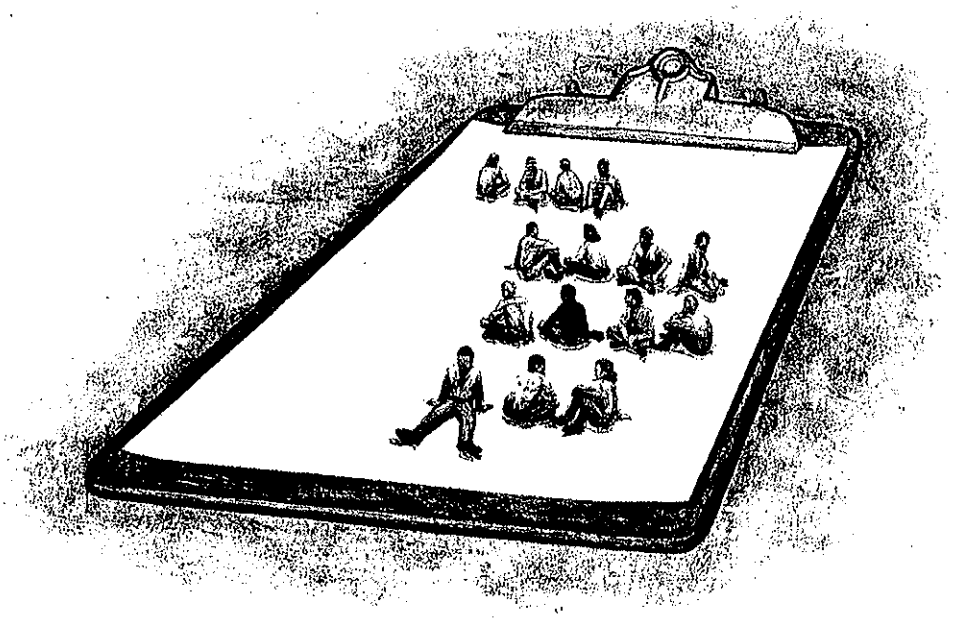
Anthropologists in Corporate America: 'Knowledge Management' and Ethical Angst

By Marietta L. Baba



JONATHAN BOUW FOR THE CHRONICLE

DURING THE PAST DECADE, anthropologists have begun to appear in some unexpected places—inside U.S. corporations. A few anthropologists were active in corporate research and consulting during the Great Depression and World War II, but the postwar increase in academic jobs lured them away from corporations. Recently, however, a prolonged period of academic downsizing, together with demands for new skills in the private sector, have both pushed and pulled anthropologists back into corporate America. Today, more than 40 per cent of the 2,000-plus anthropologists who practice outside of academe work in the private sector, either for large corporations and consulting companies or as independent contractors. (The rest work in government and non-profit organizations.)

In particular, an emerging focus on "knowledge management" has generated a new demand for anthropologists to assess the knowledge of working people. Many of the anthropologists employed by corporations find themselves trying to collect the "tacit" or informal knowledge that workers gain while doing their jobs—the information that workers have about what they do that has not been made explicit—so that it can be used more broadly.

For example, a factory worker may have an informal mental map of the way materials actually flow through a manufacturing process that differs from—but is more accurate than—the way the process is shown in an idealized engineering plan. Or a machine operator may discover that a grinding wheel need be sharpened with a diamond only after 100 uses, rather than after 50, as she was instructed.

While attempts to capture workers' knowledge are not new, management scholars, consultants, and business executives are increasingly aware that tacit knowledge, when captured and taught to other workers, improves the efficiency of business and manufacturing processes. For example, if a grinding wheel needs sharpening only half as often as was thought, and if all workers are trained to sharpen it after 100 uses, productivity increases and costs are reduced, because grinding wheels last longer, and fewer diamonds are needed for sharpening.

Executives realize that anthropologists' training, particularly in techniques of conducting fieldwork, equips them to establish rapport with diverse groups of workers and to learn what people know, even though the workers might not recognize or express their knowledge explicitly. For example, anthropologists working for a manufacturer of medical instruments observed emergency-room physicians on the job and discovered that doctors actually prefer instruments that enable them to work rapidly, even though in interviews the doctors claimed that their main interest was in instruments that were highly accurate. This insight led the manufacturer to redesign its products and increase its share of the market.

In another case, an anthropologist followed photocopier technicians on service calls and discovered that the war stories about machine repairs that were swapped informally by technicians contained clues to diagnosing repair problems. Such information, in turn, permitted technicians to solve problems that their formal training had not actually prepared them to handle. This revelation led the photocopier company to devise new ways for technicians to communicate with one another.

In these and other cases, advanced training in observing behavioral and linguistic nuances enabled the an-

thropologists to reveal knowledge that otherwise would have remained invisible.

Yet this kind of work for corporations revives ethical concerns that have troubled anthropology many times during this century. Whether in corporations or in more-traditional fieldwork, anthropologists rely on close relationships with key informants. The trust and rapport that ensue can yield information not available to other outsiders. Anthropologists often learn secrets that reveal patterns of human behavior, some of which are illicit.

Because the trust that others have in them is the foundation of their knowledge, anthropologists follow a code of ethics that requires strict protection of people who give them their trust. Identities of informants are rarely divulged, information that could be injurious to informants often is not reported, and clandestine or covert research (such as spying, or otherwise concealing one's identity as an anthropologist) is forbidden.

Many academic anthropologists avoid applied research altogether, because they fear that sponsors of the research might use the knowledge that researchers uncover to manipulate or harm people. This fear is not unfounded. In fact, anthropology's development as a formal field of study was accelerated greatly when British colonial administrators commissioned anthropologists to conduct research on African and other societies as a way to gain knowledge that would allow the colonizers to rule more effectively. Much of the classical ethnographic literature produced during the early decades of the 20th century resulted from such studies.

ANTHROPOLOGISTS' ethical duty to protect their informants presents serious challenges inside corporations, particularly when managers ask the researchers to collect workers' informal knowledge. Will managers use this knowledge to improve working conditions, or will they make the conditions worse, or even use the information to streamline operations and eliminate jobs? These are key questions, especially when managers' interests do not coincide with those of their employees.

For instance, in the case I cited above concerning the manufacturer of photocopiers, the anthropologist discovered that repair services depended on communication among technicians at different sites in the field, as the workers drew on each other's knowledge of machines and customers. The anthropologist was instrumental in getting portable two-way radios for some technicians, as a pilot project designed to make this communication easier. Once the corporation deemed the experiment successful, it expanded the program nationwide. However, some of the company's managers justified the expense of the radios in terms of increased productivity, because the radios meant that fewer technicians could service more machines. The number of technicians was cut, primarily through attrition, although the company—which was in the process of downsizing—might have eliminated the jobs even without introducing radios.

In another example, a manufacturer of cars and trucks hired a team of anthropologists to observe work groups and identify practices that could improve the deployment of computer-aided design and manufacturing technologies. The manufacturer warned the anthropologists not to become entangled in the somewhat troubled relationship it had with the outside supplier of those technologies. Unfortunately, employees of both companies insisted on talking about the relationship to the anthropologists, and both companies then pressured the researchers to turn over any data that might be damaging to one party or the other—data that included details pertaining to specific work groups and that could have been harmful to informants who divulged questionable practices related to one of the companies. The anthropologists spent several nervous days preparing a general report—which they gave to both companies—that took care not to reveal which employees had given them sensitive information.

As these examples show, anthropologists working for corporations often find that the knowledge they uncover can be used to make life less pleasant for the workers who are their informants, perhaps by the companies' eliminating jobs, or making the work more demanding or stressful. Yet anthropologists have ethical obligations to their employers or clients as well as to their informants. Hired to discover information, they cannot simply conceal what they have learned (although withholding data that would harm specific individuals is an accepted practice in anthropology). Nor can they simply walk away from an ethical conflict without running the risk of damaging their careers.

The generation of anthropologists who worked with U.S. businesses during the Great Depression and World War II faced similar dilemmas; indeed, many of them later found themselves labeled "sellouts" by academics. Yet their goals were lofty. Led by the pioneering anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, who created the important subfield of community studies, the early corporate anthropologists were trying to improve industrial productivity to support economic recovery—and, later, the war effort. They believed that their knowledge of human social systems could help ameliorate the conflicts between labor and management that were inhibiting gains in productivity. Later, critics charged that these industrial anthropologists had aligned themselves too closely with managers, uncritically embracing management rhetoric about the need for improved productivity, and failing to notice that labor-management unrest was worsening, not improving.

> Anthropologists often learn secrets, in part because their training enables them to establish rapport with diverse groups of workers.

By contrast, most of the anthropologists who studied corporations in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s were Marxists who observed the companies from the outside, rather than from the inside as consultants or employees. They came down squarely on the side of the workers. They were openly partisan in documenting the ingenious ways in which working people created and used their informal knowledge to cope with pressure and threats from managers. Ironically, it is this very knowledge—so precious to the survival strategies of working people, and so important to the scholarship of Marxist anthropology—that some anthropologists fear they themselves now may be putting in jeopardy.

As the anthropology of work enters a post-Marxist era, many anthropologists who work with business are experiencing ethical angst. While they are enthusiastic that corporations seem to be treating working people's knowledge with greater respect than in the past, some are deeply concerned that history will judge them and their profession just as harshly as their predecessors in the 1930s and '40s were judged. How can anthropologists fulfill their responsibilities to their employers, while simultaneously protecting the interests of the working people whose knowledge and trust the anthropologists must rely on for their own livelihood?

Although it may not be possible to resolve this dilemma completely, anthropologists can and should take several steps to avoid unethical behavior.

First, they must recognize that the results of their research may be applied in ways that they cannot anticipate. Laudable reasons to engage in corporate research certainly exist—for instance, the anthropologist's suggestion of portable radios for photocopier technicians has improved the working lives of the technicians who still have jobs—but it is important not to be naïve about the possibility of more-sinister consequences. Anthropologists have a responsibility to understand how their research findings might be used before they undertake a project, especially during an era of downsizing and pressure for gains in productivity. They should be skeptical of management rhetoric, being sure to compare managers' words today with their actions in the past. That will help them assess the risk associated with a given project. If the risk seems too high, perhaps they should avoid the project altogether.

Second, just because anthropologists are not fully in control of their data does not mean they are without influence. Anthropologists should review their discipline's ethical principles in detail with corporate managers for whom they are considering working. By explaining the relevance of professional standards, they may be able to structure an assignment to avoid ethical problems. Of course, all anthropologists should accept only employers, sponsors, and projects whose values are compatible with anthropological ethics.

Third, anthropologists can encourage managers and workers to negotiate improvements in working conditions in exchange for workers' sharing their knowledge. Employers can claim that their corporation legally "owns" an employee's intellectual property, because the corporation provided the resources and opportunities that led to its creation. But the capture of informal knowledge still requires cooperation by employees—nobody can extract the knowledge from employees against their will by any ethical means. Employees might offer their cooperation in exchange for participation in deciding how their knowledge should be used. Or they might seek to negotiate conditions governing its use, so that they gain greater job security, compensation, or other benefits.

Progressive managers interested in enhancing employees' loyalty—as well as in extracting employees' knowledge—should be interested in negotiating such terms. Such agreements could ease workers' distrust of managers' intentions and make it more likely that anthropologists' research would benefit the informants.

Finally, if serious ethical conflicts arise that cannot be resolved, anthropologists should drop the project. Any other course ultimately would jeopardize an anthropologist's reputation and could discourage workers from sharing information that might, under better circumstances, help improve their working lives.

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