
UNIT 5 BUSINESS AND CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGY*

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- understand the rise of Business anthropology as a sub-discipline;
- comprehend what/how/why anthropologists do as a business anthropologist; and
- discuss the relevance of business anthropology in contemporary society.

5.0 INTRODUCTION

Anthropology has a distinct way of understanding the world, and its subject matter is extensive. The subject matter of anthropology and its unique set of methods or approaches have allowed anthropologists to investigate life situations as they are. As a discipline, it has provided a practical lens to view the cultural world of others. The anthropologist's task has always been of a keen observer who tries to understand the diversity and variation these cultural worlds offer. The main area of anthropology is to study how human beings are different at certain levels yet similar and how and why humans and societies change.

Traditionally anthropology has been known for its work at places that seem exotic to Westerners, mainly tribal societies or the cultures that were far and very different from their own. For example, Bronislaw Malinowski spent years studying the Trobriand Islanders in the Pacific in the 1910s. But the world today is very different from that in which Anthropology began. The discipline has kept pace with changing times, visible in the various theoretical approaches over the past few decades. The methods and techniques of data collection have become

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more sophisticated and are appended by sophisticated newer technologies like video recording, camera use, and audio recording. Today's ethnographies focus on aspects of a society or culture rather than mapping every element of culture as in previous ethnographies. Also, 'field' has been redefined and places like shopping malls, hospitals, offices, organisations, and streets are now fields where anthropologists conduct their study to understand human behaviour.

Anthropology has moved from a city, town, village, or jungle hut to places like corporate units, shopping malls/markets, industrial units, business organisations, and other autonomous and private entities. Applying anthropology to real-world studies/problems has gained importance in the recent decade, and anthropology has grown both as a discipline and as a profession. As a discipline, it generates knowledge focusing on theoretical approaches and procedures of conducting field studies. And as a profession, it applies this knowledge to the external world to solve problems. Practitioners with an advanced degree in anthropology often work as consultants for research firms, government and non-governmental organisations, international organisations, and more recently, corporate organisations. Such practitioners are called Practicing Anthropologists who use their anthropological knowledge and skills to solve various client-based issues and practical problems.

For instance, practice work would often include working in an organisation (government or non-government) collaborating and co-thinking with other consultants and experts to work on a community project and solve a practical problem affecting the community or society. Or for example, working in a market research firm to study consumer behaviour and helping the company deal with the bottlenecks it faces in selling its products by scanning the client's needs and delivering solutions. Here in this Unit, you will learn about how anthropologists have ventured into organisations. Recently, their engagement with the business and corporate world is more of a mutually benefiting situation for both, anthropology/anthropologists and the corporate/ business organisation. Let us briefly look at the history and development of business anthropology.

A Brief History of Practice in Anthropology

During the early 1950s, British anthropologists dealt with a very different issue in England, i.e., staff relationships and productivity in corporations. Similarly, in the US, after World War II (and later with the formation of the Society for Applied Anthropology in 1941), Anthropology had established in the Universities in America. There was also the high engagement of anthropologists in the International Development Organisations. During the 1970s, there was a substantial increase in the rise of the applied side of Anthropology, and most Anthropologists started working outside the academy. Such anthropologists were called 'Practitioners', and by the 1980s, the number of Practicing Anthropologists swelled. Their work in non-academic organisations stimulated an interest in the study of business and industry. By the mid-1980s, anthropological literature focussed on documenting the work of Practice Anthropology. *The Journal of Practicing Anthropology*, which started in 1978, followed by *NAPA Bulletins (now The Annals of Practicing Anthropology)* in 1985, documented the work done in various domains.

Today, Practitioners work in almost every field like social service, public administration, international development, manufacturing, public relations, marketing, corporate organisations to name a few. These Practitioners function as Managers, do evaluation and assessment studies, help in data collection and analysis, do needs assessment, and participate in advocacy and policy formulation. For instance, Practitioners working

in product design or marketing are helping the organisations create or promote new and different types of products. As Business Anthropology began to grow during the 1980s, it developed as a distinct and separate area of practice focusing on corporate cultures, product development and consumer research, and industrial and production arrangement.

Check Your Progress:

1. Define Practice Anthropology.

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2. What are the avenues for anthropologists other than academia?

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5.1 WHAT IS BUSINESS AND CORPORATE ANTHROPOLOGY?

The terms ‘business’ and ‘industry’ are fundamental structures of organised economic activity to meet basic human needs in modern marketing societies. Marietta L. Baba says ‘business’ means the buying and selling of goods and services in the marketplace, also known as commerce or trade. Whereas ‘industry’ refers to the organised production of goods and services on a large scale. There is another term, ‘corporate’ which we are using in this Unit. A corporate is a large company or a business group having a legal entity. These terms, when used by business anthropologists, are related to the study of:

- the process of producing goods and services;
- of corporate organisations in which the production takes place;
- ethnographically informed design of new products for the consumers and
- the behaviour of consumers in the marketplace.

The term ‘business anthropology’ became popular in the 1980s when anthropologists were hired full-time as non-academic practitioners to study consumer behaviour and marketing. Earlier terms like ‘industrial anthropology’, ‘anthropology of work’, or ‘applied anthropology in the industry’ were used more frequently to denote areas of research and practice focused on business-related phenomena. More recently, ‘business anthropology’ refers to any application of anthropology to business-oriented problems. Presently, ‘business anthropology’ is recognised as a subfield of the discipline in applied anthropology.

Business anthropology applies anthropological theories and practices to the needs of private sector organisations, especially industrial firms. Current research initiatives in the field are focused on:

- marketing and consumer behaviour,
- organisational theory and culture,
- intercultural communication, and
- product design and development.

Business anthropologists conduct ethnographic research, using participant observation, informal or structured interviews, and help organisations do business in culturally appropriate ways. They help organisations to have smooth working relations between employers and employees, study customers and their behaviour, and develop appropriate marketing strategies. Research at Wayne State University indicates that international business settings failures frequently result from the inability to understand and adapt to foreign thinking and acting. Understanding the cultural context of business is valuable. The importance of culture is vital during the present scenario where the business models should be inclined to global customers.

The term ‘culture’ (defined as an integrated system of shared ideas, behaviours, and material objects that characterise a group) needs to be mentioned here. The term has been defined and redefined and anthropologists have contributed by understanding human life by interpreting how humans are part of the culture. When an individual is part of an organisation, one gets immersed in a new culture and gets introduced to the shared behaviour patterns of employees; for instance, the shared idea of the employees, like the goal of \$1 billion in sales for the next fiscal year or shared behaviour of following a dress code to work and wearing the same company shirt.

A business anthropologist would see organisation as a culture and all features of the organisation like structure, reward system, rules of behaviour and goals would be components of the culture. Any organisation study would include research on division of labour, values and objectives of the company, organisational structure and leadership behaviour, group formation and communication, organisational artefacts like dress and logos, and building type. This idea of culture and qualitative fieldwork techniques that are applied to business to understand organisations has been a unique contribution of anthropology to organisational research (Jordan 2015). And we see later in the Unit how business anthropologists have used the culture construct not only to study the inside of the organisation but also to study the services/products the organisation offers to its consumers and to study cross-cultural communication.

Check Your Progress

3. What are the different domains to which business anthropologists can contribute?

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5.2 HISTORY AND GROWTH OF BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY

In the last three decades, there has been a phenomenal growth in the anthropological work in the organisations. From First World War, into the 1930s, sociologists and anthropologists at the University of Chicago conducted studies that pioneered modern urban studies. Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s was a bustling city that created jobs and was the centre of creativity and great intellectual activity. Between 1924 and 1933, most human relations studies in a business setting were done in Chicago. Lloyd Warner, an American anthropologist who had studied the Murngin Aborigines of Australia, participated as one of the scientists and researched Western Electric's Hawthorne Works manufacturing plant in 1931. Warner's team used anthropological theory and qualitative research techniques to study employee interactions at work. This research was significant in realising that understanding human relations was crucial to understanding performance in organisations and thus instituted human relations as a field of study.

It was the first qualitative study of an organisation and the researchers observed and recorded employee interactions while working. The researchers found that the worker's productivity increased even when there was manipulation of the physical and management-centered stimuli. The increase was a consequence of management's interest in the workers, demonstrated by the presence of researchers like Warner. The worker's response was called an example of the *Hawthorne Effect* (Jordan 2015: 11). The Hawthorne's studies and Warner's anthropological contribution made the organisational scientists realise a need to study human relations in the work setting. This was the beginning of Industrial Anthropology which later came to be known as Business Anthropology.

Reflections

The Hawthorne's study fell under severe criticism. The critics demonstrated that many of the study findings could not be tied to measurable variables like economic incentives and corrective discipline (Franke and Kaul 1978). Moreover, the functionalist theoretical approach that was used as the basis could not explain the tension, conflict, or dissent in the organisational studies. Also functionalism as its paradigm could not explain many issues of business organisations.

Organisational studies rebounded with the revival of the economy during World War II and Chicago continued to be the centre of the human relations school. In the 1940s, former students of Warner at Harvard, Conrad Arensberg and Eliot Chapple, began working in Industrial Anthropology and started the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA in 1941), which is still the oldest and largest applied anthropology professional association in North America today. During this period, anthropologists trained at Harvard conducted numerous studies that gave impetus to Industrial Anthropology. Working within the functionalist theoretical paradigm, the studies combined quantitative and qualitative approaches and developed interactional analysis, a technique for measuring interactive human behaviour.

During the 1940s and 1950s, management hired anthropologists to work on specific problems like absenteeism, strikes, and poor worker-management cooperation, etc. They studied social structure and relations within the industrial enterprise, such as informal relations among workers, actual work processes, status hierarchies, relations between workers and managers, etc.

Reflections

Various scholars conducted studies like:

- Arensberg who studied teamwork and productivity in a shoe factory;
- William F. Whyte studied interrelations of supervisors, waitresses, cooks, and customers in local restaurants in Chicago and
- Richardson and Walker studied technology change on an assembly line at IBM's Endicott Plant in 1948.
- Whyte studied the incentive system at Bundy Tubing in 1948;
- Sayles studied leadership and change in Eastern Corporation's Lakeshore Mill in 1952;
- Walker and Guest studied work and informal relations on an automotive assembly line in 1952; and
- Whyte studied a strike at Chicago's Inland Steel Container Company in 1951.

In 1946, Burleigh Gardner and Lloyd Warner, and other business partners formed Social Research Incorporated, the first management consulting firm to include business anthropologists and to use anthropological techniques and theory to analyse problems in organisations and tackle questions about consumer behaviour. In the 1950s another influential business anthropologist came to prominence. Edward T. Hall, who worked for the US Department of State, provided training in cross-cultural communication to technicians who were supposed to work outside North America. He understood the significance of the failure to communicate effectively due to cultural differences. In his book *The Silent Language*, he explained communication as involving much more than just language, and it included nonverbal characteristics. Hall's contribution in intercultural communication and intercultural training has been monumental as he understood that errors in cross-cultural communication could destroy a business deal or a peace agreement (Jordan 2015: 14).

Check Your Progress:

4. Write a short note on Hawthorne Study.

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5.2.1 Business Anthropology in 1980s: Few Important Studies

By the 1980s a large number of anthropologists were working in diverse fields of applied anthropology and simultaneously, there was an increase in the studies being conducted on organisational culture. Few popular books spurred interest in culture and management. The art of *Japanese management* (1981) by Richard Pascale and Anthony Athos addressed the role of culture in Japanese business success. The following year Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy published *Corporate Cultures* and Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman published. *In Search of Excellence* focus on the theme that successful businesses must be concerned with their organisational cultures. Mainly, these works and other studies conducted in organisations popularised the culture concept and attracted the business community's interest. The term **organisational culture** became popular and was described as an additional construct in studying organisations. Throughout the 1980s, anthropology's work on organisations set the stage for the new field of study of organisational anthropology. With its focus on the methodology, anthropology produced works on the culture of the organisations and cross-cultural management. Following years witnessed an increasing number of studies that addressed diverse issues of the organisations.

Scholars like Gerald Britan (1981), Ronald Cohen (1980), Dubinskas (1988), Tomoko Hamada (1991), Helen Schwartzman (1993) conducted ethnographic studies on organisations, and works on the dynamics of formal organisations began appearing. For instance, Tomoko Hamada (1991) conducted extensive research on American and Japanese organisational and cultural interactions. Marietta Baba (1989) studied the development of local knowledge systems among the workers. Corporations employed anthropologist, Elizabeth Brody, to conduct in-house research, which was published in anthropological journals. Anthropologists like Steve Barnett conducted a study in consumer research. The research methods were anthropological, including participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and interactional analysis to view people in the act, i.e. seeing people work and interact in the workplaces. Anthropologists like Brigitte Jordan, Patricia Sachs, and Shelly Goldman were designing or re-designing workspaces to facilitate work.

By the 1990s anthropologists were being hired by corporate and business organisations. Anthropologists like Grant McCracken, John F. Sherry, Eric Arnould are a few who have played a critical role in the development of consumer studies in both their business school teaching environments and their discipline of anthropology.

In the last decade, the fields of business anthropology have further crystallised and grown. Some famous works include Susan Squires and Bryan Byrne's *Creating Breakthrough Ideas: The Collaboration of Anthropologists and Designers in the Product Development Industry* (2002); Ann Jordan's *Business Anthropology* (2003); Sarah Pink's *Applications of Anthropology* (2006); Brian Morean's *The Business of Ethnography* (2005); Patricia Sunderland and Rita Denny's *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research* (2007).

In the field of design anthropology, anthropologists use ethnographic techniques to develop new product ideas. In 2005, the first Ethnographic Practice in Industry

Conference (EPIC) took place, which brought together Anthropologists from various industries to discuss the use of Ethnography in their Organisations and Business. EPIC's goals are to promote public recognition of practicing ethnography as a profession and support the continued professionalisation of the field. EPIC is attended by designers, design anthropologists, and others to promote ethnographic techniques to develop new products.

Check Your Progress

5. How do Business anthropologists contribute towards the study of organisations? Discuss with examples.

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5.2.2 The Contemporary Landscape and Relevance of Business Anthropology

In the contemporary world, we have witnessed the transformation of capitalist economies, marked by an increase in global flows of goods and services, worldwide deregulation, and the diffusion of converging information and telecommunication technologies, together known as globalisation (Baba 2006: 21). The rise in incomes of industrialised and newly industrialised countries, and demographic composition shifts have significantly altered the market situation. New markets are opening around the world, thereby enhancing the competition in every industry. People world-over are now the crucial actors and potential and lucrative targets as consumers to the goods and services offered by multinational firms. The growth in corporate units and multinational firms has again led to an increased anthropological interest in organisations. The research has focussed mainly on three main areas i.e., (a) organisational cultures in technology-based firms; (b) boundary crossing in a global context; and (c) regional perspectives on work and corporations.

Scholarly works on corporate culture have come into prominence. Some famous works by scholars like Tomoko Hamada, *Inventing Cultural Others in Organisations*, 1995; Carla Freeman, *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy*, 2000; Marietta Baba and et. al. *The Contexts of Knowing: Natural History of a Globally-Distributed Team*, 2004; Melissa Cefkin *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter: Reflections on Research in and of Corporations*, 2009 are a few which have led to the development of **Corporate Ethnography**. Such works have not only aided in the growth of anthropological theory but have also increased the number of job opportunities for business anthropologists who, apart from studying the work processes or the organisational culture, are researching on areas like human-machine interaction. For instance, anthropologist Bonnie Nardi in her work *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart* (1999) showed that human face-to-face communication has advantages that any of today's communication media cannot replicate. She opines that face-to-face communication is a prerequisite for effective distribution of work and therefore, the firm must choose appropriate technologies for effective communication.

The above discussion shows that the growth graph of business and corporate anthropology has been phenomenal and marked by ups and downs. As a sub-discipline (of Practice anthropology), it has created a niche for itself in academia and has also been able to gain acceptance in the business world.

5.3 ADVANCING ETHNOGRAPHY TO STUDY BUSINESS AND CORPORATE CULTURES

To research the organisation the anthropologist must be thorough with the methods and techniques of conducting fieldwork in the organisation and should be able to provide a solution or produce results. In the coming section, we would see how anthropology/ anthropologists contribute to business anthropology.

5.3.1 What/ Why/How do Anthropologists Study?

To understand **human experience** in business and corporate organisations, anthropologists apply their ethnographic methods and techniques to get valuable insights into the organisation's cultural and social worlds. For anthropologists who study work and organisations, doing good research still largely depends on doing good conventional ethnography (Gluesing 2013: 23). It requires spending time with people in their work settings, observing them as they do their work, and talking with them about what their work means to them.

Ethnography is the trademark methodology of anthropology and enables the researcher to learn about communities or institution's social and cultural life. Among anthropologists, the primary ethnographic method is Observation which allows 'the researcher to take part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture' (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002: 1). For instance, an anthropologist while observing the workspace in an office might focus on the amenities that the organisation provides to its employees, such as an eating area, a separate smoking area, play area (like most corporate offices have play zones and Gyms in their office buildings for their employees). This would reflect on the **workspace experience of the employees**. The anthropologists can help to improve the quality of the experience of the employees. Another example can be the observation of the parking space, which may indicate the organisation's hierarchy. Reserved parking spaces for executives and various levels of managers can give important clues about the hierarchical nature of the organisation.

Another famous example is from the study of Lucy Suchman, who researched in 1979. She was interested in relations between technology and work. Based on her observations, she could decipher the employee's difficulties while using a Xerox copy machine. The complex devices with many features were complicated for people to figure out, and as a result, people faced problems using the xerox machine. Now, all xerox copy machines have a single green copy button, and a simple copy of the document is generated with ease (Jordan 2015: 3).

Another example is from the work of Bonnie Nardi. She worked at Hewlett-Packard, Apple and AT&T. She was employed by high-tech companies to examine consumer behaviour. Her interest in Human-Computer interaction led

her to develop a better spreadsheet at Hewlett-Packard. Nardi observed how spreadsheets were filled and contrary to the methods that engineers had imagined, one person does not fill out the entire sheet. Instead, it was passed around and different workers fill in different portions. This led to the development of a more useful and efficient spreadsheet design (Weise 1999).

From the above examples, it is well understood that observation is invaluable in understanding the work processes but should be appended by interviews to learn about the employees, their work, and their concerns. Initially, it is not easy for the anthropologist to make the individuals/employees talk about the work processes, work culture, and expectations. The interviews can be highly structured where the same set of questions are asked to everyone, or it can be informal interviews where there are about 5-6 topic areas and the informants are encouraged to talk at length about them. The main areas could be career history, company history, employee work, teamwork, etc. The interview techniques allow the researcher to gather descriptive data about the work culture, organisational structure, employee involvement, perception, and satisfaction at the workplace.

Another study on **consumer behaviour** was by Susan Squires (2002). She studied the manufacture of personal care products. The manufacturing company made hand lotions and tissues and wanted to know if people would use its personal care products at the office, the way they use them at their homes. Through observation and interviews, Squires learned that people did not want to use these products at the office in front of others, even though they wanted to use them during the workday. People used personal care products which were available in designer containers. So, Squires recommended the company not to remake its products, instead repackaging the old product to use them in formal settings like an office.

Advertisers and marketing managers can use anthropological methods to get insights into consumer needs and expectations and thus gain a greater understanding and learn about the best ways to market their products. This is more important in a fast-changing technology-driven globalised market where many brands compete and consumers have a greater variety to choose from. For instance, while purchasing a cell phone, you make a checklist of various features that a cell phone brand provides and as per your requirement, you choose from the multiple options available in the market. For increasing sales in the market, the company has to keep pace with changing demands of the consumers and at the same time not compromise on the quality of the product (as multiple companies are providing good quality products). For this, the advertisers and marketers must understand the consumer's expectations and learn to market their product uniquely so that the consumers constantly and consistently recognise the product.

Grant David Mc Cracken, a Canadian anthropologist, is well known for his works on commerce and culture. He has been a consultant for many corporations, including Netflix, Google Amazon, IBM, IKEA, and Ford Foundation. He suggests that from the viewpoint of an anthropologist, consumption is the process at work. He studied how people use consumer goods to construct their concepts of self and the world. He explains the importance of consumer goods by analysing hairstyles that hair products allow us to create. For his fieldwork,

he spent hours in beauty salons, and through observation and interviews of hairdressers and their clients, he concluded how women used hair colour and style to create an image of the self.

Another anthropologist Daniel Miller (1998), has worked on consumer behaviour issues like consumer resistance. He gave an example from the consumer response to the New Coke introduced by Coca-Cola and it was seen that people resisted buying it. People chose the new formula 55% of the time and the original one 45% of the time, resulting in a decline in the company's sales. The consumers did not like the new coke's taste and were emotionally connected to the original product. Thus, the company reinstituted the traditional formula with the label 'classic,' and got a positive consumer response. This example explains the importance of cultural analysis of emotion in consumer research. The consumer's emotional connection with the old coke product led the company to reintroduce the old formula.

Business anthropologists contributing to **consumer research** focus on the social life and the modes of consumption give insights into the consumer mind. The consumption pattern talks about consumer practices (acceptance and resistance for the product), consumer experience, and consumption's contextual nature.

Another vital area where anthropologists contribute is **design research**. Anthropologists get close to their subject of study, i.e., the potential user of a product, to get a precise idea of what the end-users want. Here the anthropologist is studying user behaviour by observing the action as it is taking place. Lucy Suchman (1987) calls this 'situated action'. In **product design and development**, an anthropologist may create new products, services, or policies and use ethnographic techniques that consider the human factor (human cognitive abilities) to get insights into making a product easy for human use. For example, Christina Wasson (2000) describes a work done for a company named Steelcase that manufactured office furniture and office partitions. Office space is divided into cubicles (individual space) and meeting rooms (for group activities and discussions). Research showed that workers were using the space in ways the designers had never assumed. Workers met and discussed work in areas such as hallways not designed for group work. Consequently, Steelcase manufactured products like whiteboards used for writing with markers and chairs, which could be placed in communal spaces where workers generally met (like hallways).

Alice Peinado, Magdalena Jarvin, and Juliette Damoiseil (2011) worked on a project with designers and executives from three banks and two insurance companies to develop a new methodology for designing bank and insurance products for customers in France. The banks and insurance companies were confounded by what appeared to be irrational choices by their customers. These anthropologists used qualitative methods to study the client's socioeconomic status, perception of money, and relationship to banks and insurance companies. The research revealed that the customers brought up trust and lack of face-to-face interaction as the reason. They wanted a banker who knew them well and could advise them based on their specific situation. Consequently, designers designed an interactive-based interface that allowed clients to personalise their bank and insurance information and dialogue directly with their banks and insurances. So, in this case, no new products were created for the customers

instead the delivery method of the product had to be redesigned to suit the customer's needs.

Anthropologists' ability to get closer to the consumer and study the contextual issues surrounding product use has allowed anthropologists to contribute to design research.

Check Your Progress

6. Discuss the contemporary relevance of business anthropology as a sub-discipline in the globalised world.

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7. How have anthropological inputs benefited consumer Research and Design research?

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5.4 SUMMARY

Here in this Unit, we examined the history and growth of the field of business anthropology. We have read about the anthropological work in consumer behaviour, marketing, product design, and work process in an organisation. Anthropological theory and the techniques provide ways of seeing business organisations as different from those used in other disciplines. Anthropologists focus on holism and answer a specific question/problem by viewing it in a larger context by unpacking the complex, interrelated issues. For example, suppose the unit of analysis is a product that is to be distributed worldwide. In that case, we look at the product's response in the local market and then re-contextualise it in the new social, economic, and political arena in which it is to be applied. Businesses, corporations, and industries have provided an apt venue to study human interaction, intercultural communication, human-machine interface, and the study of consumer-product/service relationships. And with continued globalisation, where the world seems smaller, Business anthropology as a branch of Practice anthropology would continue to grow and understand human issues.

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5.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Refer to section 5.0
2. Refer to section 5.0
3. Refer to section 5.1
4. Refer to section 5.2
5. Refer to section 5.2.1
6. Refer to section 5.3.1
7. Refer to section 5.3.1

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