

Business is Booming for Business Anthropology

This post was submitted by Robert J. Morais and Elizabeth K. Briody.

In 2011, Florida Governor Rick Scott disparaged the return-on-investment (ROI) of an anthropology degree: “We don’t need a lot more anthropologists in the state. It’s a great degree if people want to get it, but we don’t need them here. I want to spend our dollars giving people science, technology, engineering, and math degrees. That’s what our kids need to focus all their time and attention on, those types of degrees, so when they get out of school, they can get a job.” Understandably, anthropologists took umbrage and mounted a [spirited defense](#).

Much in the world has changed since 2011, but apparently not some people’s perception of the practical value of anthropology. Consider [this recent statement](#) by a community college transfer center coordinator: “When students self-advise themselves, they usually miss the small details and sometimes end up taking the wrong classes. For example, anthropology can be an elective offered, but students who are business majors will need economics, not anthropology.”

As business anthropologists, we want to set the record straight about the value of anthropology – at least for business: Business anthropology is booming! Students who want to work in business are well served by taking anthropology courses and earning anthropology degrees. Their anthropological education can be applied in a broad array of businesses: marketing, advertising, marketing research, design, new product development, organizational culture and change, sustainability, risk management, and more. Anthropologists are on staff and consult with Google, Intel, American Eagle, Nissan, ADP, and IBM; anthropologists have conducted consumer, design, and organizational research for Procter & Gamble, Campbell’s Soup, WD-40, General Motors, Revlon, IDEO, and MARS, among others; many anthropologists work in advertising agencies, design companies, and marketing research firms.

Our careers are two cases in point: Morais began his business career soon after earning his PhD, initially at Grey Advertising in New York. He spent 25 years with advertising agencies, rising to Chief Strategic Officer. In 2006, he became a principal at marketing research firm Weinman Schnee Morais, serving in that position for over 10 years. He has worked with Procter & Gamble, GlaxoSmithKline, WD-40, Coca-Cola, Post Foods, Danone, Safeway, Dentsply Sirona, and Fairmont, Raffles, and Swissôtel, among many other corporations. Now he teaches MBAs about business anthropology in the context of marketing research at Columbia Business School. Briody, who also has a PhD, worked for 24 years at General Motors Research, most recently as a Technical Fellow. She founded Cultural Keys LLC in 2009, a consultancy that helps organizations understand and transform their culture. Her projects have spanned many industries including health care, consumer products, aerospace, petrochemicals, and aging, among others.

Business anthropology is gaining attention and generating excitement on a number of fronts. At the 2017 AAA Annual Meeting, there were an unprecedented number of sessions and workshops on business anthropology, supported by a [series of articles](#) in *Anthropology News*; Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) could not

accommodate all of the people who wanted to attend their 2017 conference; the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) will feature business anthropology workshops this April; and a major summit on business anthropology is being held this spring in Detroit. Moreover, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics [anticipates growth](#) in business and consulting for anthropologists. These developments demonstrate the vitality and promise of anthropology in business.

Along with the growth of business anthropology practice and association events, business anthropology scholarship has expanded substantially over the past decade. Journals such as the *Journal of Business Anthropology* and the *International Journal of Business Anthropology* were launched, and *EPIC Perspectives* offers articles that merge practice and theory. Business anthropology is also visible in *Human Organization*, *Practicing Anthropology*, and *American Anthropologist*, among other leading journals. Authored and edited books on business anthropology have flowed at an increasing rate, as have web sites dedicated to business anthropology. The web site businessanthro.com contains a list of these and other resources.

Why should students major in anthropology? The answer is that anthropology students learn to explore, understand, and engage in problem solving in and for businesses quite differently than those trained in other disciplines. An anthropological perspective provides a focus, methodological toolkit, guiding principles, and theory for gathering and analyzing “what’s going on” within firms and the marketplaces in which companies compete. More specifically:

- **Culture Concept:** Students are taught to understand culture as a *process* tied to everything that people have, think, and do, unlike in some businesses where culture is understood as a variable to be measured and manipulated.
- **Holism:** Students of anthropology learn to consider consumers’ lives and business organizations holistically through time (i.e., past, present, and future) and space (e.g., corporate headquarters, across geographies), comparing and contrasting the patterns they uncover.
- **Ethnographic Methods:** Students develop critical ethnographic skills, in which they combine observation and interviewing to assist them in making sense of behavior, decisions, practices, and policies, and proposing solutions.
- **Emic View:** They understand consumers and employees from the point-of-view of those individuals and their experiences.
- **Ethnocentrism:** Students are challenged to conceptualize corporate cultures, national cultures, and community cultures as exhibiting different features, such that ethnocentrism (i.e., the belief that my culture is better than yours) has no place in business analysis.

Anthropology courses furnish business majors with a more expansive and empathetic worldview; that in itself has immeasurable value. ROI-minded governors and college advisors – and students – should know that anthropology courses enhance graduates’ workplace value and opportunities. Students who decide to major in anthropology and/or pursue advanced degrees should be aware that the application of anthropology in business offers both intellectual and financial rewards. Is there a need for more anthropologists? There certainly is in business.