



# USING ETHNOGRAPHY IN BUSINESS RESEARCH

CASE: THE EFFECTS OF AUTONOMY ON  
ENGAGEMENT IN MANUAL LABOR

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# SOME THINGS ABOUT ME



- Manager @ Dazzle, working primarily on management training, business research and concept design
- MSc (management, marketing) – Aalto University
- Academic interests: engagement, organizational culture, ethnography, virtual work
- Past work: Product manager (Expak Systems), Marketing and Sales Manager (Lahjalaguuni)



# ETHNOGRAPHY



- Roots of the method lie in 19th century anthropology and sociology
- Characteristics of ethnography:
  - emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena instead of seeking to test out a predisposed hypothesis
  - Tendency to work with unstructured data
  - Investigating a small number of cases in detail
  - Analysis of the data using explicit interpretations of the meanings and functions of human actions
  - Quantification and statistical analysis are used sparingly if at all
- The process: Immerse, Watch, Listen
- Questions to answer when deciding to use this method:
  - Role of the researcher: participant or observer?
  - Transparency of research
  - Should the researcher "go native"?



# ETHNOGRAPHY



- The method is used in contemporary academic business research, mostly in marketing
- Commercial business research applications are more rare, but gaining in popularity
- The most common form of commercial ethnography today is studying consumer behavior
- Management and HR applications have attracted interest recently
- Benefits:
  - Produces rich, descriptive and nuance-filled information
  - Allows the researcher to gain a deep, hands-on understanding of the phenomenon in focus
  - Optimal for unveiling tacit knowledge inside the organization
- Limitations:
  - Very contextual, researchers should be careful to generalize findings
  - Ethnographers' own prejudices, attitudes and presence in the research context can impact the results of the study
  - Usually not quantifiable



# CASE EXAMPLE: STUDYING ENABLERS ENGAGEMENT IN BLUE-COLLAR WORK



- Part of Aalto University's engagement research project TILA – Spaces and Places
- A study of how autonomy affects work engagement in maintenance workers
- Ethnographic participant observation: spending work days with maintenance workers at Lassila & Tikanoja



# METHODOLOGY

- Ethnographic (partial) participant observation
- Some open-ended questions, but mostly general discussion and observing work
- Limiting pre-observation readings (idea from grounded theory) to keep an open mind
- Some preparatory work: self reflection on drivers of engagement and disengagement, open-ended test interviews



# THEORY

- Psychological path framework of engagement created by Kahn (1990) and refined by May et al. (2004)
- Meaningfulness: Job enrichment, Work role fit, Client relations
- Safety: Coworker relations, Supervisor relations, Coworker norms, Self-Consciousness
- Availability: Resources, Outside activities
- Focusing on employee perspective, personal experiences of engagement



# THE DATA

- Seven informants (four caretakers, three service men)
- Six sessions
- Roughly 20 hours of observation
- Data arranged thematically according to psychological pathway
- Informants a homogenic group: Finnish, middle-aged men



# FINDINGS

- Strong link between autonomy and engagement
- Maintenance work quite knowledge intensive
- Highly homogenous teams
- Strong, yet vulnerable culture
- Hands-off management of autonomy



# LIMITATIONS

- Contextuality of ethnography
- Small sample size
- Choice of informants by Lassila & Tikanoja management



# IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- How can managers support engagement in manual labor?
- Engagement differences between homogenous and heterogenous teams?
- Differences in engagement pathways in different microcultures inside an organization
- Engagement factors of younger employees key for the future of Lassila & Tikanoja



## POSSIBLE FUTURE CASES

- Benchmarking best practices of successful managers at a privately operated education and training institution in Finland
- Researching the reasons behind very low retention rates at the Australia/NZ branch of a global engineering company
- Enablers of engagement at the Finnish branch of a global IT company
- Researching background of in-company tensions at the PNG service branch of a global shipping technology company

