

Anthropology | Workplace Strategy | Culture

Applied Anthropology: Bringing Added Evidence and Value to Workplace Strategy

Dr. Chris Diming

An introduction to how anthropology applies to workplace strategy and supplies methods for discovering the future workplace.

Introduction

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, social distancing measures have led to 'working from home' among knowledge workers, a trend made possible by advances in communications technology and software. Remote working and flexibility are key workplace trends going forward. Furthermore, while working from home has benefits associated with more focused work tasks, potential downsides exist for collaboration and company culture. To create future workplaces, companies will need to better understand what constitutes 'work' for their workers, their desired organizational cultures, and how these relate to their business strategies and real estate portfolios.

This article introduces applied anthropology to workplace strategy and supplies methods for discovering the future workplace. First, we briefly describe anthropology before connecting it with workplace strategy, utilizing workplace literature and example processes to ground the discussion. Next, we put forward methods from applied anthropology for studying how people interact within and use the locations where they work. Through their toolkit and perspective, applied anthropologists can investigate culture and practices as they emerge within the workplace, uncovering future possibilities and innovation opportunities in the process. In collaboration with



Connect with workplace experts by advertising here
Please contact Caroline at sales@workandplace.com



designers, strategists, and others, anthropological engagement can help reshape the future of work and drive lasting value for organizations.

A Background on Anthropology

Anthropologists study people and culture. Durham University professor Michael Carrithers views culture as a shared set of concepts, metaphors, and practices that members of a group use to interpret their surroundings, relate with others, and navigate daily life.ⁱ This toolbox is both created and reproduced through social interactions. Rather than being universal and static, culture is dynamic and fluid. Furthermore, anthropologists are future-oriented because they view culture as being in a constant state of 'becoming.' Because culture emerges from what people do, it differs from place to place.

Ethnography – people and workplace cultures

Anthropologists have developed ethnography to study how culture and practices emerge from social contexts. An ethnography is an account of a group of people in context. Making one involves fieldwork, through which the researcher becomes embedded within a population and place. The sheer depth characterising this immersive process allows researchers to gain insights on more than just what happens in the present or past. Rather, anthropologists can connect the dots between what people do and say while discovering new forms of culture as they are being produced. As will be shown later in this article, anthropologists' emergent view of culture and ethnography allows them to focus not just on what is happening within the present workplace, but also on uncovering what could occur tomorrow and identify opportunities for innovation.

To carry out ethnographic fieldwork, anthropologists start with identifying the study's research questions, which relate to the aspects of culture they will investigate. The research questions are then matched with rigorous research methods.ⁱⁱ Qualitative methods, including participant observation and interviewing, focus on uncovering the 'why' and 'how' behind observed behaviours through providing 'thick' data.

During participant observation, the researcher studies phenomena related to a group and its members (often termed 'informants' or 'respondents') while simultaneously participating and analysing their evolving role as a researcher. Interviews complement participant observation by allowing the ethnographer to probe deeper into recorded behaviours, thereby opening a window into the respondents' perspectives and experiences.

When interpreting data from both methods, anthropologists seek out developing themes, asking what they say about the research questions and, ultimately, culture. In not just focusing on what people say and do, but what both words and actions mean, anthropologists' ethnographies describe culture in context and explain how it emerges.

While anthropologists often employ qualitative approaches, they can also use quantitative techniques as part of a 'mixed-methods' methodology.ⁱⁱⁱ Quantitative methods, such as surveys,

allow researchers to conduct studies across large-scale populations. These tools can quickly and systematically gather and analyse numerous data points.

While quantitative methods often reveal behavioural patterns, they are not as effective as explaining how and why the findings are the case. Thus, researchers may seek out the best of both worlds through combining qualitative and quantitative methods, with large-scale comparability on one hand and sensitivity to the context on the other.

In conclusion, anthropology's value lies in its use of ethnography to explore how culture emerges among people in context. Rather than simply exploring how people interact in the present, anthropologists look beneath the surface to understand shared perceptions and beliefs. Consequently, they explore how culture is co-produced, discovering new practices and concepts in the process. This insight enables them to ascertain patterns that can become trends, thus granting them a window into future possibilities. As will be discussed in the following sections, anthropologists' ability to look beyond the past and present has concrete implications for workplace strategy because they can reveal aspects of work to come and opportunities to shape it.

Applied Anthropology within Workplace Strategy

While continuing to take people as its starting point, anthropology is routinely practiced in non-academic contexts as 'applied anthropology.' This section outlines the connections between applied anthropology and workplace strategy and highlights co-creation opportunities with multi-disciplinary project teams.

The 'workplace' is simultaneously virtual, physical, and social. Furthermore, it serves as a setting for the emergence of company culture while also being part of broader systems, including local communities and the physical environment. Yet, the definition of workplace strategy varies by company and practitioner. Therefore, workplace strategy is broadly defined as a dynamic process for connecting people, work tasks, and space. It seeks to create a sense of place across the locations and media where work happens, thereby fostering experiences, shaping workplace culture, and driving organizational goals.

According to Advanced Workplace Associates (AWA), workplace strategies are organizational 'blueprints' for how and where workers will go about their tasks^{iv}. However, this vision is bound up with understanding those who would utilize the space and fashioning an end-to-end experience.

As with the above definition of workplace strategy, we acknowledge that numerous processes exist. In an example of an end-to-end process, Interserve and AWA specify six steps for designing a workplace experience:

1. using applied research to create a 'workplace experience brief',
2. establishing parameters through 'synthesis and innovation',
3. separating the vision into consecutive 'journeys',
4. rendering the journey map into concrete 'specifications' for execution,
5. 'delivering' the experience through collaborating with the project team, and

6. maintaining the experience via 'workplace management' ^v.

Meanwhile, Neil Usher, author of *Elemental Change*, bases his workplace transformation and change management model on first establishing the 'infrastructure of change,' which contains three interrelated levels: the 'universal,' the 'global,' and the 'local'.^{vi} For Usher, success involves opportunities to shape future behaviours, rather than relying on the past or present. These opportunities take the form of behaviours that workers would be willing to do and 'shortcuts,' behaviours that people do within the physical environment despite the latter being officially designed for another purpose^{vii}. In finding shortcuts and new behaviours, change managers establish local conditions for change that create infrastructures of change that increase the project's likelihood of success.

Herein lies the first commonality between workplace strategy and anthropology: a focus on people and culture. Anthropologists' view of culture as 1) composed of values and practices and 2) emerging from interpersonal interactions, which means that they are adept at finding ways to align workers' values with new practices and shortcuts in space use. In this way, anthropologists bring value by finding opportunities for reimagining work, thereby driving a projects' success.

Company Culture and Collaboration

Company culture and collaboration is the second connection between workplace strategy and anthropology. A seminal white paper produced jointly by the British Crown and the architecture firm DEGW, *Working Without Walls*, considers culture within the context of communication^{viii}. The paper argues that advances in information and communications technology enable more collaborative teams and responsive decision-making.

Meanwhile, Steelcase identifies joint efforts as central to most work-related tasks, especially for knowledge workers^{ix}. Based on its 'Work from Home' survey, Colliers identifies improved collaboration as a reason for remote workers to return to the physical workplace after Covid-19^x. Hence, understanding company culture and facilitating collaboration are essential for workplace strategy going forward.

Applied anthropology is well-suited for exploring organizational culture and working together due to its methodological and disciplinary focus on culture. Rather than examine solely how employees perceive collaboration, anthropologists study emerging concepts and values that underlie it. As organizations are composed of inter-personal relationships, working together involves encounters between and among employees that produce new forms of organizational culture.

By exploring how workplace culture emerges, anthropologists observe new patterns of behaviour and collaboration that can shape the future, thereby revealing potential characteristics of work to come and avenues to reimagine it^{xi}. Therefore, anthropologists identify potential conditions and opportunities that organizations will face, while discovering potential avenues for reimagining collaboration and workplace culture. In short, anthropologists are future-seekers and opportunity finders.

The Future of Work

Being future-forward is an asset, especially when it comes to the effects of COVID-19 on the workplace. Recently, the pandemic has upended the workplace landscape, generating urgency among companies to decipher the 'Future of Work.' Mass remote working has sparked doubts regarding the office's purpose for knowledge workers. However, in recent research, Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL) finds that the office will take on new functions by becoming a hub for sparking collaboration, maintaining company culture, and driving innovation^{xii}. That the office will exist within an arrangement of spaces that allow remote and in-person work is at the core of the emerging hybrid workplace models.

Because workers will face abundant choices, spaces must foster collaboration and culture if they are to be desired by workers and occupants. Companies will need to make numerous choices, leading to questions regarding what to include and what to exclude from the hybrid workplace. Designing these spaces requires insight into employees and how they are working with each other, as well as awareness of future trajectories and opportunities.

Therefore, Anthropologists may collaborate with strategists by contributing their focus on emerging workplace cultures and practices. Thus, a trained anthropologist can discover potential futures for organizations and uncover opportunities for realigning people, space, processes, and technology to fit what lies ahead.

Anthropological Methods for Workplace Strategy

This section builds on the discussion above by proposing methods for workplace transformation projects. We describe the workplace ethnography before delving into shorter rapid studies. In each section, the method is described along with an example of how it would be used in a practical scenario. These methods harness anthropologists' sensitivity to emerging forms of culture and, in collaboration with other strategists, allow them to highlight opportunities for innovation in workplaces.

Workplace Ethnography

The first method we discuss is 'workplace ethnography.' Workplace ethnographies have previously been conducted by organizational researchers^{xiii} and applied anthropologists^{xiv}. Our execution of ethnography differs from previous uses by applying the method to workplace strategy and design. Here, the researcher delves into the underlying aspects of workplace culture and connects these values with empirically observed behaviours in the built environment to generate avenues for reimagining workplaces.

Representing 'short-term' ethnographies (as described by design anthropologist Sarah Pink^{xv}) they need four to six weeks to complete and are feasible because they focus on specific aspects of the workplace. Unlike existing uses of observations and interviews in workplace strategy, they are focused not only on present behaviours in working environments. Rather, they uncover ways that workers may interact and use workplace environments in the future because anthropologists utilize

their methods and emergent perspectives on culture to become immersed in the environment and look for emerging patterns in cultural values and behaviours.

When designing the study and interpreting the data, anthropologists would seek to understand how, for example, trust is produced within the environment, which employee practices lead to it forming, and how these actions might be utilized by workplace design processes to create future environments. Or, more specifically, when an aspect of the environment does not work (like audio-visual technology in a meeting room), what do they do? To an anthropologist, what the employees do in response represents an emerging pattern that, if it happens throughout the study, shapes how employees will work tomorrow.

To make our framework concrete, we will now show how a workplace ethnography could happen in practice. In our example, a client desires to understand how remote employees are working to know what aspects their workplace must include to be relevant after the return to work.

- **Deciding Research Questions:** In conjunction with other members of the workplace strategy team and client stakeholders, the anthropologist devises the research questions. The questions are distributed to the team and client for feedback to have a stable foundation going forward. In our case, the questions are:
 - How do employees view collaboration and team relationships? What practices do these ideas entail? What forms of collaboration and teamwork emerge in the process?
 - When the tools used by employees do not work, what do they do instead? Do these patterns of behaviour hold over time?
 - What ways of utilizing home space and virtual space emerge throughout the project? How might these practices inform what the future workplace would need to support employees and drive value?
- **Designing Methods:** the anthropologist then designs methods based on the research questions. In our case, we conduct a remote ethnography utilizing diary studies and photography techniques to gather data.^{xvi} With the client's consent, we also join the team's virtual Slack (or similar) environments and video conferences to observe directly how online collaboration happens. We also conduct interviews via Zoom, with employees' informed consent and structured around the above themes. If the anthropologist cannot join the environment, numerous 'mobile ethnography' techniques can be used, which harness smartphone technology to elicit responses and behaviours from participants.^{xvii} These methods allow us to become immersed within the virtual environment and answer our research questions.
- **Recruitment:** We then recruit participants from across the company, aiming for a broad cross-section of employees and between fifteen and thirty interviews. In qualitative research, the number of samples is less important than depth and speaking with a range of people. As the research aims to improve the employee's experience and utilizes rapport building, incentives are less likely to be needed.

- **Data Collection:** We begin our observations and interviews.
 - o *Participant observation:* While within the virtual environment, the anthropologist notes key posts and images, observing how employees work while also participating to the extent possible by interacting with employees and joining virtual meetings. The anthropologist builds rapport and accumulates notes over time relating to the research questions.
 - o *Interviews:* Simultaneously, the anthropologist begins the Zoom interviews, thus obtaining employees' perspectives concerning the research questions. To facilitate detailed analysis and interpretation, the interviews are transcribed. To accompany responses, the anthropologist asks interviewees to take photos of their home working environments and requests that they provide a diary of their work over a week. The diary provides longitudinal data, while the photos inform the anthropologist about the employees' physical environment. Responses will be anonymized and kept confidential to preserve trust.
- **Interpretation and analysis:** Following the fieldwork, the anthropologist will collate the observation notes and transcripts. The interviews and notes will be coded to highlight themes that arise from the data. The anthropologist then digs into the themes to investigate nuances and variation in responses while relating the findings to the research questions. The data are interpreted for meaning and emerging patterns.
 - o In our example, the anthropologist has found opportunities for building on specific workarounds that employees have devised to make remote collaboration work better. The anthropologist has also found how employees view collaboration and teamwork, and related practices, and extrapolated what these findings could mean for the future workplace.
- **Outcomes:** The anthropologist produces both a report on these insights and a presentation with highlights, presenting both to the strategy team and client. Through collaboration, the anthropologist and other team members design ways to appropriate the opportunities uncovered in the research for creating the future workplace. Having conducted fieldwork and established the infrastructure for change, the anthropologist and team can align the environment with emerging behaviours and values.

Thus, anthropologists can answer clients' questions about how work could happen in the future, thereby informing strategic planning decisions beyond present space usage. When collaborating with workplace strategists, anthropologists' techniques represent a form of forecasting that explores what clients' workplaces could look like in the future, what might be needed to support employees, and identifies opportunities to anchor projects to emerging behavioural and cultural patterns. These perspectives represent valuable insights that provide clients with possibilities for creating workplaces that harness technology, culture, and space.

Rapid Qualitative Studies

Although workplace ethnographies probe deeply into emerging social patterns, the resulting insights come at a cost in time, making them tricky from many strategy teams' perspectives. Therefore, I propose an additional method for consideration: *rapid qualitative studies*.

Like workplace ethnographies, rapid studies utilize qualitative techniques to generate insights on people, culture, and the workplace. They have their roots within rapid assessments in public health^{xviii} and design research,^{xix} where teams often utilize them in agile software design and development cycles.

These studies can take between one and two weeks, depending on the research question and time available. They can also be executed alongside surveys as part of a "mixed method" project. Additionally, techniques can include observations and mobile ethnography alongside interviews, depending on the project. Their short timespans and flexibility make it possible to integrate the studies into fast-moving design processes while still revealing cultural context and future workplace possibilities. Thus, when conducted by anthropologists, rapid studies provide cost-saving and efficiency benefits for research phases due to the rigor involved and the outputs produced.

Anthropological rapid studies are possible because they focus on specific topics rather than broader research questions. To illustrate this approach, we provide a short example of a two-week process. In our case, a company has delivered and analysed a survey on perceptions of collaboration among remote employees. The findings appear to show perceptions of reduced collaboration since mass remote work began in March 2020. However, the survey results lack context, and it is unclear why employees answer the way they do. Therefore, the anthropologist designs and conducts a study in the following phases:

- **Deciding Research Questions:** The anthropologist devises the research questions in collaboration with the strategy team and client-side colleagues.
 - Why are employees responding in this way to the survey?
 - How are employees collaborating and working?
 - How do they view collaboration?
 - From both the rapid study and survey, what possibilities are there for enhancing collaboration?
- **Designing Methods:** As soon as the questions are finalized, the researcher plans a series of qualitative interviews with ten to fifteen employees.
- **Recruitment:** Given the two-week timeline, recruitment begins immediately after the methods are finalized. Interviewees are recruited from the survey's original respondents based on their answers, to speak with a wide cross-section of respondents.
- **Data collection:** Interviews are conducted on a rolling basis upon recruitment. Given time constraints, greater emphasis is placed on accurate note taking than transcripts, which take time to produce. As with the workplace ethnography, interviews are structured according to the research questions and are done with the respondents' informed consent.
- **Interpretation and Analysis:** The anthropologist interprets the interview notes utilizing the same coding method as workplace ethnography. The anthropologist then triangulates the

findings from the notes with those of the survey to contextualize the survey responses and reveal emerging patterns of collaboration in the working environment.

- **Outcomes:** The anthropologist provides a report and presentation to colleagues on the strategy team and with the client on the research exercise and implications for the survey. This report answers the client's questions regarding the survey while moving the conversation forward by highlighting the opportunities of emerging collaboration patterns for the client's workplace. Given the agile nature of this method, it can be repeated as the workplace evolves.

The rapid study's structure allows anthropologists and strategy teams to collaborate within more restrictive time frames. Therefore, rapid studies provide substantial benefits for workplace strategy through their compatibility with agile processes and ability to highlight emerging patterns of behaviour in the workplace, consequently helping clients and teams to harness future possibilities.


Conclusion


This article has introduced applied anthropology and described how it relates to workplace strategy. Following this discussion, we have provided methods for workplace strategy. Anthropologists' approaches and people-centred mindsets make them well-suited for contributing to workplace strategy projects. When working alongside workplace strategists, anthropologists provide insight into organizational culture and the people who utilize working environments while highlighting opportunities appearing in emerging behavioural patterns. Consequently, such multi-disciplinary teams can co-create solutions that generate collaboration, productivity, and value for organizations.

The Author




Dr. Chris Diming: *Chris is an applied anthropologist with a passion for design research and the workplace. In 2017, he obtained a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from Durham University in the United Kingdom. Focusing on the built environment and social interactions, his research explored how people negotiate and mobilize networks of inter-personal relationships in Pristina, Kosovo's capital city. He has recently returned to the United States, where he advocates for applying anthropological methods to workplace strategy and design.*

 chris.diming@gmail.com

 +1 804 873 7902

 [ChrisDiming1](#)

 [linkedin.com/in/drchrisdiming](https://www.linkedin.com/in/drchrisdiming)

-
- ⁱ https://www.berghahnbooks.com/downloads/intros/CarrithersCulture_intro.pdf
- ⁱⁱ <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442268883/Research-Methods-in-Anthropology-Qualitative-and-Quantitative-Approaches-Sixth-Edition>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780759120709/Handbook-of-Methods-in-Cultural-Anthropology-Second-Edition>
- ^{iv} <https://www.advanced-workplace.com/awa/services/workplace-strategy/>
- ^v <https://www.advanced-workplace.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Interserve-Workplace-3-Practical-Guide.pdf>
- ^{vi} Neil Usher, *Elemental Change: making stuff happen when nothing stands still*, (Pre-publication proof), 27.
- ^{vii} Usher, *Elemental Change*, 45-54.
- ^{viii} <https://www.worldcat.org/title/working-without-walls-an-insight-into-the-transforming-government-workplace/oclc/156653541?referer=di&ht=edition>
- ^{ix} <https://www.steelcase.com/content/uploads/2015/01/threesixty-collaboration-white-paper-v2.6.pdf>
- ^x <https://www2.colliers.com/en-hr/research/exploring-the-post-covid19-workplace>
- ^{xi} <https://workplaceinsight.net/anthropology-might-hold-some-of-answers-to-the-most-difficult-workplace-challenges/>
- ^{xii} <https://www.us.jll.com/en/trends-and-insights/research/future-of-office-demand>
- ^{xiii} <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1094428109338070?journalCode=orma>
- ^{xiv} <https://convene.com/catalyst/workplace-anthropology-making-spaces-work-better-people/>
- ^{xv} <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/symb.66>
- ^{xvi} <https://www.epicpeople.org/ethnographic-research-in-remote-spaces-overcoming-practical-obstacles-and-embracing-change/>
- ^{xvii} <https://www.quirks.com/articles/mobile-ethnography-let-kraft-capture-the-highs-and-lows-of-party-planning-and-hosting>
- ^{xviii} <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2656056/>
- ^{xix} <https://www.epicpeople.org/breaking-it-down-integrating-agile-methods-and-ethnographic-praxis/>

The copyright to this article belongs to And Places Limited (Hong Kong SAR) 2021. If you would like to know more about opportunities to collaborate with **Work&Place**, either as an author or sponsor, please contact marcus.bowen@workandplace.com

 Connect with workplace experts by advertising here
Please contact Caroline at sales@workandplace.com 