

Special Section: Ethnography in NPD Research How "applied ethnography" can improve your NPD research process (Part 2)

How to do ethnographic research

In ethnographic field work, there are many ways to observe and document what people do and use, from direct observation with note-taking, to the use of photography or video-taping and even self-documentation. But there is a tradeoff between the richness of the documentation and the level of intrusiveness we impose on the participants. For example, we can make notes of our observations and conversations, but we will get far better documentation if we audiotape the entire event. And if we are able to videotape, we can look back and observe people's body language as well. Exhibit 1 shows some of the ways that ethnographers make observations and document what they hear and see.

Exhibit 1: Three Main Ethnographic Approaches

	What people say	What people do	What people use
LISTEN			
Make notes	Conversations		
Audio-record	Interviews		
OBSERVE			
Watch		Behavior	Behavioral traces
Make notes		Mapping patterns of behavior	Wear and tear on objects, pathways, etc.
Sketch or diagram		Relationships between people	Product usage
Photograph		Time-lapse photography	Photos of product use
Videotape		Videos of daily living	Videos of activities
Digital technology		Web-cameras	Web-cameras

Videotaping is certainly the most complete documentation method from the research point of view. New technologies like digital cameras have greatly increased the reach of the ethnographer. By putting such tools on the web, the researcher can record activities almost in real time over large distances and across time zones. This can greatly reduce the time and costs involved in conducting global applied ethnographic research. But videotaping may cause the participants being observed to feel uncomfortable, and sometimes people simply refuse to be videotaped. In that case, it is not a good recording medium - and you have to find an alternative approach.

Variations on applied ethnography

In applied ethnography, alternative methods of documentation are continually being explored. The product development process does not slow down to wait for the results of the field work to come in. Faster and less expensive methods and tools may be the only way to introduce ethnographic methods into the NPD process when a company is just beginning to explore its use.

Self-guided reporting by participants

One alternative to having a researcher do all the field work is to have participants engage in "guided self-reporting." This approach has emerged recently in response to the need for more cost- and time-effective ethnographic methods. Exhibit 2 shows how this technique compares to traditional ethnographic methods.

Exhibit 2: Comparing Two Different Field work Methods

	Ethnographic field work	Self-reporting by participants
LISTEN		
Make notes	Conversations	Diary entries
Audio-record	Interviews	Beeper studies
OBSERVE		
Watch	Behavioral traces	Self-observations

Make notes	Mapping patterns of behavior	Daily logs
Sketch or diagram	Relationships between people	Cognitive maps show relationships between people
Photograph	Photos of people, places, events, stuff, etc.	Disposable and Polaroid cameras are used
Videotape	Videotaping	Self-initiated videotaping
Digital technology	Web-cameras	Web-cameras

In the self-reporting approach, the ethnographer does not go into the "field" to collect the data. Instead, the research person prepares tools that will guide the participants in understanding how to collect the data themselves. A good way to structure the self-reporting activity is to prepare a workbook that guides the participants in making and documenting their own observations. Self-documentation allows people to take photos of places and activities that they might not want you to see first hand. Of course, at the same time there is a potential for bias by the participants. For example, they may clean up the house before taking pictures there. This factor must be taken into account when analyzing the data.

Digital technologies have made electronic self-reporting possible. Participants can document their own activities and environments in electronic workbooks and send them to the research team electronically. The implications of electronically-enabled ethnography are very exciting. The new digital technologies also give the researcher an improved means of sharing the field data with others in the product development team.

Deciding on the right approach

A number of factors go into deciding which research method to use. These include: where you are in the development process; who are the participants being investigated; the time frame available; and, finally, the size of the research budget.

Ideally, an ethnographer does the field work over an extended period of time so that he or she can pursue themes and opportunities as they emerge. But it is rare that the ideal approach can be taken. A more practical approach is to use a blend of "pure" ethnography techniques, combined with guided self-observations from the participants.

Combining types of research

Applied ethnography of the self-reporting variety can work well together with traditional focus groups. This combination is, in fact, an effective and cost-effective approach. Participants must agree to do some homework prior to coming to the focus group. The homework consists of completing the self-observation workbook that is either sent or hand-delivered to the participants at least one week before the focus group.

Researchers used this combination in the early 1990s to develop the Zip drive and reposition the Iomega company. In the study, participants were sent disposable cameras and a workbook to fill out before joining the focus groups. They were asked to take pictures of all the places they worked. In the focus group, they introduced themselves by showing their photographs while they explained what they did at work. The photographs and the descriptions they gave of all the "stuff" they used at work were crucial for helping the design team to understand the relationships people had to their information - the main type of "stuff" that interested the research team. This understanding provided the content for the positioning taken by Iomega to introduce the new Zip product line with the line, *"Because it's your stuff."*

Greater use by companies

The interest and excitement surrounding the use of applied ethnography is leading to a rapid increase in the number of companies that claim to practice it. It is easy to see, however, that many of these firms are just traditional market research firms trying to sell something new. In reality, they have very little, if any, experience in ethnographic field work. Before hiring an individual or a company to do ethnographic field work for you, you must be sure to find out about their previous experience and check the references they provide.

If you are using applied ethnography for the first time in your own organization, it is advisable to seek guidance from a practitioner who has a number of years of experience to draw upon. Look for someone who not only conducts applied ethnography but who is also willing to teach your team to do the field work.

In addition, remember that ethnographic research has its own code of ethics. It should not be done in secret. You must tell the participants about the nature of your research. You must obtain their consent. Knowing that they are being observed will, of course, change their behavior. But the skilled applied ethnographer will keep this in mind during the data analysis phase.

Finally, it is important to respect the people you are researching. Remember, they are the experts in their own lives and experiences. And, as researchers, we are there to learn from them, and then to use that information in the NPD process to design and develop more useful and desirable products.

How Microsoft Uses Applied Ethnography

Software developers naturally want to create features that are interesting to themselves. This is an inherent danger in software development. One of the main goals of our work as ethnographers at Microsoft is to understand our customers from their own perspectives instead of from the software company's perspective. That is why ethnographers have directly had impact in numerous divisions within Microsoft, including Mobile Products, MSN, and Windows.

Ethnographers experience the world of technology in the users' own environments, observing their activities that have personal, idiosyncratic meanings and a direct impact on their daily lives. Ethnographers translate what they see for Microsoft product teams and that input directly impacts on how features are designed so that they can be successfully used in the "real world." In essence, ethnographers bring the voices of real people to the software development process.

Good ethnography is a skill, and it is usually most successful when used by trained researchers. Recently, there was a round of email at Microsoft on the subject of the skills of anthropologists. The question was asked: "Can't anyone do good site visits?" The answer was, "Yes, but." One of our ethnographers responded with the following illustration:

A Microsoft product team member visits a man in his home. She wants to know how he uses his frying pan. The product team member asks the man a bunch of questions such as, "When did you buy this frying pan? Why did you buy a non-stick pan? Do you always spray your frying pan? Why did you buy a non-stick pan? Do you always spray your pan with Pam?" She asks for the man to tell her even more about the frying pan. First one hour, then two hours pass - the researcher asks many, many questions about the frying pan. The product team member totally missed the really interesting thing the man does with his blender.

The moral of the story was simple: There are many who can get the basics out of a site visit, but not everyone will get the most out of such a visit. What is most important, however, is to remember that ethnographers at Microsoft are only one part of a very large team of product planners, program managers, developers, product designers and usability engineers. Success of our work comes from integrating our findings (about both the frying pan and the blender) into the team as a whole.

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