

# FASTCOMPANY.COM

Where ideas and people meet

Article location: <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/05/anthro.html>

December 18, 2007

Tags: [Management](#), [Careers](#), [Organizational change](#), [employee retention](#)

## Anthropologists Go Native in the Corporate Village

By [Kate A. Kane](#)

Anthropologist Elizabeth Briody earned her PhD studying communities of Mexican-American farm workers and Catholic nuns. For the past 11 years, though, she's been studying a different community -- the men and women of General Motors. As GM's "industrial anthropologist," Briody explores the intricacies of life at the company. It's not all that different from her previous work. "Anthropologists help elicit the cultural patterns of an organization," she says. "What rules do people have about appropriate and inappropriate behavior? How do they learn those rules and pass them on to others?"

Briody is a pioneer in a growing and influential field -- corporate anthropology. What began as an experiment in a handful of companies such as GM has become an explosion. In recent years, some of the biggest names in business have recruited highly trained anthropologists to understand their workers and customers better, and to help design products that better reflect emerging cultural trends. These companies are convinced that the tools of ethnographic research -- minute observation, subtle interviewing, systematic documentation -- can answer questions about organizations and markets that traditional research tools can't.

Sue Squires did her fieldwork analyzing fishing communities in Newfoundland. Today she is a PhD anthropologist at Andersen Worldwide's Center for Professional Education in St. Charles, Illinois. Squires uses ethnographic techniques and in-depth observation to evaluate training programs. She instructs accountants from Arthur Andersen in different ways of doing business around the world -- from making effective presentations in Singapore to interacting with clients in India.

"In some ways this is new territory for anthropologists," Squires says. "But ethnography is still my basic technique. Studying the corporate world is a lot like studying a community in Newfoundland. The concepts are transferable."

Anthropologist Patricia Sachs couldn't agree more. She earned her PhD in economic anthropology studying small mining communities in West Virginia. For the last several years, however, she's applied her skills at Nynex, the telecommunications giant. "Corporate settings are a complex world," she says. "We have 'natives' of many stripes. We have natives who have different opinions, who fight with each other, who work with each other."

New technologies can make these settings even more complex. Sachs was called into Nynex when workers did not respond as expected to an "expert system" developed to help manage the company's maintenance operations. Sachs says the engineers turned to her after they admitted to themselves: "Maybe the problem isn't with the computer system. Maybe there are social systems we should understand." Based on that initial project, Sachs helped create a "work systems design group" inside Nynex that uses anthropology to change how the company organizes work and delivers services.

Last January, Tony Salvador became Intel's first "engineering ethnographer." He studies customers rather than workers. Salvador is not a trained anthropologist (his PhD is in experimental psychology), but he applies the same tools and techniques. He works closely with Intel's engineers at the early stages of product development to describe "entire environments" in which new technologies might fit. "My job is to figure out what it's like to be someone else," he says.

These days, Salvador spends much of his time figuring out what it's like to be a teenager -- power users in the fast-growing market for home computers. "Teenagers are part of their own holistic community," Salvador argues. "They work, play, and spend time with the same people all day long. They're like a small village in a European country, or what a town in America was like a hundred years ago."

What explains the popularity of anthropology in tough-minded companies such as GM and Intel? Cathleen Crain of LTG Associates, a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm, believes the field's "holistic" approach -- one that draws on evolutionary, cultural, linguistic, and biological perspectives -- matches the growing complexity of business itself. Her firm's consultants (roughly half of whom hold anthropology degrees) use these varied perspectives on a wide range of projects -- from analyzing the behavior of multicultural crews of astronauts for McDonnell Douglas to advising health clinics on patterns of use by different ethnic communities.

"Adding an anthropologist to a research team is like moving from black-and-white TV to color," says Crain. "We're able to observe shades of color that others can't see. Anthropologists understand complexity and can help devise answers that reflect that complexity."

Understanding the organization in technicolor has been Elizabeth Briody's mission from her first days at GM. In one of her earliest projects, she spent three months "living with the natives" in an assembly plant. Her job was to study why a new quality program wasn't working out as well as expected.

The plant, Briody quickly discovered, had strong cultural rules that the program simply didn't recognize. The most important rule involved the "blame game." Briody's research documented that workers and supervisors were seven times more likely to assign blame for problems than to offer praise for good work. She also analyzed who blamed whom for what, how blame was expressed, and how blaming patterns followed the flow of work inside the plant.

Her conclusion: blame was pervasive but not random. Workers were eager to do a good job, but the structure of work at the plant left them feeling powerless. No quality initiative would succeed, she concluded, until it addressed these cultural realities.

"What I do is make explicit what has been implicit," Briody says. "Sometimes that makes people uncomfortable. But that's the anthropologist's job. We help people see patterns more clearly."

As a senior vice president with Houston-based Texas Commerce Bank (TCB), anthropologist Anita Ward has moved from observer to leader. She was a key player in a widely recognized reengineering initiative that cut costs by more than \$50 million, increased revenues by more than \$10 million, and improved morale. Ward says three insights derived from anthropology shaped the program.

The first was a respect for cultural differences within and between organizations. "Every culture is different," she explains. "What works in Papua New Guinea is not likely to work in Thailand." The second involved the "ability to quickly identify the core culture of the organization." In the case of TCB, that meant recognizing that teams -- not individuals -- were the basic cultural building block, and that any

change effort would have to revolve around teams. The third was an ability to recognize natural leaders. "The anthropologist can identify the true social leaders within an organization," Ward says, and enlist them as the most effective champions of change.

Ward believes the anthropological approach to change -- at TCB and elsewhere -- reflects a general movement to democratize business. "When the anthropologist enters the picture, change becomes a grassroots movement," she says. "Anthropologists understand that work is not just about process, it's about people. If you lose sight of that, you lose."

## Sidebar: Elizabeth Briody

**Name:** Elizabeth Briody

**Title:** Industrial Anthropology

**Company:** General Motors

**Age:** 40

**Education:** Ph.D., Cultural Anthropology

**Fieldwork:** Mexican-American farmworkers, Catholic nuns

**Corporate Specialty:** Understanding "subcultures" at GM

**Best Anthropological Find:** The quest for autonomy is a key attribute of the GM culture

**Last Book Read:** "God: A Biography"

**Favorite Book:** "Heidi" ("It introduced me to a child from a different culture and lifestyle")

**Last Movie Seen:** "Pride and Prejudice"

---