-the-life: Work barriers/facilitators and customer interactions
- Motivations, annoyances, priorities & aspirations
- Perception of self, the organisation and management hierarchy
- Perception of training, compensation & brand versus the competition
- Ideas on how to improve internal processes and communication

The benefit of Anthropology and the Ethnographic method, herein, is to search for knowledge (expressed and inherently understood) that explains how participants make sense of the world around them (the how and why of one’s positioning, actions and interactions) (Spradley, 1979) – ultimately, informing the definition of an engagement program based on unmet needs and behavioural insights that would build bridges between management and retail associates through greater depth of understanding.

We conducted a top-down study of the retail associates, meaning that recruitment of participants and their introduction to the study was managed by supervisors to whom they reported as part of the company structure. Whilst this offered benefits, there are constraints this method imposes that we should beware (Whitelaw, 2013). In our case study, the supervisors had already explained the purpose and expected outcomes of the project so that we were already known to retail associates prior to a personal introduction. The trade-off here is that, whilst it is usually easier to build a relationship with people when the ethnographer is introduced by someone they trust, in a corporate setting there is the risk that informants will view your presence as a threat, or consider your role that of an auditor – there to observe employees for performance appraisal and managerial control. For us, we found our introduction by managers aided the recruitment of participants and facilitated our insertion into the organisation, but created a hierarchy in our participation, with participants that could potentially lead to retail associates being more closed than they might have otherwise been.

Further limiting the openness of our dialogue with retail associates was the presence of top management at interviews, whom, despite our hopes to conceal their identity, were already known to staff who had been told senior management would be attending (probably by their supervisors). This, again, increased the level of pressure for the retail associates, adding the perception of management scrutiny – leading to answers that were clearly tailored to fit the expectations of management. In addition, a lack of financial incentives offered to retail associates removed extrinsic motivation to participate in the study, making it harder to establish rapport and encourage open dialogue. Whilst many researchers employed on this project were local (meaning we did not have to overcome cultural barriers), there was still a need to navigate the distrust and skepticism occurring from management’s presence. In an attempt to fix this, we planned prolonged introductory telephone calls prior to interviews, going beyond the usual confirmation of time and attendance to develop rapport and improve the level of engagement between interviewers and retail associates. In some instances, however, our task was made even tougher due to national regulations restricting the asking of “personal” questions that can often help to establish rapport at the start of an interview.

Finally, during the course of the project, we discovered that management had recruited the “best” employees to participate in the study, meaning the people we spoke with were often those most satisfied with their job, making it harder to ascertain the “pain points” of disenfranchised and underperforming members of the organization. From an ethnographic perspective we, therefore, needed to be conscious of this limitation in our fieldwork when deriving our final conclusion – in the best-case scenario, we would have been able to interview a healthy mix of satisfied and disenfranchised, as well as excelling and underperforming employees, alas, time and resource constraints dictated by the need to deliver this project within a strict budget prevented us from re-engaging the business to find a broader mix of employees to meet with.

Ethnography around the world

To structure this multi-sited ethnography - and capture the language, values and perceptions of each business unit - we organized the project around our base team in Barcelona. From here, the client relationship was managed, streamlining communications and controlling the

project from a central location. On the client side, a core project team was set-up to collaborate with and inform A Piece of Pie's base team. Henceforth, all local, in-country researchers were managed by our base team in Barcelona – local researchers did not have direct contact with the client, except for the people they interviewed or shadowed.

As a result of this structure, there were a few challenges we had to overcome. It is always difficult coming into an organization as an “outsider”, where you must learn “what language to use, what political icebergs to avoid, and for how long our presentations [will] be endured” (Brun-Cottan, 2013), and a multi-sited project further compounds this difficulty owing to complexity and scale. One such concern was the need to manage the ever constant flow of information between the client's core project team, our base team in Barcelona and the local researchers in-country. Because local researchers were not present in meetings with the client's senior management, there was a constant need to update and involve them with the project's developments. However, these difficulties were counterbalanced by the advantages we gained by working with local researchers.

Local researchers helped us to understand particular nuances that are often hidden from non-natives. They enabled us to speak the language of local people (figuratively and literally), offering better insights into the perceptions and feelings of interviewees. Yet, certain cultural aspects are (in some cases) so deeply ingrained that local researchers can sometimes take them for granted – meaning we risk them not sharing everything should they assume something to be too obvious. One such insight we found difficult to uncover was the perception of luxury. Whilst in some geographies (e.g. Europe), luxury goods were considered relatively attainable for a large part of society, in others, they were a symbol of one's social status in society (e.g. Latin America). However, it is always a challenge communicating effectively with a client (many of whom speak with heavy use of industry jargon), and it becomes even more complicated when there are local differences in the terminology and language used between geographies and business units. To successfully complete a corporate ethnography, it is essential that researchers learn to talk and think like the company whilst maintaining their own identity and observational understanding (Denny, 2013; Sunderland, 2013), and, in this regard, local researchers proved a great asset to the project's success.

BREAKING THE ENGRAINED PARADIGMS

Anthropological methods can be used to derive insights and hypotheses (Fricke, 2003) that break engrained paradigms. In organizations, corporate ethnographers identify each piece of the puzzle, fit them together, and combine them to create new insights that answer complex business questions and “get to the heart of the matter” (Cefkin, 2009). It is in this way, ethnographers can benefit companies by dispelling underlying cultural assumptions, beliefs and values (Ensworth, 2013) to improve the way businesses operate. Through a deep understanding of the retail associates' motivations and how they interacted within the corporate ecosystem – their environment, relationships and influences – we discovered that three major beliefs guiding managerial decisions were not in line with the reality retail associates experienced.

Most significant of the engrained paradigms was the management belief that retail associates' motivation came from a perceived increase in personal status offered by employment in the luxury sector. Due to this belief, management believed they could

motivate retail associates with bonus compensation in the form of luxury gifts (designer bags, perfumes etc.) and, in doing so, reward effort and improve performance. Whilst luxury items do perform a status symbol function in Latin America (and to a lesser extent in Europe), and, for this reason, are often the reason for people wanting to join the company in the first instance, once we examined the drivers of ongoing motivation, we discovered retail associates' primary motivation was "growth" and that they had a strong desire for personal and professional development. When offered opportunities to develop skills and pursue a clearly defined career path (with established goals and objectives), retail associates became more competitive and felt greater appreciation from the company. Hence, we were able to change managerial perspectives and make them aware how presumed assumptions could affect the engagement of retail associates, limiting their motivation and affecting results.

The second paradigm we encountered was that supervisors (the people managing retail associates) of some countries overseeing retail associates performed an administrative, but not emotional or supportive role in daily activities. They were distant from the retail associates, interacting with them on a monthly, or even less frequent, basis to discuss targets and performance issues (low sales or poor inventory counts, etc.). A view shared by both retail associates, for whom supervisors performed a "controller" function, and the organisation, who assigned the supervisors increasingly large geographical areas. Through the Ethnographic fieldwork, we identified the significance of the role retail associates perform, seeing, as have others, that they exist in a hierarchical structure (Webster, 1983) where there is a large amount of pressure coming from quarterly targets and revenue goals (Oliver and Anderson, 1994). We identified that their supervisors were indispensable, acting as the retail associates' closest connection with management, with whom retail associates had little access, thereby transmitting the cultural values of the company to the front-line and, therefore, to the customer. For this reason, the character and performance of individual supervisors was critical to company success. Once this was identified, the company was able to reinforce support structures and develop processes to leverage the proximity of supervisors to improve managerial dialogue with retail associates.

Finally, we found further misconceptions, originating at Corporate Headquarters (HQ), to be a source of constraint limiting the development of policy that could improve the status of retail associates and reward them for their contribution to the company. In HQ, management and organizational structure was more rigid and hierarchical than in countries with smaller and more dynamic operations. Furthermore, the time of the study coincided with the European recession, meaning that in HQ, where the most retail associates were employed, there was a strong awareness of operating costs, for which retail associates were the most significant contributing factor. With executive management at Corporate HQ situated in a country where the recession became a crisis, a focus on costs overtook other priorities (such as engagement, motivation and retention) and this was transmitted from the top of the business to the periphery. As a result, it was common amongst management to focus on cost reduction (efficiency) and rather increasing sales through retail associates (productivity) – albeit, as discovered through interviews outside HQ, not all managers shared this view. The implication for the client being that a focus on cost-cutting had distracted managers from opportunities to increase productivity, with their current strategy having the reverse effect, demotivating employees and restricting growth. By HQ imposing upper limits on salaries and banning the recruitment of new retail associates, the company was

hindering their ability to compete under challenging market conditions by failing to effectively use a key resource.

Herein, we can observe the impact that shared organizational assumptions can have on company performance and how key values dictate decisions made at all levels of the business – heavily influencing critical decisions relating organizational structure, employee incentives and other corporate initiatives (Gordon, 1991). Furthermore, we see how a positive culture leads to high performance (Apasu, Ichikawa and Graham 1987) thanks to fluid management-employee communication and the employees’ sense that management wants them to deliver the best possible performance (Bettinger, 1989). As Kotter and Heskett suggest, company performance is linked to corporate culture through goal alignment, effective incentivisation and managerial control without formal bureaucracy (1992).

DELIVERING INSIGHTS AND SOLUTIONS TO CREATE IMPACT

As Jordan (2013) remarks, results in Business Anthropology are a long way from their counterparts in scientific academia. The papers we publish typically take the form of “deliverables” – design blueprints, management workshops or Powerpoint presentations – and, hence, the first challenge is to “to reduce complexity and make findings on organizational culture concrete and easy to communicate so they [can] be shared” (Holme, 2010). In addition, when using Ethnography for strategy formulation, we must consider “what language to use, and what political icebergs to avoid (Brun-Cottan, 2013), taking into consideration individual relationships, differences in departmental goals and operational capabilities. Finally, we must ensure that our ideas are embraced by management and that they are implementable.

For this purpose, ethnographers must identify allies who have the power, strength, vision and voice to lead the successful implementation of their plan. Only with their collaboration will corporate change be a success (Holme, 2010). Our approach is to reveal Ethnographic insights in a visual format during workshops where we challenge assumptions and break engrained paradigms using the learnings from the study. Armed us with the company’s HR objectives, we aligned our findings to their corporate goals, presenting our insights categorised into three groups – Attracting, Engaging and Retaining – and accompanied by a large number of on-location photos and direct quotes to personalise the presentation and help management get close to the employees who had participated in the study. Next, we divided client and consultancy participants into teams, each with a diverse mix of people, to ideate around what we had learned and co-create strategies and solutions. In our case study, each team had people with a mix of backgrounds from Innovation, Retail Sales, Marketing Communications, HR and Training. Through active participation, participants can better align with project, becoming more involved and embracing the solution through a process of shared contribution (Levin, 2013). At the end of which we help to build bridges and managerial understanding of the behaviour and motivations of retail associates, making sense of the new knowledge to co-create the final deliverable – an enhanced engagement program to reduce employee turnover and increase productivity.

By the end of these workshops, 80 ideas were generated, 17 of which were selected by the workshop participants to test with the retail associates themselves. The workshops were followed by a voting process, involving the worldwide participation of more than 500 retail associates as a means to get everybody “on board” and trial the reception of new ideas

before they were officially rolled out. Retail associates were given a brief introduction of each idea alongside an illustrative image, and asked to rank each initiative in order of relevance and attractiveness. Following the results, we were pleased to see the top 6 ideas selected (the ones that received the most votes) were common across all countries, with only their order changing.

Initiatives

The winning initiative was a kit designed to support the sales process – offering product samples, sales pitch materials, gifts and accessories etc. – and was sent to individual retail associates at crucial moments, such as low sales or new product launches, around 4 times a year. Informed by the Ethnographic process, the initiative was designed to meet a need for specialized training and tools to energise the workplace, motivating retail associates on an ongoing basis to achieve their targets and boost sales.

The second and third most popular solutions were both training related, consistent with our anthropological insights, showing the retail associates' desire for growth and professional development. The second was an educational initiative, offering customized training programs linked sales objectives and career plan, allowing retail associates to manage their training, opting into courses when they had acquired enough credits, with the aim increase competency and create employee loyalty through investment in their professional development. The third initiative awarded retail associates with a new job title upon completion of specific training, aiming to promote differentiation and engage shoppers with improved service and customer experience, grounded in a high level of salesperson training. Both initiatives ranked similarly in Argentina, Chile and Spain – where there was strong competition and retail associates often lacked higher education. By contrast, retail associates in the UK, where education levels were highest, showed the least interest in training and industry certification.

White Book

Five months after the project completion, our client asked for a WhiteBook – a bible of all the knowledge and best practices acquired through our study, detailing new initiatives and guidelines to maximize performance. We wrote the WhiteBook, covering three main areas of management: Organization and Compensation, Competency and Competitiveness, Motivation and Recognition. In the book we detailed the two initiatives that had been successfully implemented by the company after our three-month study.

At the start of the project, during interviews with top management we had witnessed a lack of fluid communication and alignment between business units. We had seen that “great minds do think alike” but are too often unaware of each other and the benefits that can be enjoyed through collaboration. Noticing how, on many occasions, business units were working on similar initiatives at the same time, whilst failing to communicate effectively, we used the WhiteBook to incorporate all the knowledge we had acquired with the aim of accelerating knowledge share and information transfer within the business.

CONCLUSIONS: ROLE OF ETHNOGRAPHY IN MARKETPLACES

As Garsten and Nyqvist (2013) note

Anthropological studies in and among complex organisations have reached a point of momentum: the impressive weight of decades of ethnographic inquiry combined with the more recent speed of the development of these forms of engagement paves the way for a smooth and powerful continuation ahead.

In this paper, we addressed how anthropology can be used in a business context, focusing on Business Anthropology as a means to generate insights to inform successful strategy formulation, managing business transformation and cultural change. Examining the sales force, we saw that key areas in business management lie in the domain of anthropology – notably motivation, incentivisation and corporate culture (Webster, 1991). We also saw that, in the S-D logic of business management, value perception and creation are a two-way process between company and customer, again, heavily influenced by cultural symbols, individual perceptions and community relationships (Vargo, Stephen & Lusch, 2004)– all areas where Anthropology can add value and understanding.

Anthropology, and its unique capacity to enlighten “understanding people and the system in which they live” (Mack and Squires 2011), was used in our case study to learn about organisational structures (the interpersonal relationships between management employees), personal motivation and the perceptions of both management and employees as a means to build bridges for the formulation of improved management-employee communication and engagement. Using ethnographic methods, we looked at the individual motivations and the cultural frameworks that govern corporate structures, the role they play in individual sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and how strategic initiatives can use Anthropological insight to identify areas for improvement and inform effective organisational change management – herein, contributing to business success through the identification of initiatives to improve employee productivity, reduce staff turnover and facilitate management-employee engagement (Gordon 1991). We saw how it was important to effectively socialise employees and allow their voices to be heard, that, by understanding the ways in which people think and the motivations behind their behaviour (Bettinger, 1989), Anthropology can help create strategies that achieve greater commercial success (Lusch, Vargo & O'Brien, 2007).

To conclude, we would like to highlight Anthropology’s power to break engrained paradigms and offer new insight into business management and organisation (Ensworth 2013). If Big Data and quantitative analytics are able to show us “what” happens in the business context, seeking precise measurement and analysis, Ethnographic insights tell us the “why”, offering a deeper level or rich insight, helping us to understand the motivations of behaviour and the meanings behind actions (Miles & Huberman, 1994), ultimately allowing us to “provides insights into corporate structure and process and provide real-world solutions to problems that arise in business and industry” (Jordan 2013).

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