

Social scientists study what gadget users want and need

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Matt Wallaert is not a software engineer. Nor is he a programmer or developer. Still, it's not unusual for him to get calls regularly from tech companies looking to recruit him.

Wallaert is a social scientist - a behavioral scientist who has done undergraduate and graduate work in psychology.

Eight months ago, Wallaert, who also has experience at [tech startups](#), began working at Microsoft Corp. with the Bing team, figuring out ways to make it easier for Bing users to make decisions and take actions, as well as ways to wean people off the habit of automatically going to Google for their Web searches.

While the idea of social scientists working at tech companies is not new, "There's been a shift in the industry," Wallaert said. "They used to shuffle these people into marketing: 'How do we get them to help sell us more things?' Now, they've shifted us into product: 'How do we actually make the thing better?' "

Wallaert's experience is echoed by some other social scientists at Microsoft and at other tech companies that are seeing increased interest in the skills social scientists offer, especially with the rising importance of social networking and big data to businesses.

Many agree their roles have become more integrated with specific product groups within their companies, rather than segregated to

marketing or research.

In the past few years, with the rise of [social computing](#) and social media, tech companies have come to understand that "it's not enough to understand the individual user," said Donald Farmer, a Seattle-based vice president of product management at QlikTech, a software company. "You have to understand them in a social context."

"There really is no business anymore that sells directly to one consumer," he said. "Every enterprise is now a [social enterprise](#)."

Jennifer Chayes, managing director of Microsoft Research labs in Cambridge, Mass., and in New York City, saw this change coming about six years ago. She pitched the idea to Microsoft of opening up a research lab specifically staffed with social scientists.

Social science research forms a substantial part of the work of the New England and New York labs, which opened in 2008 and 2012, respectively. Those labs take an interdisciplinary approach, uniting subjects such as machine learning and behavioral sciences.

A number of those researchers are studying some aspect of social networking.

"As technology becomes the mediator of our social interactions, it's essential that research in technology incorporate deep research in [social science](#)," Chayes said. "Otherwise, we design systems that don't do what we would like them to do for people or don't do what people would like."

Microsoft's devices and services, for example, shouldn't be thought of strictly as only devices or services. Many of them have social components as well.

"Xbox is a social site," Chayes said. "Skype is a social site."

Devices - such as Windows phones and tablets - also mediate social interactions, she said.

Microsoft researchers, for example, are looking into how people find out what music they want to listen to, what musicians they want to interact with, and how to enrich the fan experience - all of which might help the Xbox Music service.

Yammer, the business [social networking](#) startup Microsoft bought in 2012, has turned to Chayes' group for insight into social networks, including how people can locate the right people to network with, and how to discover experts with large companies and connect them to others in the company who need that information, she said.

Tracey Lovejoy, a senior user research lead for Office, has used her anthropology training at Microsoft as a user experience researcher and an ethnographer, researching how technology is embedded in people's lives.

Recently, she and her team conducted a field study of about three dozen people, talking to people and observing them in their environments to understand the kinds of work they do on their tablets and how those tablets fit within their wider technology ecosystem.

One theme that emerged was that many tablet owners used their devices for more "casual productivity" and in more relaxed positions, such as reclining on the couch - information useful for future iterations of Office.

These days, Lovejoy observed, it's the researchers themselves who are more embedded into product teams, "becoming more impactful, and

influencing decisions at the strategic level."

Similar things are happening at other tech companies.

When Ken Anderson, an anthropologist and principal engineer with Intel Labs, started at the company about 12 years ago, there were only a handful of social scientists. Now there are dozens.

Moreover, most product and marketing groups at Intel now have at least one anthropologist or sociologist embedded in them, Anderson said.

Previously, someone developing technology for mobile devices, for example, might come to consult with the social science researchers. Now, there are researchers embedded with the mobile teams.

"It's a real shift on corporations' part," Anderson said. "They're interested in understanding how people live so they can innovate for them."

Jeanette Blomberg, an anthropologist with IBM Research, said social scientists, along with other researchers at the company, look for partners in the IBM divisions that would benefit from their research. The challenges faced by the divisions then help shape what the researchers work on.

"We've seen a growing interest and need for the kind of expertise that we bring to the questions of the day around data analytics, and social and mobile technologies," she said.

Blomberg is doing research on how data is produced - especially in the course of everyday activities - and analyzed, and the ways those analyses are then used within corporations.

"Social scientists are in a strong position to help us understand the sources of data and the way data needs to be understood in order to be taken up," she said.

Trey Causey, who is working toward a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Washington and recently joined flash-sales clothing website Zulily as a data scientist, said there's still some skepticism among tech firms that [social scientists](#) have skills to contribute.

But that's changing, he said, especially with the volume of data available these days that companies want to analyze.

There's even an emerging field of "computational social science" that looks at social phenomena using computational tools, and that ties together everything from statistics to social sciences to computer science.

Edward Liebow, executive director of the American Anthropological Association, says an organization he and other anthropologists are active in, called Ethnographic Praxis in Industry, is growing, and it brings together people from the anthropological and design communities, including industrial, device and service design.

The group's first conference, held in 2005 at the Microsoft Conference Center, drew about 160 people. In recent years, the group has had to cap attendance at 450.

Liebow believes that "the task of making sense of the overwhelming amount of data we have available now places a premium on those who can make the data tell a story or find a story in the data."

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