

# Anthropologists deep in the corporate bush



Anthropologist Linda Catlin isn't unearthing the skeletons of past civilizations, she's exposing the 'skeletons in the closet' of corporate America.

**By Marylou Doehrman**  
Staff Reporter

From banking to retail to high-tech to health care, the anthropological power of observation is in demand.

One expects to find anthropologists studying the lifestyles of the Bushmen of southern Africa or the Aborigines of Australia, but not many people would admit to having pictured an anthropologist observing employees at General Motors or the Mayo Clinic.

However, for years anthropologists have been delving into corporate cultures and consumer-buying practices, said Ed Liebow, the immediate past-president of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology.

"U.S. Bank employs an anthropologist as the head of corporate philanthropy to ensure the bank is a good corporate citizen," he said.

J.C. Penney and the Gap utilize anthropologists to study consumer trends.

Anthropologists at Microsoft tailor operating systems to different languages and user groups, Liebow said.

"Anthropologists get a lot of work in high-tech—in software development," he said. "They get the users to talk through what is confusing."

Health maintenance organizations employ anthropologists to help determine the health care needs of employer groups and "understand the health of their client populations," Liebow said.

Natural disasters and the threat of terrorism have opened more doors to anthropologists, who assist corporations with emergency preparedness plans by studying the environment and finding employees who can be cross-trained, Liebow said.

"The better prepared a company is to respond," he said, "and the more they are mitigating risks ... the lower the insurance

premiums."

Whatever their "jungle," anthropologists are attempting to discern "why people do what they do in the local setting where they live and work," Liebow said.

"Our slogan is 'context matters,' he said. "How do villagers in rural Mexico use a new water system? How do you make workers more productive?"

Anthropologists gain their understanding by observing human behavior, not from a psychology-of-self approach or the wide lens of a sociologist, but through an "intermediate level between the individual and the whole society," Liebow said.

The techniques they use to examine human patterns are often the same as those used to observe chimpanzees.

Linda Catlin, a Colorado Springs anthropologist, hasn't been entrenched in any chimpanzee habitat, but she has observed



humans and the corporate culture at two renowned kings of the jungle: General Motors and the Mayo Clinic.

Catlin brought doctorate-level training in anthropology from Wayne State University and experience from a career in education—as a former dean of a community college in Dallas—and business—as a corporate trainer for Shepherd, McGraw Hill, CFNI Steel and McDonnell Douglas—to the GM environment.

General Motors hired Catlin as a consultant to the company's full-time anthropologist. From 2001 through 2004, she observed the inner workings at GM, from the assembly line to the board room.

"We take a holistic approach—looking at the organization as a whole," she said.

Anthropologists look at corporate values and how employees integrate them into the workplace, Catlin said. They also "audit the organizational culture," by identifying both formal and informal leaders and the staff's comfort level in taking risks—voicing opinions—making suggestions, she said.

An anthropological audit may be prompted by a company's profitability, high employee turnover or to assess the reasons behind departmental wars, she said.

Growth is what spurred Mayo Clinic to seek Catlin's services.

The Mayo Clinic has a rich culture and a rock-solid place in the history of health care.

"What's not as well known is the creation of our clinics in Jacksonville, Fla., and Scottsdale, Ariz.," said Matt McElrath, the human resource director for Scottsdale.

"We were struggling with growing pains ... we didn't want to lose the culture ... we were looking at how to keep the heritage alive. We had read about the concept of corporate anthropology."

McElrath found Catlin through the GM staff anthropologist.

"She visited all sites and spent time walking in our shoes," he said.

Catlin posed as a patient, observed families in waiting rooms and shadowed staff members and physicians.

"She did countless interviews, joined physicians on patient visits and even spent time in the operating room," McElrath said. "She helped us understand the differences and similarities among the geographical sites, which helped us deal with inter-company conflicts that might have been attributed to style and approach. She was able to objectively discern that which is Mayo and that which is being located in the southwest or on the East Coast. It's helpful to the leaders to see style differences among the regions."

At the end of six weeks, Catlin presented 11 recommendations to the Mayo Clinic. All of them are in place today, McElrath said.

Among the recommendations: All new physicians attend a heritage program in Rochester, Minn., to interact with colleagues and learn about the history of the Mayo Clinic.

Teleconferences had been widely used as a way to save on travel costs, but Catlin stressed the importance of relationships. Today, Mayo Clinic leaders intersperse teleconferences with on-site meetings.

"It's still important that people have the ability to sit together and look at each other eyeball to eyeball," McElrath said.

"I liked using anthropologists because they aren't traditional, run-of-the-mill consultants," he said. "I didn't want anyone who would turn around and try to sell me something. I just wanted someone to help us understand (our culture)."

# Anthropologists in the smaller jungles

**By Marylou Doehrman**

*Staff Reporter*

Nancy Negohosian learned through the watchful eyes of Colorado Springs anthropologist Linda Catlin how cultural differences impact not only the work environment but also the company's bottom line.

Negohosian is the co-owner of HMS Products, a family owned manufacturing company in Troy, Mich.

As a business owner, Negohosian is responsible for 80 employees and is accustomed to weighing in on boardroom discussions. However, when she is negotiating purchasing contracts with clients from India, she takes on a different role.

"My job was to serve coffee and lunch," she said. "I've learned the customer is always right. It's the Golden Rule: Treat others like you want to be treated but don't make people uncomfortable."

The same philosophy can be applied to the nationalities, socio-economic backgrounds and temperaments that make up the culture of an organization.

"From machinists to engineers, you have to make people aware of the social equation in the business picture," she said.

Negohosian credits Catlin for creating company awareness about in-house culture and international customs and competition.

As a manufacturer of press-room automation with ties to the steel and automotive industry, Negohosian needs to be astute in a growing global economy—even when it comes to dealing with other countries in North America.

HMS ships products to Mexico, but the company delivers its products to Canada, which Negohosian said has been a bit of a challenge.

"With the (Canadian) border patrol, no two experiences were alike," she said.

Catlin interviewed the Canadian border patrol and identified the inconsistencies that HMS drivers faced. Negohosian said the only solution that has worked to get

products into Canada is to occasionally bribe the border patrol.

Dealing with overseas markets can be unnerving, but an anthropologist eases the intimidation factors, Negohosian said.

When HMS considered expanding into other markets, the company wanted to determine if it could replicate the success of its Michigan plant.

Through employee interviews, Catlin discovered the company's success was a result of loyalty and the employees' connection to a sense of family. That sense of family could be hard to match in another market, she said.

So, instead of expanding markets, HMS expanded its product line, which included plastic consumer goods, such as Christmas tree stands and Halloween carving kits.

The carving kits are manufactured in China.

"Part of doing business over there is going to homes and celebrations – eating camel hump and snake," Negohosian said.

Success is about blending into a culture, something Negohosian said she learned from Catlin.

Catlin's international know-how is compiled in a book she and her husband, Tom White, a marketing professional, wrote.

"International Business: Cultural Sourcebook and Case Studies" features case studies about international business and information about how company's can raise their cross-cultural awareness levels.

Catlin, who is a visiting assistant professor of anthropology at Colorado College, maintains that cross-cultural and organizational relationships are less complicated if one approaches them from a holistic viewpoint, from observing "explicit elements," like artifacts, to "tacit elements," such as values and beliefs.

That approach is inviting to Negohosian.

"If I had a situation, Linda would be the only person I would call," Negohosian said. "If it was a glamorous job, she'd be on the 'Today' show."