

Business Anthropology and the Culture of Product Managers

The first section of this paper explores the history and evolution of the three domains in the field of business anthropology. The second part utilizes a business anthropology lens to examine the field of product and brand management.

Business and industry, according to Marietta Baba (2006) noted business anthropologist and professor, are fundamental ways of organizing and categorizing economic activity to meet basic human needs in modern market societies. Baba defines business, commerce and trade as the buying and selling of goods and services in the marketplace. She defines industry as the organized production of goods and services on a large scale.

The term “business anthropology” notes Baba (2006) was coined in the 1980s when anthropologists began working as full time practitioners outside of academia in fields pertaining to consumer behavior and marketing. More recently, the term is used more broadly to represent any application of anthropology to business-oriented problems. There are three major domains of anthropological research and practice in the private sector:

Organizational Anthropology - anthropology related to the process of producing goods and services, and the

corporate organization in which production takes place

Design Anthropology - ethnographically-informed design of new products, services and system for consumers and businesses

Consumer Anthropology - anthropology related to the behavior of consumers and the marketplace

Each of the three domains is well established with anthropologists holding positions in major corporate research labs and institutes such as GM, IBM, Intel, Microsoft, Motorola and Xerox. Consulting firms employ anthropologists, with Sapient employing more than 20 at one time. Scholar-practitioners are not uncommon as corporations often grant access to scholars in exchange for strategic research. Each of the three domains operates at both the national/regional level and international/global level.

Following is an overview and historical picture of the development of each of the domains of business anthropology.

Paula Gray is the Anthropologist-in-Residence at the Association of International Product Marketing & Management (AIPMM)

ORGANIZATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY

This domain focuses inside the firm and analyzes the behaviors of the people and groups that make up the company's workforce. This study may be done in order to effect changes in these behaviors. An anthropologist, adds Ann Jordan (2003) a noted business anthropologist and professor, looks at the business organization culture. Jordan defines culture as an integrated system of shared ideas, behaviors and artifacts shared by members of a group. A shared *idea* can be a company's revenue goal, or the sentiment that "the customer is boss." Examples of shared *behaviors* are casual dress Fridays, or the unwritten rule that employees are expected to work through their breaks. Examples of shared *material artifacts* include the store or office building and their contents or the company logo T-shirts.

Historical literature on organizational anthropology, according to Baba (2006), generally can be grouped into three main areas: organizational culture in technology firms; boundary-crossing roles in a global context; and regional views of corporations and work.

Organizational Culture in Technology Firms

The business community was introduced to the idea of "corporate culture" in the 1980s via the management consulting industry. Lacking an anthropologist's understanding of culture, these firms were responsible for a considerable oversimplification of the cultural construct. Anthropologists in academia

were pressured to add their more informed and enlightened view to the management literature in order to counter the inaccuracies and oversimplified view from the management consultants. A small number of anthropologists were able to gain access to firms for research purposes and began to examine organizational behavior "intent on demonstrating both the subtlety and complexity of anthropological conceptions of cultural phenomenon in organizations" (Baba 2006 p. 24). The anthropologists were also intent upon introducing the "native's point of view" as a powerful and valuable source of empirical data. This latter goal, according to Baba was meant to distinguish anthropological work from other academic disciplines that also claimed expertise or authority in the domain of "corporate culture", such as psychology, yet often represent culture as an unchanging or monolithic concept.

Several noted examples of anthropological research during that time period include Kathleen Gregory's ethnography of technical professionals in Silicon Valley computer technology firms (Gregory 1983, Baba 2006). Her goal was to determine how they understood their social worlds and to understand their "native" taxonomies or classification schemes, which indicated the existence of occupational boundaries within the firms. These taxonomies were used to understand the occupational identities and the individuals associated with those identities. Gregory was one of the first anthropologists to identify the new technology "project", its cultural meaning within the group and its cultural logic as a critical activity for many computer professionals. The commitment to the project rather than the firm allowed

● ● ●
The business community was introduced to the idea of "corporate culture" in the 1980s via the management consulting industry. Lacking an anthropologist's understanding of culture, these firms were responsible for a considerable oversimplification of the cultural construct.



individuals to move freely between firms, which was an essential element to the dynamism of the Silicon Valley region. This insight into the idea of the “project” would later be applied to decode and uncover the social practices of computer hackers.

Another noted anthropologist contributed significantly to the understanding of culturally constructed meanings and socially organized work practices among blue-collar technical workers. Julian Orr (Orr 1996 as cited in Baba 2006) was based at Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). He is known for his research studying Xerox repair technicians and the way in which they were able to repair technically advanced models of copiers though not having formal training on the equipment’s repair. He discovered that the technicians disseminated technical repair information by trading work “war stories.” They solved difficult problems by referencing stories they had learned of colleagues’ procedures and gleaning clues on how to proceed in their own situation. The company, according to Orr, had not been aware that this knowledge resource existed. Xerox modified its practices based on Orr’s work, by equipping all technicians with radio phones so they could easily communicate with one another. Another finding in the same study was the triangular relationship between the technician, the customer and the machine. Orr found that the customer was a source of knowledge about the machine behavior and the technician was a source of knowledge about the customer. Orr found that technicians were required to repair the customer relationship, in addition to the machine. This body of research illustrated the real economic value of

hidden knowledge held by employees who were not previously considered “knowledge workers” (Baba 2006).

These two examples are only a small window into the research done during that time. A few anthropology departments in universities began to incorporate additional focus on organizational research in private companies. The academic departments that have gained esteem and become widely recognized for their graduate education and/or research, according to Baba (2006) include the University of North Texas, Oregon State University, the College of William and Mary, Michigan State University, Northwestern University, and Wayne State University.

Global Boundary-Crossing

In the 1990s, focus shifted to cross-cultural issues in the corporate environment including studies of firms transplanted between countries, firms headquartered outside of the US and firms whose team members live around the globe and work virtually. The research generally followed the trends of social science literature focusing on the construction of self, identity and community in a world where traditional structures and frames of reference are becoming obsolete, where new patterns and norms are emerging (Baba 2006).

Anthropologist Bonnie Nardi is best known for her work researching “information ecologies” which examines computer mediated communication in the context of its use. Nardi’s research found that face-to-face communication between humans has advantages and complexities that have no substitute and cannot be duplicated by any

● ● ●

“Today, many design and business professionals recognize that cultural trends, and the principles that underlie them, can best be discovered through some form of rapid ethnographic analysis”

● ● ●

communications media. Her research also found that this irreplaceable communication also has costs such as disruption of work, financial expense in addition to time and energy expense. She notes that the social connections that are created and sustained by face-to-face contact are *necessary* in order to establish effective distributed work teams. Nardi found that it is imperative that a firm understand the context of the mediated communication so effected choices can be made around the types of technologies to be used and the coordination of face-to-face versus mediated communication situations (Nardi 1999 as cited in Baba 2006).

Marietta Baba along with Julia Gluesing and several other anthropologists (Baba et al., 2004 as cited in Baba 2006) conducted research on distributed work teams through an ethnography on an American-based, global firm. The firm’s goal was to institute a particular marketing methodology within a French retail company via its global virtual team. The researchers discovered that internal conflict broke out when the team members held differing opinions of the cultural appropriateness of transferring certain aspects of the methodology. This conflict nearly brought about the team’s destruction because the firm’s management team threatened to end the careers of the squabbling nationalists. What then ensued was a shift from fractional conflict to self-preservation, which in turn resulted in cooperation and collaboration. This challenged the conventional management theory by showing that key variables (teammate behavior) could fluctuate and change over time rather than remaining stable, as is the case in many theoretical models. This ethnographic inquiry also revealed

that the geographic distribution patterns of resources and people “on the ground” have bearing on the distributed team and on the ways in which historical, cultural and linguistic resources are used by leaders to further their own agenda (Baba 2006).

Regional Views of Corporations and Work

Of special interest to anthropologists are geographic regions that drive their own economic systems, such as Silicon Valley with its high tech focus. Anthropologists began studying Silicon Valley in the early 1980s with Kathleen Gregory’s previously mentioned dissertation. Several other anthropologists nearly twenty years after Gregory, examined high technology work and the idea that the work may be framed in moral terms that illustrate the social benefits technology offers to its producers and consumers. Long-term ethnographic research was conducted in the Silicon Valley and on specific firms such as Apple. Anthropologists discovered that “the language and culture of high tech work is permeated with a sense of ‘doing good’, a social construction with roots that connect Silicon Valley to notions of technical ‘progress’ grounded in the Industrial Revolution” (Baba 2006).

E. Gabriella Coleman (2001 p.28) studied Linux programmers and found “the free software community’s moral notions of freedom and more significantly its practices of production resemble a guild system of work and social organization.” Coleman adds that much in the same way that a medieval guild artisan “learned and followed the techniques cultivated by their guild”, a Linux programmer enters a

world of “standardized conventions and preferences and unique social organization when volunteering on a free software project” (p.29). Newcomers on a project are required to prove themselves through an “apprenticeship” in which they demonstrate their skills and abilities.

The studies of Silicon Valley, according to Baba (2006 p. 33) suggest that “some organizations have found (or individuals within them have found) a means by which to enable or enhance a sense of moral purpose or mission in the experience of work, and that these organizations enjoy an increased level of effort, productivity, and/or innovation gains resulting from the motivation that derives from such moral enhancement.” If some groups of employees or individuals were to experience work this way, there could possibly be great payoff to the firm or organization.

DESIGN ANTHROPOLOGY

This particular domain of business anthropology has also been called design ethnography or as “ethnographically-informed product, service and system design’ (Baba 2006). One influential book came out of this subfield in 2002; *Creating Breakthrough Ideas: the Collaboration of Anthropologists and Designers in the Product Development Industry* edited by noted anthropologists Susan Squires and Bryan Byrne. This volume states, “unlike academic investigations, applied ethnographic analysis cannot end with descriptions or explanations. They must draw out the implications of the cultural insights and offer practicable guidelines for future ideas, plans, policies, organizations,

activities, products services and images” (Squires & Byrne 2002 p. xiv). Squires and Byrne add, “over the past century our understanding of the links between the cultural context of consumers and design has become increasingly sophisticated. Today, many design and business professionals recognize that cultural trends, and the principles that underlie them, can best be discovered through some form of rapid ethnographic analysis” (p. xiv).

According to Marietta Baba (2006 p. 40) “the notion of integrating ethnography (and, it is hoped, anthropologically-informed analysis) into the design and development of new products, services and workplaces or practices has become accepted practice” in high tech companies in the US.

Susan Squires (2002) also conducted design ethnography working with General Mills. The outcome of the research was a new product, Yoplait Go-Gurt that generated \$37 million in sales the first year it was introduced, despite limited distribution. It met the customer needs that were uncovered in the ethnography; it tasted good to children, it was nutritious, and it was designed to be consumed on the go.

It is through the direct observation of human behavior in the natural environment that enables anthropologists to gain insight on a level that is not reflected in surveys, interviews and focus groups where humans tend to speak of an ideal representation of their activities and may not be able to identify behavior that is outside the scope of their conscious awareness. Especially valuable is the comparison of survey, interview and focus group data with ethnographic

● ● ●

Anthropologists recognize that markets do not buy products, people do; businesses do not buy products, people (or several, or a group, but always people) do

● ● ●

data; utilizing the anthropologist's theoretically grounded knowledge of the broader socio-cultural context is critical to an examination of the discrepancies. "Ethnographic research places the consumer in a wider context that explains why people do what they do, not only what, and also provides a deeper understanding of the value of certain products and services in people's lives" states Baba (2006 p. 41).

CONSUMER ANTHROPOLOGY

In generations past, organizations held a "producer's view of the world" and customers and the marketplace were viewed as part of the system outside the business, a destination that products and services were sent outward *to*. Many times, organizations created products first and then looked for customers afterward, dictating what the customer would have to accept. Now, due to increased competition, the in the process; the customer is viewed as a valuable source of innovation to be drawn *from*. This more enlightened view of the value of the customer, and the need for exchanges with them has transformed the way consumer behavior is studied, analyzed and acted upon (Baba 2006).

Marketing is also evolving under the influence of anthropologists. Outdated is the practice of simply describing the consumers' purchase decision such as who buys what, where, and what factors influence the decision. Most marketers now recognize that statistical analysis of survey data related to consumer demographics makes their customer a number on a spreadsheet, or a point on a

graph, thus leaving the marketer far short of enough valuable data. Firms, once "seldom looked beyond the numbers to understand who the customer really was, or why consumers made their purchasing decisions" (p. 42). Now, firms are interested in "gaining a holistic understanding of consumers' lives in context, and finding out what this may teach them about new opportunities to create or improve products, or how to make new sales (Baba 2006 p. 42).

Anthropologists are teaching firms to recognize that a market is a grouping of *people* who share some similar human behaviors such as particular buying or usage patterns. Assessing or defining the market requires an understanding of *human* behavior. Anthropologists recognize that markets do not buy products, *people* do; businesses do not buy products, *people* (or several, or a group, but always people) do. Anthropologists stress going beyond "personas", which are fictional characters, and connecting with "persons" who are living, breathing customers.

One of the first influential anthropologists in this movement was Steve Barnett in the 1970s. He would go on to add his anthropological perspective to companies such as Procter & Gamble, Campbell Soup, and Union Carbide. In the early 1990s, Barnett moved to Nissan Motor Company where he worked as the Director of Product Strategy, helping Nissan to "reconceptualize the automobile as a cultural artifact" (Baba 2006).

Product, i.e. goods and services, consumption is a cultural phenomenon readily recognized by anthropologists.

Material goods and services in all phases of the product life cycle (development, introduction, growth, and retirement) reflect cultural classifications and assumptions, and their usage reflects cultural needs. According to British anthropologist, Daniel Miller (1995), anthropology acknowledges consumption as an expression of cultural creativity and diversity and defines the relationship between consumer behavior, cultural meaning and the market. Miller has also shown that commodities and other products can act as mythic structures, as classification systems and as a means of making moral values tangible.

The literature and research produced by anthropologists in the consumer behavior and marketing fields has been well received resulting in anthropologists now holding faculty positions in university marketing departments including Northwestern University, the University of Pennsylvania, and University of Utah to name a few (Baba 2006).

The last two decades have seen a solidifying of the relationship between anthropology and business and the future guarantees that the relationship will strengthen. The 21st century in business is evolving away from the producer mentality and into a more holistic and integrated framework recognizing the importance of understanding humans as team members, consumers, and buyers.

PRODUCT MANAGERS THROUGH AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENS

Much literature exists describing the tasks, responsibilities and core competencies of product managers; however, there is a dearth of research on product managers themselves, their culture and society. This section is an introduction to the history and culture of product managers and is meant to act as a prelude to deeper ethnographic investigation and research into their cultural and societal makeup.

The study of cultural groupings of people is a cornerstone of the social science, anthropology, and ethnography is a combined qualitative and quantitative research methodology by which anthropologists gather data about those people and their culture. Within the ethnographic methodology are individual tools the anthropologist uses to gather specific kinds of qualitative and quantitative data. The anthropologist may utilize surveys, record personal life histories, conduct interviews, and conduct participant observation- the hallmark of ethnography.

Though anthropologists are most often known for studying indigenous groups in exotic locales, both the concept and methodology for studying groups in the workplace have been around since the early 1930s (Chapple 1953 as cited in Baba 1986). Regardless of the group, prior to embarking on a full-scale ethnographic inquiry "in the field", the anthropologist must learn as much as possible about the group to be studied.

● ● ●

*a product manager
“must be able to
envisage the product
from start to finish
and to have the
ability to ensure that
this vision and
strategy of the
organization is
realized.”*

● ● ●

This section offers a preliminary anthropological analysis of the history and culture of product managers.

There is much value for the group and individuals themselves to be the subject of an anthropological ethnography. An outsider (the anthropologist) offers a unique view uncolored and unbiased by membership in the group. An anthropologist takes a “holistic” view looking at not only the individuals or group, but also the environment, external forces, language, space and history. An anthropologist is trained to see patterns in systems, behavior, processes, communication and is unafraid to examine the “unspoken” rules, the entrenched behaviors and “religious” beliefs. They possess the ability to look beneath surface behaviors to understand the deeper cultural motivations that inspire those behaviors. They can also uncover the significance and origins of deeply held beliefs and tie them to the cultural structure.

Culture, Defined

In order to understand the culture of product managers one must first examine and understand the various definitions of culture, the cornerstone on which the field of anthropology is built. According to Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (as quoted in McGee & Warms 2008) culture “is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Kottak (1987) characterizes culture as being “distinctly human; transmitted through learning; traditions and customs that influence the behavior and beliefs of people” (p. 18). Talcott

Parsons (as quoted in Geertz, 1973), a noted sociologist/anthropologist defined culture as “a system of symbols by which man confers significance upon his own experience” (p. 250). Geertz (1973), an influential scholar within the field of anthropology, goes on to add that these “symbol systems, man-created, shared, conventional, ordered, and indeed learned, provide human beings with a meaningful framework for orienting themselves to one another, to the world around them, and to themselves” (p. 250). Finally, Ann Jordan, graduate anthropology professor and author of the book Business Anthropology (Jordan 2003), defines culture as “an integrated system of shared ideas (thoughts, ideals, attitudes), behaviors (actions), and material artifacts (objects) that characterize a group” (p. 40).

Anthropologists have identified seven universal components of culture (Jordan 2003) which can be examined as they apply to the organizational culture.

Patterns of subsistence: type of technology, division of labor

Religion and magic: taboos, values, goals, ceremonies, myths

Economic system: reward system

Political system: organizational structure, leadership behavior, power and politics, conflict management.

Language and communication:
communication

Social structure: group formation other than formal organizational structure

Art: organizational artifacts such as dress, building type, logos

● ● ●

It is interesting to note that both Smelser and McElroy understood the importance of fieldwork. They both advocated for getting out of the office and talking face to face with customers. Like anthropologists, they were aware that there is no more valuable data about people, than how they behave in their own environment.

● ● ●

What is a product or brand manager?

According to the Association of International Product Marketing & Management (2009), a product manager “must be able to envisage the product from start to finish and to have the ability to ensure that this vision and strategy of the organization is realized.” Linda Gorchels, author of the book *The Product Manager’s Handbook* (2000), defines a product manager as someone who “is typically a middle manager charged with managing and marketing existing products (and developing new products) for a given product line, brand, or service.” She adds “the overall responsibility of a product manager is to integrate the various segments of a business into a strategically focused whole, maximizing the value of a product by coordinating the production of an offering with an understanding of market needs” (Gorchels, 2000). Linda Merrick and Mara Krieps, principals of the firm Pivotal Product Management (2009) add that product managers, “if doing their job well, are seen as a ‘pivot point’ in the middle of everything related to their product” (p. 3). Steven Haines, author of the book *The Product Manager’s Desk Reference* supports that by adding, “product management is the pivot point of successful business” (p. 5) though he adds “the product manager is a person appointed to be a proactive product or product line ‘mini-CEO’ or general manager” (p. 15). Haines’ last statement oddly contradicts the actual experience of product managers who describe their greatest challenge as the *lack* of power or authority, quite different from that of a CEO or general manager. This

discrepancy illustrates the reason anthropologists conduct participant observation; people often discuss the ideal rather than the actual. Anthropologists tend to look closely at patterns of *behavior* to reveal an underlying belief, value or norm.

The big bang and the evolution of brand and product management culture

Brand or product management was born from intense, sustained and rigorous trial and error in the market research department at the giant consumer packaged goods company, Procter & Gamble. In 1931, D. Paul “Doc” Smelser, a Ph.D. economist from Johns Hopkins University and the head of the new unit at Procter & Gamble, called the Market Research Department, hired female college graduates to conduct fieldwork. He sent them door to door to survey homemakers about their use of all kinds of household products and their usage patterns in a method akin to anthropological customer ethnography. Within several years, the size of the department’s staff grew to around 34 with dozens of field researchers. The first brand to incorporate these market research methods in the product design process was Camay soap (Dyer et al. 2004).

Camay soap would be the catalyst and Neil McElroy would lead the charge, in defining brand management (Dyer et al. 2004). Procter & Gamble’s perfumed beauty bar, Camay soap, challenged the purity positioning of P&G’s own product, Ivory soap. The two products targeted very different markets and were in competition for resources within P&G.

● ● ●
This cross-functional team system set up what would become one of the greatest challenges for brand and product managers.
● ● ●

This convinced McElroy, then a young advertising manager, of the need to establish assignments for its marketers in brand-specific teams to allow those teams a measure of autonomy in running marketing campaigns (Dyer et al. 2004).

In a P&G company memo written by McElroy on May 13, 1931 (McElroy, 1931) he outlined what he felt the duties and responsibilities of the “brand men” should be. He assigned them the task of studying and analyzing the brand history and instructed them to “study the territory personally,” both the dealers and the customers. It is interesting to note that both Smelser and McElroy understood the importance of fieldwork. They both advocated for getting out of the office and talking face to face with customers. Like anthropologists, they were aware that there is no more valuable data about people, than how they behave in their own environment. They recognized that surveys, scheduled interviews, focus groups still only give a partial picture.

McElroy’s (McElroy, 1931) memo laid the groundwork for a reorganization and shift from a geographically aligned sales perspective to one oriented around the brands. This resulted in a fundamental restructuring of P&G to its core (Dyer et al, 2004). John Pepper (Pepper 2005), former P&G chairman of the board, president and CEO, states “responsibility and accountability for discreet business units were assigned to separate organizations... by Neil McElroy, when he helped create the brand management system in the 1930s” (p. 305). Procter & Gamble (Dyer et al, 2004) brand managers assumed responsibility for the coordination of all activities and tasks involving their brand. Far more than just

marketing, the brand managers would also coordinate product development and field sales.

As a result of this comprehensive training, from McElroy forward, every one of P&G’s chief executives would hold the positions of assistant brand manager and brand manager on their way up the executive ladder. The discipline of brand management forms the very culture of P&G and shapes its landscape. It has been emulated in a variety of forms within companies from every sector all over the world. In a recent article, Tyagi and Sawhney (2010) state that “product management is the most common organizational mechanism to manage products, relative to other mechanisms like a functional structure or key account management” (Howley, 1988; Skenazy, 1987; Workman, Homburg and Jenson, 2003 as cited in Tyagi & Sawhney, 2010).

Shared Challenges

In the 1980’s (Dyer et al, 2004) P&G discovered a way to improve upon the brand management system. Procter & Gamble sought to redirect the internal competition between brand managers, outward toward competitors and the new focus was on teamwork. David Swanson, the senior vice president of engineering began using cross-functional (read *cross-cultural*) teams to speed up product development, improve product quality and trim costs. This cross-functional team system set up what would become one of the greatest challenges for brand and product managers. According to Gemmill and Wilemon (1972) product managers are often assigned profit responsibilities for their product(s) but not given authority over the cross-

● ● ●
a product manager is required to “see” through the lenses of customers, cross-functional team members, internally and externally, and then must “translate” and communicate this data back to the other members in effective ways in which they will understand.
● ● ●

functional team units on which they depend in order to carry out those responsibilities. Therein resides the major challenge still shared and faced by product managers today; gaining support and cooperation while wielding little to no formal authority in the cross-functional team.

Lyonski (1985) found three distinct parts of the product manager’s role that make it unique. First, the product manager is in a “boundary role” or one that is an interface between the business and its market. In addition, the product manager sits on the boundary between departments within the business. Thus, the product manager faces conflicting priorities and role expectations from outsiders such as customers, advertising agencies, and the trade, in addition to internal departments such as finance, production or engineering.

Lyonski (1985) continues with the second unique part of the product manager’s role stating that it contributes to the profit of the product. Knowing the volatility of the market, the product manager must adapt the product line’s marketing mix to the unavoidable uncertainty. Consequently adds Lyonski (p.26) “the product’s success or failure affects a number of related positions whose occupants have a vested interest in attempting to influence the product manager’s behavior.”

Lyonski (1985) goes on to add the third unique aspect of the product manager’s role is the constant ambiguous pressure of internal-external interfaces. Several product managers interviewed expressed the feeling of being “caught in the middle.”

In recent job opening posts on the website of the Association of International Product Marketing & Management, the job descriptions included the following phrases: “solid understanding of the needs of the key end-user,” “a proven track record of gaining the respect of others,” “ability to work cross-functionally,” “ability to quickly summarize and communicate complex information for multiple audiences,” “a strong influential leader of a cross-functional team,” “an internal and external champion, evangelist, and expert,” “drive a cross-functional team.” These phrases illustrate a pattern; that a product manager is required to “see” through the lenses of customers, cross-functional team members, internally and externally, and then must “translate” and communicate this data back to the other members in effective ways in which they will understand. This is without question no small feat. It is akin to speaking five languages and living in five countries for they not only have to translate their communication, they must do it in a way that creates a connection with the listener. Simply rattling off data would not be as effective because the product manager is charged with *persuading* the key players while representing the interests of the customers, the product(s), the brand, the team, and the firm.

Product managers both interact within their own firm’s organizational culture, and are members of a wider culture of product managers that span companies and continents. They acquire a set of shared knowledge, symbol-systems, behaviors, beliefs, values, norms and taboos as members of this society. Most have not had the benefit of a cultural anthropology class in their education but

● ● ●
*a product manager
is unique in that the
role is dependent on
the behaviors of
others*
● ● ●

the most successful ones have intuitively taken steps to understand what anthropology calls “the other”. Beginning with the most basic introductory anthropology class one concept is reiterated; our individual experience of the world is filtered through our own cultural “lens” and therefore everyone else sees the world through his or her own unique lens as well. Successful product managers show a pattern of having the ability to recognize their own lens and attempt an understanding of the lens of their cross-functional teammates.

Shared Behaviors

Product managers share a unique position within the corporate culture. According to Luck (1969) they are considered the “firm’s main intelligence center for its product lines” (p. 34), yet they still rely on a team of functional specialists that they have no power or authority over. Luck (1969) also found that the horizontal plane that product managers operate on, in contrast to the vertical organization of most marketing roles is a departure that has the potential to create discord and ambiguity of authority. Nevertheless, product managers must elicit cooperation from this cross-functional team in order to achieve the objectives set forth before them. According to Brian Lawley (2009), author of the book *The Phenomenal Product Manager*, a key characteristic among product managers is their “ability to use both logic and emotion to win over wide ranges of audiences” (p. 8). Merrick and Krieps (2009) also add, “the product manager plays the role of organizer, leader, translator as needed” (p. 3).

Gemmill and Wilemon’s (1972) finding support the pattern of product managers as persuaders. They found that a product manager succeeds or fails based on their ability to use alternative methods of persuasion to gain support for their actions. Product managers therefore must persuade, cajole and sometimes coerce these team members into cooperation. When met with resistance, Gemmill and Wilemon (1972) found that in the absence of authority, all product managers employ one or more of the following influence methods:

Reward Power – the ability to elicit support because others believe the product manager has the power to offer direct or indirect rewards.

Coercive Power – the ability to elicit support because others believe the product manager has the power to punish either directly or indirectly.

Expert Power – the ability to elicit support because others believe the product manager possesses unique expertise.

Referent Power - the ability to elicit support because others feel a personal connection with the product manager either in friendship, identification as a role model, a shared identity, or hero worship (though many product managers would argue the latter is extremely rare).

When examining the work lives of product managers through an anthropological lens, one sees a pattern of them straddling multiple cultures within an organization. They are members of the organizational (business) culture, product managers themselves constitute their own unique subculture,

and by the nature of their job, they must depend upon team members who hail from different functional/departmental cultures. We see a pattern of product managers holding expertise but rarely power, we also see them operating as a skillfully persuasive force in order to move a product through its entire life cycle. The product manager is unique in that the role is *dependent* on the behaviors of others. The product manager must produce his or her own output but must also coordinate the output of others without wielding power over them, therefore it requires that they develop a unique set of interpersonal relationship skills, and those who truly

excel possess a superior cross-cultural skill set as well.

A full-scale ethnographic research project is warranted to delve deeper into the world and culture of product managers. Their role in business is a unique one and their common struggle holds an opportunity for growth, not only for the individual product manager but also for the firm as a whole.

For more information contact Paula Gray at www.aipmm.com or paula.gray@aipmm.com

References

- Association of International Product Marketing & Management (2009) Company document.
- Baba, M. (1986) Business and industrial anthropology: An overview. *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology Bulletin* Vol. 2. Issue 1
- Baba, M. (2006) Anthropology and business. *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Coleman, E. (2001) High-tech guilds in the era of global capital. *Anthropology of Work Review*. 2001: 22
- Dyer, D., Dalzell, F., Olegario, R., (2004) *Rising Tide: Lessons from 165 Years of Brand Building at Procter & Gamble*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press
- Gemmill, G., & Wilemon, D., (1972) The product manager as an influence agent. *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 36 (January 1972).
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. US: Basic Books
- Gorchels, L., (2000) The Product Manager's Handbook: The Complete Product Management Resource. Chicago, IL: NTC Business Books.
- Gregory, K. (1983) Native-view paradigms: Multiple cultures and culture conflicts in organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 1983: 28.
- Haines, S. (2009) *The Product Manager's Desk Reference*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill
- Jordan, A. (2003) *Business Anthropology*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Kottak, C. (1987) *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc.
- Lawley, B. (2009) *The Phenomenal Product Manager*. Silicon Valley, CA: Happy About
- Lyonski, S., (1985) A boundary theory investigation of the product manager's role. *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49 (Winter 1985) DOI: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1251173>
- McElroy, N. (1931) Procter & Gamble company memo, May 13, 1931.
- McGee, R., & Warms, R., (2005) *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Merrick, L. & Krieps, M. (2009) Uncovering the Seven Best Practices of Leading Product Managers.
- Miller, D. (1995) *Acknowledging Consumption*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Pepper, J. (2005) *What Really Matters*. Cincinnati, OH: Procter & Gamble Company.
- Squires, S. (2002) American breakfast & the mother-in-law: How an anthropologist created Go-Gurt. *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology*. Retrieved from <http://practicinganthropology.org/stories/2002/american-breakfast-the-mother-in-law-how-an-anthropologist-created-go-gurt/>
- Squires, S. & Byrne, B. (2002) Creating Breakthrough Ideas: The Collaboration of Anthropologists and Designers in the Product Development Industry. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
- Tyagi, R., & Sawhney, M. (2010) High-performance product management: The impact of structure, process, competencies and role definition. *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 2010: 27