

RSA event on Embedding Design

Introduction

I work at Intel in Ireland in the Digital Health Group. My main research interests at present are in ageing and independent living. I explore the possibilities for using technologies to support new models of care in an ageing world. I am also involved in the TRIL Centre – a large, industry-academic, and multi-disciplinary research centre exploring independent living and ageing.

Before Intel I ran an ethnographic research consultancy called Ideas Bazaar – probably the first of its kind in the UK, and for a while was so-called ‘ethnographer in residence’ at The Work Foundation’s iSociety project.

In some shape or form I have been exploring technology, culture and practice for about 15 years since I started my doctoral fieldwork on satellite TV in India. I have also been a keen observer of, and participant in, discussion about the growth of the use of anthropology in business and other large organisations.

Working on the Inside, Working from the Outside In

More importantly, given the focus of the discussion today, I have spent time plying my trade as an anthropologist both inside and outside of organisations – as a consultant and as an embedded, resident or full time staff member. I hope that this experience of being a consultant and resident anthropologist will allow me to say something useful about the practice of embedding designers within organisations.

There is a pretty long and interesting history of the use of anthropology within large organisation and here is not the place to recount that (See Cefkin 2009; Sunderland and Denny 2008). However, it is work exploring what is expected of corporate anthropologists and what value they are seen to have. This will allow for a better discussion of how they try to achieve those results and live up to their promise.

The simplest way of describing the value anthropology is seen to offer to large organisations like Intel is that they increase the probability of creating successful products, services or strategies. According to this line of reasoning, anthropologists are well placed to infuse an organisation, and its development process, with powerful understandings of people and practices. These understanding can be used by strategists, designers, engineers and managers.

Another way of describing their role is focuses less on their instrumental value and more on the relationships they enable. Anthropologists create, it is argued, the space for such corporations to adopt different relationships with their subjects – be they customers, processes, products, markets or competitors. They achieve this by reframing everyday knowledge and understandings and by seeking to challenge normalised views of ‘how things are’. In summary, anthropology is valued as a powerful way of “puzzling things out in situations of complexity” (Cefkin 2009: ??) and providing a basis for action.

Long Conversations

These are big claims indeed and I doubt few corporate anthropologists would deny the fact that there is positive correlation between the growth in their numbers and the size of the claims made about their work. I sense that many corporate anthropologists work under the constant weight of significant expectations. If the promise of their work is that it will fundamentally shift an organisation's views about its market, or lead to a highly successful product portfolio, failure is highly possible. Furthermore, I would argue that much of the work of corporate anthropologists is spent not doing fieldwork or analysing that fieldwork, but engaging with people within their organisations. The reason for this is that they know that their success is contingent on them engaging in a long conversation with their organisations.

For 'embedded' or resident anthropologists the transfer of their knowledge, or their research findings, is not an event. It is very rarely a matter of merely presenting of 'ethnographically sensitive deliverable' to a selected audience, although it may entail such communication. Rather it is a process, a long conversation, with multiple stakeholders all differentially located within the business (geographically, functionally, hierarchically): it is an ongoing set of interactions.

The intention is not merely to 'debrief and depart', but to inform and engage. Perhaps like an educationalist they try to light a flame of curiosity in the minds of those in their audience. In this sense their role is to inculcate an ethnographic or anthropological sensibility – a distinctive point of view. Few would suggest this can be achieved quickly. It is a cultural project and one that organisations like Intel have been engaged in now for nearly 15 years.

Sticking Around

The long *duree* of the work of a resident anthropologist clearly differentiates it from the *modus operandi* of the consultant who is likely to conduct research, and then debrief it. However, I suspect many consultants would beg to differ, to suggest that they are committed to ensuring their work has an impact in their client organisations, and that they do 'stick around' to increase the chances that their work has an impact.

My contention is that however hard they try to ensure that the results of their work are 'actionable' within their clients' organisations (and they may indeed be more creative with their research outputs than many an 'embedded anthropologist'), their position as external to the business makes this hard in practice. Instead, the real work gets done in unanticipated ways in unexpected places. If anthropologists are indeed engaged in long term projects to change the way people view things then I think it is hard to argue convincingly that such 'conversion' happens over night. Perhaps some clients are susceptible to Damascene conversions. In my experience, only a few are.

The work of conversion is about changing language and challenging assumptions. In many cases that requires having an intimate knowledge of the

people you are engaging with, 'where they come from' and the stakes they hold in the positions they adopt. It would be reasonable for the consultant anthropologist to argue that by virtue of long term relationship with a client, constructed from a series of engagements, that they possess that requisite understanding.

My experience suggests that while this may be true to a certain degree the modern firm, as a large, geographically dispersed, multi-divisional organisation, is an exceptionally complex economic and cultural form. To tell the story of that external world, in way that is meaningful and has impact, one needs to have a strong sense of how that organisation is organised and what structures the norms, values, beliefs and motivations of the audience. That requires knowing individuals but also understanding the organisations in which such individuals are embedded. Working out how your research can have an impact requires a pretty good knowledge of how the recipient organisation work.

Reconciliation, Relationships and Roles

Being successful, or valued, as an anthropologist in a large organisation requires that you reconcile the knowledge, frameworks and models that your enquiry produces, with those of the organisations and individuals for whom the work is conducted. This requires ongoing acts of negotiation between your research and implications and how the organisation, and its constituent members, understand or construct the issues

Communicating, and being heard, requires that the message – and often the medium – is developed with a high degree of sensitivity to the position of the receiver. As an senior engineer at Intel put it “measure communication at the receiver not the transmitter”. A resident anthropologist requires the ability to continually think about what are appropriate messages for different audiences. They need to learn to continually re-tell their stories as they learn what works and has an impact. They need to be sensitive not just to what they say but how it is heard. .

The communicative artefacts that are produced are hugely important too. These may be PowerPoint decks, brief summary documents, longer research brochures or even small project websites. The monochromatic outputs of academia rarely have a role accept perhaps to demonstrate, at later points in time, the broader legitimacy of ones research within the wider scholarly community. However, the oral tradition of a large organisation needs to be understood too. Chance encounters, hallway talk, staged lobbying – all play a part in the long term project of getting yourself heard. Creativity in terms of the outputs you develop is important. Ensuring that your output has 'ethnographic liquidity', the ability to be transformed into something of value, to be traded, is vital.

Impactful, communication outputs and 'being there' over the long term to develop relationships combine to create the sort of value that is expected of embedded anthropologists. They work hand in hand, but it is the networking and the socialising of the ideas internally that really makes the impact longer term. Hard outputs and soft influencing create what Darrouzet, Wild and Wilkinson

(2009) have called an “externalised *mis en scene*”, against which an organisation and its members can engage in critical reflection which in turn produces an “opposable thumb” for the organisation. Such an outcome is not created in an instant. That evolution of thinking and perspective develops over a period of time. The imperative for an anthropologist embedded in an organisation is to work towards this goal.

I have suggested elsewhere (link to blog) that anthropologists within large organisations need to be ‘critics’, or rather that they need to **C**onsult, **R**esearch, **I**dentify Opportunities, **T**ell Stories, **I**nform and Influence and **C**ontextualise. To that list of practices and roles could be added the need to be brokers, advocates, creatives, strategists and even artists. Successfully performing the role will require a tight rope walk between being an insider and an outsider. To that extent it is highly similar to the position adopted during ethnographic fieldwork itself when, as participant observer, an anthropologists simultaneously takes part in the action and spectates it. That ability to engage, and yet still remain above the action, is a vital skill for a resident anthropologist.

Accounting for Value

And yet, there lies the critical tension when, in the final analysis, the anthropologist is asked to account for the value of their contributions to an organisation. As Michael Fischer describes it:

“Ethnographic research needs to resist being absorbed into the pure instrumentality of short-term cost benefit relations subordinated to current business practices lest it loses its distinctive ability to contribute fresh perspectives and thereby earn its keep” (2009)

Of course, estimations as to the value of the work of anthropologists embedded within organisations will always differ, depending on who you are talking to. There is very rarely a straight line between the research that is conducted and a clearly delineated outcome. Instead there is a “messy, engaged romp with uncertain outcomes” (Blomberg 2009: 216). In such circumstances it is not easy to point back to the original research and trace that line. Equally, as the saying goes, while success has many fathers, failure is always an orphan. Many will seek to claim responsibility for successful outcomes. In that context, it might not always be possible to demonstrate the vital role of the resident anthropology. In any event, knowing the complexity of an organisation, and the part played by a wide constellation of actors in reaching an outcome, the anthropologist might be unwilling to claim too much credit. That said, they’ll be conscious of the need to demonstrate not just the soft, but also the ‘harder’ more tangible outcomes of their work.

Beyond an organisational group, or managers’ framing of what success or value looks like, embedded anthropologists learn to account for and express their contributions in ways that combine soft and hard outcomes. Soft measures might include education, the production and inculcation of a new sensitivity or sensibility and better awareness of . Hard measures might be patents, invention disclosures, product ideas or tangible influence on product or market strategy.

What hard and soft measures count, and in what proportion, and the way they are expressed by anthropologists, will of course be influenced by the cultural and organisational logic of the host organisation. That is something over which an embedded anthropologist has more sway than a consulting anthropologist.

In or Out?

In much of the above I have described many of the benefits that accrue to an anthropologist working within an organisation. These mainly emanate from the ability to shape the work they do, and the way they seed it into the organisation, based on an intimate understanding of how that organisation thinks and works, which is, itself, contingent on continued access to that organisation. External, or consulting, anthropologists do however have significant value to offer. Their role as outsiders gives them an ability to see quickly, and often to penetrate, the way an organisation talks about and constructs its worldview. The outsider can apprehend the customs, behaviours and language which are utterly normalised and invisible to an organisations actors. The ability to hold a mirror up to an organisation, from outside, is something that the 'socialised' anthropologist within an organisation may often feel less able to do. More importantly, since an outsider is less likely to be identified with a particular point of view, group or faction within an organisation, they are able to adopt positions that might be uncomfortable for a resident anthropologist to adopt. Equally, the views they present are can be seen as those of a dispassionate, external observer who, freed from the politics of their client, can speak truth unto power without necessarily knowing how that power is constituted or who holds it. Living within the corporate jungle, the weeds of the organisation can grow over a resident anthropologist, stifling their ability to see as clearly as they could in past and impacting their ability to be heard.

In the end, perhaps, it is not a matter of embedded good, consultant bad, or *vice versa*. Rather is it is about pragmatic questions of size and resources – is a resident anthropologist affordable and is there work for them long term? Can their role mutate as needs demand and is the organisation flexible and mature enough to cope with individuals that have roving briefs that often have more to do with a 'project of sensibility' than they do hard deliverables. As many organisations hire anthropologists, and explore how they work and what that work achieves, the debate about in- rather than out-sourcing continues. However, I think that questions about the value of anthropology in large organisations or businesses have been settled. Their value is recognised and very rarely questioned. The real imperative now is to think about the sort of home to give anthropologists within organisations, mindful of the fact that organisations are constantly evolving and their needs ever shifting. That requires remaining open minded as to the sort of roles they can play and the influence they can bring to bear on people, processes and the wider project of the organisation.

References

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