



## MONITOR

# Off with the pith helmets

Mar 11th 2004

From The Economist print edition

### **Management: The use of anthropologists in technology firms, once a novelty, has now become commonplace. What changed?**

NO ONE asks to see Steve Barnett's pith helmet anymore, which he views as a sign that the natives are now comfortable with his presence. Indeed, they appear to accept Dr Barnett, a pioneering business anthropologist, as one of their own—something that now holds true for corporate anthropologists in general. It was certainly not the case in 1979, the year Dr Barnett left academia to set up as an anthropological marketing-consultant. It was still not true in the late 1980s, when Xerox asked one of its resident anthropologists, Jeanette Blomberg, to don a pith helmet for a corporate photo.

But corporate anthropology is now mainstream, particularly among technology firms. Indeed, when he was informed that IBM Research had hired Ms Blomberg as its first anthropologist in December 2002, Paul Saffo of the Institute for the Future exclaimed, "Just now? How embarrassing." To be fair, Ms Blomberg signed on to do anthropological research into services, a new tack for an industry traditionally focused on products. But Dr Saffo's point is that anthropologists are now regarded as a necessity at such firms.

The use of anthropological techniques in industry goes back to the 1920s, when a group of researchers, including Lloyd Warner of Harvard University, conducted several pioneering experiments at a factory in Cicero, Illinois, examining the impact of pay, working conditions and other incentives on productivity. But the field then fell largely dormant until Dr Barnett and his colleague Lucy Suchman were asked by Xerox to provide an anthropological perspective on product design. This was an unusual step, because computer scientists in particular tend to dismiss social science as vague, qualitative hand-waving based on interviews—the antithesis of computers' predictable determinism. "We suggest behaviours and trends that often get dismissed as being anecdotal," says Genevieve Bell, an anthropologist who has worked at Intel, the world's largest chipmaker, since 1998. "I routinely have people here who look at me like I have three heads."

But now the computer industry needs the advice of anthropologists more than ever before, argues Marietta Baba, a social scientist at Michigan State University and the creator of the first business-anthropology course in America, at her former employer, Wayne State University. As computers have

gone from being specialised tools operated by men in white coats to part of the fabric of everyday life, hardware and software designers can no longer assume that their customers are just like them. "There was an astounding lack of attention paid to what people would use technology for, and what they needed," says Dr Saffo.

Ferocious competition and increasingly saturated markets now mean that computer makers, like makers of other mass-produced consumer goods, need to understand their customers and design products for specific markets. The days of "one size fits all" are long gone. Another factor, notes Rick Rashid, the head of Microsoft Research, is that the internet has made computers into social tools. It seems obvious now, he says, but "a few years ago people would ignore the social implications of computing."

All of this means business anthropologists are no longer detached, pith-helmeted observers, but are getting involved in shaping corporate strategy. Dr Bell, for example, recently completed a two-year tour of six Asian countries, conducting field research about attitudes to technology. Her aim, in part, was to debunk the theory, espoused by her colleagues at Intel, that all markets would react in the same way to PC technology. It is not yet clear what it means to Intel's long-term strategy that, in parts of southern China, it is customary to take your mobile phone to a local Buddhist monk for blessing. But it is clear that people who live in tiny dwellings with less-than-reliable electrical supplies are unlikely to have much enthusiasm for large computers with power-hungry processing chips.

PC-makers still have a long way to go to match the marketing prowess of most consumer-goods firms. That is not surprising, for PCs have only recently become consumer goods. But there are signs of progress. Dr Saffo mischievously notes that technology firms once shared with Colombian drug cartels the dubious distinction of marketing to "users". Now they talk of customers instead.