Anthropologists in workplace seek new product ideas

By Stephen Singer, Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — The culture and customs of work are under scrutiny by a pair of anthropologists at Pitney Bowes trying to improve product designs by watching customers on the job.

Alexandra Mack, left, and Jill Lawrence hang out in the file archives room at the Pitney Bowes Research and Design Center.

Michelle McLoughlin, AP

Jill Lawrence and Alexandra Mack work at the Advanced Concepts and Technology division, Pitney Bowes's research and design unit in Shelton. They observe how users of Pitney Bowes products do their jobs, then help develop products that improve the work done by the company's customers.

"It's understanding the work people are actually doing, not what they're saying they do," Mack said.

There's a difference between the two, as the anthropologists tell it. They discovered, for example, a group of lawyers who use e-mail to compile lists of projects as much as they use it to communicate electronically, Lawrence said.

"There are many cases of technology being delivered to the marketplace without an idea that it's going to be used," Pitney Bowes spokesman Chris Tessier said.

Discrepancies between how technology is designed and how it functions prompted the Stamford-based Pitney Bowes, with revenue last year of $4.5 billion providing mail, messaging and document management products and services, to try to figure out how customers communicate and distribute information.

The company sent anthropologists into the field to study the natives.

It's not as unusual as it sounds in the corporate world, which has long been a source of interest to social scientists such as economists and sociologists. Anthropologists, who study humans and the relationships and cultures they establish, are just the latest researchers to pick apart corporations, examining their pecking orders and way of doing things.

Adapting anthropology to industry is becoming more common, said Ghita Levine, spokeswoman for the American Anthropological Association in Arlington, Va. It's helping companies better market their products while boosting interest in the social science.

Applied anthropology has grown so fast that in 2002, the anthropological association added it to the basic branches that comprise the discipline, she said.

Anthropologists "understand the culture so people are trying to develop products or service populations," Levine said. "It's sort of like using old-fashioned focus groups."

One prototype Lawrence and Mack is helping to develop is a secure mail locker for people frequently on the road. It receives packages and mail and can be signed for after workers return to work. It also ensures that whoever delivers the mail knows it's been received. The mailbox is still in the developmental stage, however.

Lawrence and Mack begin working on new products after observing Pitney Bowes customers. They may build a prototypes, draw pictures or even sketch cartoon stories along the way. Numerous steps — product design, production and marketing — must be undertaken before an idea becomes a product.

Austin Henderson, director of research strategy at Pitney Bowes, said the research is a collaborative effort with the company's business units.

"In some sense the work the researchers and anthropologists are doing are not in research, but in the line of business," he said.

Pitney Bowes' research unit employs about 70 researchers, including engineers, designers and computer scientists. Much of the company's research and development is in software development, Tessier said.

When not looking to build a better mousetrap, Pitney Bowes's anthropologists can adapt technology already in place to fix a workplace problem. Radio frequency identity tags, for example, that are used for employee ID badges and cards for motorists to quickly pay at highway toll booths can help track documents. The need arose after Pitney Bowes researchers spoke with lawyers trying to find legal folders that went astray.
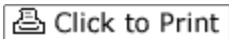
"You engage the world to understand what people's needs are," Henderson said. "Once you understand the need you create solutions that meet the need."

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