

WHY ORGANISATIONS NEED ANTHROPOLOGISTS

IN CONVERSATION WITH WALTER FAAIJ



Walter Faaij is a corporate anthropologist. We spoke to him about his co-authored book, [Anthropologists Wanted: Why Organisations Need Anthropology](#), translated into English this year and published by the Amsterdam University Press, and his experience of working in business. What follows is an edited version of our interview.

The significant economic and social upheaval wrought by the pandemic has meant that understanding human behaviours from a cultural and social perspective has never been more critical. So the publication of the book, [Anthropologists Wanted: Why Organisations Need Anthropology](#), translated into English this year and published by the Amsterdam University Press, could not be more timely.

The book is aimed at people curious how they can use their anthropology degree as well as employers interested in what someone with anthropological training might bring to their organisation. As the authors discovered, many people, including potential employers and consultancy clients, still know little about what anthropologists do, the added value they bring to organisations and the roles they can play.

The book explores the labour market, the specific skills of anthropologists, how anthropologists can explain their value to an employer, and how anthropology is marketed.

The authors state in the Preface that society is facing several significant challenges such as an ageing population, climate change, and increased inequality, all of which require an understanding of people in order to create change and find better solutions. So it's up to anthropologists to "up our game. Claim our seat at the table. And build that sustainable, inclusive and future-proof world."

Our Founder, [Dawn Walter](#), invited anthropologist, consultant, entrepreneur and now author, Walter Faaij, to talk about why he

co-wrote the book (together with [Laurens Bakker](#) and [Masja Cohen](#)), his experience of working as a corporate anthropologist, and his tips and advice for anthropologists who want to use their training outside the academy.

What follows is an edited version of Walter and Dawn's conversation, available also as a [video](#).

WALTER'S STORY: MOVING FROM IT TO ANTHROPOLOGY

Before becoming an anthropologist, Walter Faaij "started off as an IT guy", studying Information Technology because all "that stuff was going to be

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really super hot in the upcoming decades." And while he discovered he was right about that, he also discovered he "didn't really like working with machines, and computer logic" and he "wasn't particularly good at it."

After taking 18 months out to think about what he wanted to do, including a stint in Norway working on a farm, "waking up every morning at 5:30 milking cows, herding sheep, and doing all the stuff that farmers do", he realised that he "wanted to work with people and to better understand different cultures." It tied in with his love of travelling and

his realisation that he really wanted to “deeply understand what moves people to make the choices they do.” Which led him to anthropology. He says, “the anthropological perspective, the anthropological glasses I learned to look through and I learned to observe the world through is magical.”

Graduating from his studies in Greenland in 2010 was timely. “Climate change was kind of upcoming and I thought, where in the world can you learn more about climate change?” The conversations were “about temperature, increase and CO2 levels in the atmosphere and that kind of stuff. And I thought, this is a very technological approach, but what does it mean to people? What effects does it have, what social impact does climate change have.” It was at that point, graduating in Greenland at a time when the financial crisis was “at its height”, that he realised he “wanted to do something with climate change and sustainability” and to help society move in “a more sustainable, inclusive future-proof direction.”

The company he started in 2011 has recently celebrated its 10 year anniversary. But he explains that “finding clients, running projects, finding my own voice took time” with “twists and turns” along the way. For the first two or three years he had “part-time jobs on the side to make money” but after that he could “live from it full-time.” He says, “having a company was a platform to do what I wanted to do and to be an anthropologist working in this field... to bring anthropology to a wider audience, to make more impact.”

Together they have written the book that “we would have loved ourselves when we graduated”.

WHY WRITE THE BOOK?

Anthropologists Wanted: Why Organisations Need Anthropology is the book that Walter wishes had been published “10 years ago when I graduated.” It’s actually an iteration of an earlier edition that Masja Cohen wrote, which was a collection of stories of Dutch anthropologists at different points in their career in different organisations. Walter, Masja, and Laurens decided to re-write the book to help anthropologists who have recently graduated or

who are having difficulty “finding their place in the job market” as well as people who are interested in anthropology such as “parents, employers, clients.”

Together they have written “the book that we would have loved ourselves when we graduated.” They all felt they were “at the point in our careers that we have something meaningful to say” working as they do in different sectors. Walter runs his own business, Masja worked for the municipality of Amsterdam before recently shifting to consultancy, and Laurens is an academic with a focus on applied anthropology.



Greenland. Photo by Filip Gelda on [Unsplash](#).

The book showcases “stories from anthropologists about who they are, what anthropologists are capable of, our skills, how they help organizations, companies, municipalities” as well as “clients, users, and inhabitants” to show “the value of anthropology to the world and to give people the stories, the tools, and the examples. And then the words to describe those.”

The authors also felt that “we face some serious challenges as societies, globally” even before the pandemic “exploded in our faces with all the medical and social challenges” that it brought. As Walter explains, “how do we respond to those things as a society? How do we build back better? We could “approach this in the classical way” but “if we add an anthropologist, the cocktail of expertise, of knowledge, of ways of studying” mean “the answers get better.”

BRANDING ANTHROPOLOGY

I ask Walter, “how do we brand anthropology?” “Poorly,” he says with a smile although “we’re getting better” at it. One of the reasons why “anthropology has been an overlooked discipline or not taken seriously enough is because we’ve not told the right stories. One of the reasons is that the roots of anthropology are in doing research and in describing what you find.”

But “working outside of academia, there’s always the question of well, thank you for helping me understand but what’s the wisest course of action right now? So the challenge is to help people, companies, organizations, municipalities, clients, users, whoever, to make that next step. As anthropologists we are not trained to to engage in that next step.”

Moving from “describing” to “suggesting changes” doesn’t come naturally to anthropologists because we’ve been trained not to make judgements. As Walter explains, suggesting changes “implies that something is not right as it is currently” so “there’s

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kind of judgment in that.” One of the main things we’re taught “is not to judge or at least postpone your judgment for as long as you can.” And then there are questions around “who decides what’s good? Who decides what is sustainable? Who decides what’s inclusive.” He believes “we need to overcome that, stop holding back, and step into that field and accept that sometimes things go wrong.”

He turns to how we market ourselves, saying, “what we need to do is get our marketing right. Tell better stories, tell stories about how and why we, as anthropologists, help organizations, well-built, better organizations. Organizations are entities built by people. So how do we engage with the people inside those organizations? And how do we understand them better? How do we help them to have better conversations, to have richer conversations, to engage in the aims and the goals that they trying to achieve?”

This “demands a couple of things from us, for example, to be less nuanced, which I think is a great strength of anthropology but at the same time, you can get totally lost in nuance. Be less nuanced, be more clear, sketch out the bigger picture. And if your client or your counterpart is still on board, then zoom in on more details.”

Corporate anthropologist, **Jitkse Kramer**, who contributed to the Branding Anthropology chapter, says we must “own our rank” by which she means champion your discipline, your knowledge and your skills. Walter also adds, “If we don’t take ourselves seriously, if we don’t have the answers ready for people, our counterparts, our clients, then we won’t be taken seriously. Owning your rank means a number of things but it also means “dress up, wear that suit, claim your rate, don’t do too many things for free or for a rate that’s way too low.”

As anthropologists “we try to find stories, understand the impact of stories in organizations, or in social contexts. We are quite good at understanding stories, at building stories, but we don’t share the right stories about our own discipline.” It is, he says, “a puzzling paradox within our own discipline. Storytelling is everywhere. But where are we?”

“We need to find better ways to tell our stories. And I think we are upping our game and we’re doing a better job every year. Up until a couple of years ago, I would have said we do our branding quite poorly. But we’re getting there, slowly.”

ANTHROPOLOGISTS’ UNIQUE SKILLS

Anthropology is “about understanding why people do what they do, and behave as they behave and act differently than how they say they act. I’m also human and I also do things differently than I say I do. This is all about meaning and all about sense-making...about how the meaning gets shaped within a different social context.”

Walter explains, “this sensemaking is partly fed by our emic and etic perspective. So the insider [emic] perspective: suspending your own judgments [to understand the perspectives of others]. And the etic [taking the outsider’s] perspective to find explanations, seeing the patterns, seeing the tensions, within a social context.” The “holistic view that we have, our ability to see the patterns” is what other people call “systems-thinking” and which

“anthropologists are doing naturally, but we just don’t use the phrase, for whatever reason.” He believes anthropologists should explain their holistic, systems-thinking skills better than they currently do.

Walter uses anthropological concepts in his work with clients such as liminality which he has “found super helpful” to “explain to my clients and organizations what it is, what it means, what are we still seeing, what you should do as a leader or as an organization.” But he says, “all these basic anthropological concepts have to be translated. We are translators. We are bridges between worlds, between social worlds, and between language worlds as well.”

His training as an anthropologist has “helped me to see better, to understand better, to have richer conversations because it helps me to listen better but also to talk in a better way and to make change in an easier way.”

It’s important to remember but easy to forget that “whatever an organization is involved with or is working on either willingly or unwilling, ultimately it’s all about people. It’s the people, stupid.”



Photo by Sigmund on [Unsplash](#).

ENSURING ANTHROPOLOGY AS A DISCIPLINE REMAINS ON PEOPLE’S MINDS

As anthropologists, “one of the things we need to do is to up our marketing game. Marketing is something I really hated until recently,” Walter explains. “But if you don’t do it, if you don’t tell the

right story, you only touch people’s minds, not their hearts” which means “you tend to get forgotten.”

“We are trained to describe and to be quite critical and I think there’s great value in that but at the same time it’s really easy being critical. It’s much harder to step into the field and to try to make things better. It demands that we engage with leaders and to see them as human beings trying to do the right thing. Of course there are toxic workplaces and leaders who are consciously doing a terrible job. They exist, I know, I’ve met them. But I also see many leaders trying to do the right thing but they don’t know how culture works, about how people engage, and about all these things we’ve talked about.”

During their training, anthropologists typically ‘study down’ and research disadvantaged groups, so they sometimes struggle with working with the people who hold power. Walter acknowledged this and posed the question: “To what extent are we willing, ready, and capable of engaging with power? Are we willing to wear that suit and to dress up and to speak the language of the boardroom, of the managing director, of the CEO?” He says we must because in order “to increase our impact we need to be in the places where decisions are being made” while also at the same time “giving the unheard voices a platform.”

WHY ORGANISATIONS SHOULD HIRE PEOPLE WITH ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRAINING

Walter quotes the “wonderful” analogy Jitske Kramer uses to describe what anthropologists bring to organisations: “Hiring an anthropologist is like switching from black and white TV into colour TV.” In other words, he says, “if you hire an anthropologist your vision becomes much richer, much more colourful with more layers. You have a better understanding of why people do what they do within your organization, or your clients, or your customers, or users, or your inhabitants. Your understanding gets richer, deeper, and more layered. And I think that’s a starting point for whatever you want to do.”

As Walter explains, “most organizations are in some way involved in change, which is all about meaning, and that’s all about people, that’s the heart of our discipline. Anthropologists should be

there to help them understand the organization that we want to work for and to better understand those mechanisms. And the answers people find to the questions in order to make the impact that the organization want to have. So have better conversations, have richer decision-making processes, better understand why people do, what they do.” Organisations should “use the power of story, use the power of liminality, of being in this ‘betwixt and between’ phase of not knowing but being really open to learning.”

Reflecting on his own work, Walter says, “it means helping people to really see that embedding sustainability into the DNA of the organization is not only about technological solutions and applications but it’s much more about hearts and minds, and people. For example, to merge two companies is not only putting two firms in one building and saying, here’s your new logo, your new website, you’re merged. It’s more about finding new ways together to build that organization because the organization is, to put it bluntly, nothing but a name. It’s built by the people within it.”

Walter also believes that anthropologists “should claim their seat at the table” with respect to “diversity and inclusion, which is at the heart of our of our discipline as well.” He explains, “it’s not only a topic for HR; it’s about power. Who decides what’s normal? Who gets to question the current status? So it’s also about leadership.”

He concludes our interview by citing the Dutch journalist and anthropologist, [Joris Luyendijk](#), who wrote the foreword for the book: “Anthropologists are like salt in a dish; throw in too much and the food is spoiled. But if a dish has no salt at all, none of the other flavours can come into their own.”

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Walter Faaij is a corporate anthropologist, consultant and entrepreneur (founder of Green Culture Lab) who specialises in sustainability, corporate culture and culture change. He helps leaders and sustainability professionals to embed sustainability in their organisations' culture.



Walter’s mission statement is: “The transition into a sustainable, inclusive and future-proof society is not about technology. It’s a culture change from extractive to regenerative, from unequal to inclusive, from profit-driven to purpose-driven. Sustainability is about our beliefs, mindsets and actions. Sustainability is about people”.

You can follow Walter on Twitter [@WalterFaaij](#), connect with him on [LinkedIn](#), and find him on his website, [Green Culture Lab](#).



Anthropologists Wanted.
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