



## [Episode 6: Lessons from the First Canadian Behavioural Insights Unit](#)

with Julian House Behavioural Scientist at the Ontario Behavioural Insights Unit.

*The Ontario Behavioural Insights Unit (BIU) was the first provincial “nudge unit” in Canada and Julian House has been involved since his days as a PhD student at the University of Toronto. Julian and I talk about how the BIU started, how they use their MIST framework in problem scoping, and how they pair BI with other tools. Don’t “MIST” the opportunity to listen ;)*

### *Transcript:*

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KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short.

Today, we're "calling DIBS" on Julian House, a behavioural scientist with the Ontario Behavioural Insights Unit. We're really lucky to have Julian on the call today because Ontario was the first province in Canada to create a BI unit and they are a real leader in the space in Canada. And at UBC we've been fortunate to work with the Ontario BIU on developing our Advanced Professional Certificate in Behavioural Insights. So, I'm excited to talk today with Julian and get the chance to learn more about what Ontario has been up to. Welcome to the podcast, Julian.

JULIAN HOUSE, GUEST: Thanks for having me, Kirstin.

APPELT: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your role at the Ontario BIU?

HOUSE: I am one of two behavioural scientists on staff with the unit. I completed my graduate work in organizational behaviour at the Rotman School of Management. Rotman, as your students probably know, has a research center focused on behavioural economics. And I was a budding PhD student just when that was founded. I was kind of involved in some of the founding white papers that the research center put out. And, you know, a student who is in the year ahead of me actually started working at the behavioural insights' unit in the government before it even began back in the fall of 2013 -- Nicole Robitaille, now a professor at the business school in Queen's University. And she let me know about this opportunity because she was moving on to become a full-time professor. And I started just before I finished my PhD part-time in the unit.

And my role in the unit has been, I think, the same since, since that time, I lead projects from start to finish. And our main role in the Behaviour Insights Unit is facilitating the delivery of behavioural science projects for the Government of Ontario. And so, all of those projects involve a behavioural scientist, scoping problems, exploring the context surrounding a particular problem, helping to design solutions and tests that will evaluate whether or not those solutions are actually helping to change behaviour for the better. So that's what I do on a regular basis at the Government of Ontario.

APPELT: That's fantastic. And it pulls on some of the things we've already been talking about in the Certificate. So, I'm excited to dig in a bit more. But before we get there, what led you to a career in BI?

HOUSE: Well, I was really fortunate to know Nicole, as I mentioned, who, you know, just tapped me as somebody who she thought might be interested because I've been kind of hearing inklings about what was going on in the United Kingdom. You know, I had read the nudge book when it came out and thought that was really such a cool way of taking what I've been learning in my PhD to kind of the quote unquote "Real world and application of this for the public good", so to speak.

But prior to that, you know, I think I would like to claim some intentionality in my career's direction, but I think that's probably post-hoc rationalization. You know, I came out of an undergrad in International Relations and Political Science at the London School of Economics and thought that, you know, I've been hearing all of these competing theories that kind of explained how political actors, citizens should behave in particular situations, but didn't really seem to be any way to reconcile these competing theories.

I did what a lot of students who are kind of dissatisfied and not sure about their kind of undergraduate training and went to law school and found that actually, you know, there was still a lot of assumptions there about what a rational person might do in a particular situation that might make them liable, for example, either criminally or civilly for certain things. But it still seems like these assumptions were just that and in need of some deeper questioning. And, I likewise was dissatisfied there, and eventually ended up taking some psychology courses. And, you know, really was enamored by this idea that we could turn the scientific method towards human behaviour, and use it to understand why people might behave in a particular way, in a particular situation. And this idea of context-dependent behaviour really fascinated me, really kind of made me see lots of things in a new way.

From there, it was into grad school and like I said, just happened to be in the right place at the right time in terms of realizing that there was this new way of taking my specific training and experimentation and human behaviour and doing something that I'd always wanted to do, which was working in the public sector, work in the public interest. But in a way that now felt much more empirically grounded than anything I'd been exposed to previously.

APPELT: That's great. And I hear some echoes of my own story as someone who started in economics and then added in psychology to end up in a mixed place. That resonates a lot with me. So, you were someone who is at the Ontario BIU at the very beginning. So why did the Ontario Public Service decide to explore using a BI approach?

HOUSE: So not at the very beginning. Just a few months after it started. I've only heard this second hand as hearsay, but the story goes that there was a deputy minister who read the nudge book who had heard what was going on in the United Kingdom, thought that this made sense, maybe got a little bit jealous that some of his international colleagues were doing this and he hadn't been able to yet. And so, I think he decided that he wanted to set this up as what was then determined or called a special projects scheme.

It was not a permanent budget item, just some funds kind of scraped together to have one full-time staff and essentially one part-time PhD student working in the government. And I think, you know, the Ontario government is very lucky to be located physically so close to the University of Toronto, where there were these great scholars already thinking about the application of behavioural science to policy both in the public and private sectors. And so, they really found that there were these people who were willing to dedicate resources to the cause. So, the Ontario government is really indebted to professors Dilip Soman and Nina Mazar and both of them were instrumental in kind of continuing to persuade folks that this was a good idea, but also to developing a portfolio of three projects that were successful, fortunately enough, off the bat, that really made the case for making this into a permanent team in 2015.

So, you know, a little bit of just one person being influenced by the growing international movement and, you know, the popular press book that has been so influential. And then I think the good fortune of a collaboration between academia and the public sector to quickly deliver on some low hanging fruit that made the case that, "Okay, this isn't something that just happens elsewhere. It is effective here in Ontario. We can do this." And, you know, I think that having those kinds of quick wins is something that I've seen in lots of other teams around the world as being critical for getting going.

APPELT: Absolutely. So, you've talked about it having a few quick wins upfront, like you just said. How would you describe the value of BI for the public service in Ontario? What has that enabled you to do?

HOUSE: Well, I think, you know, there's two broad value propositions: The way that we explain it to folks who are curious about how behavioural science might be useful for them, and those are the theoretical perspective or kind of the paradigm shift to a more nuanced perspective of human behaviour as highly context dependent. And making our models of citizens or, you know, even organization's behaviour more consistent with modern-day evidence that has been accumulated through decades of research, rather than relying on the more neoclassical, economic model of a rational actor responding to incentives. And they're kind of stable individual preferences.

So that's the one kind of value that we bring. And the other is, I think, the empirics. The methodological component of "randomized evaluation" -- and we really see those as united in behavioural science and that you can't have one without the other. And that's I think one of the things that is the hardest to persuade people on is that you can't just take one, but that rather they're an integral package. And so even though they contribute value uniquely, on their own they are much less powerful because we know that context dependent behaviour means that generalizability from one population or setting to another may not always follow.

And we also know that there's a million different ideas that you could potentially test ways to change a program or a policy. But without that underlying theory guiding you, you're kind of-- you would have no way of knowing which ideas might make you want to test first, which ones might be the most promising. And you'd never get anywhere. Just testing all the time. Everything.

APPELT: Absolutely. I love bringing those two pieces, and I think that's something we've talked about quite a bit in the Certificate. Another thing we've talked about quite a bit is the idea that Behavioural Insights is part of a larger toolkit to change behaviour and how it can work with those other tools. So, can you unpack how Ontario sees the idea?

HOUSE: Well, I mean, I can't speak for all of the public service, of course, but, you know, we're very much of the mindset in our team that the public service has been doing lots of fantastic work for a long time before we came along. And they were able to do so with an existing suite of tools that they can bring to bear on policy challenges. I mean-- policy challenges, often when you boil them down, are behavioural in nature.

But, you know, if you want to categorize it as kind of a nudge as one of the ways of thinking about behavioural science interventions, that's only one of the ways of shifting people from behaving in manner A to manner B. You know, we do know that incentives work. We do know that regulatory methods work. We do know that although less than we would anticipate, people need information in order to make informed decisions, in order to make up their preferences and attitudes, especially towards novel things that they have not encountered previously.

I think, what we also see is that there are places where those two value propositions that I was talking about before, and in particular the empirical kind of testing of ideas isn't really possible. Perhaps you have a regulation or policy that pertains to an industry with only a few actors in it. So maybe, there's a handful of actors and therefore the statistical evaluation that we would typically do is impossible because we just don't have the sample size to carry it out. You know, in other situations, it might be that it's not possible to deliver different messages or different interventions to different sub-populations and again, you know, for a particular narrow window of time that you have as a policymaker, an RCT just might not be on the table for that or other reasons.

And in such situations, you know, it's probably useful to look to the behavioural science literature for some inspiration. But at the end of the day, some old-fashioned regulation or incentives with taxation or monetary benefits might be what's called for. And those might be impossible, even under a legal framework, to test in the same kind of way that we would normally do with a randomized controlled trial. So, you know, I think it's definitely gray as to when one tool is exclusively used and another, and often it's in combination. But there are certainly times when behavioural science just isn't going to be at least a primary tool that you can rely on to solve the problem.

APPELT: Yeah, and that's something I think we've talked about, are starting to unpack a bit in the program is that there are some times where you use some of the behavioural insights, but you're not able to test, like you said, sometimes you are able to bring both pieces. But it depends on what tool you're using it in combination with, and I think that's a message we've been trying to get across. But I think you really elucidated it nicely.

So, one thing you mentioned at the very beginning when you were talking about your role as a behavioural scientist is starting at the beginning of a project when we have the problem discovery phase and that scoping phase. One of the things I've been trying to clarify for students is how do you decide when it is a good fit to have a behavioural insights approach versus when it's not a good fit?

HOUSE: Yeah, this is a great question and one that we think about a lot, because as our reputation as a team continues to grow, there is increasing demand for our involvement and there's opportunity costs, if you're going to be involved in one project, that might mean another project that you have to forego. So, it's not necessarily that a project isn't going to be benefited at all from taking a behavioural science approach, but that maybe there are other projects where you can have a bigger return on the investment of your limited time and resources. The prioritization framework that we use in the Behavioural Insights Unit is an acronym that goes by MIST, M-I-S-T. And so, we always joke that we're looking for "MIST" (missed) opportunities.

The "M" is for measurement. You can't do empirical work without empirics. So, the two ways that we get people to think about this is, you know "Is it observable?", first and foremost, because we explain that word "behaviour" is in all of these names for the discipline, for a reason that at the end of the day, you as a policymaker are not interested in people's attitudes and perceptions and knowledge, in and of themselves, but rather the behavioural consequences of those.

So, are you sure that you're, first of all, talking about a behaviour? Is it observable? That's usually a good indication that, yes, it is the behaviour and then the next point is, is it something that could be measured relatively inexpensively? Because as long as it's observable, it should be theoretically possible to measure. But if you have to have an army of research assistants with clipboards actually observing every single individual 24 hours a day, that's not feasible. And now, we're very fortunate in the environment that we currently exist, that sensors, smartphones, and all kinds of digital technology are making things more and more measurable and quantifiable all the time. But, sometimes in the public sector, we have limited resources and we're dealing

with legacy technology platforms. So those features that might be available to your Amazons and Facebooks etc. aren't necessarily available to us.

And so, what we're often looking at is, do you have administrative data systems for the particular program? Are you already essentially measuring the outcome of interest? And often people are, because to run the program, they need to know who's doing what. And so, you know, measurement is usually ticked off. And if it's not, then we might look at some technology platforms if you're sending someone an email, right, it's usually possible with today's email campaign software instead to measure, did somebody open the email? Did somebody click through? And then, you know, those are at least proxies-- they're getting closer to the ultimate behaviour that you want them to do, which might be, you know, in a private sector context, purchasing a product or in a public sector one, taking a particular action.

The "I" stands for impact in MIST. We want to make sure that when we're zooming down from the policy level all the way to a small, granular behavioural component, that we know with some degree of certainty that that behaviour is actually consequential for the policy objective. We don't want to have zoomed in so much that we've lost the forest for the trees. And we now are focusing on a behaviour that even if we are wildly successful in changing it, it doesn't actually matter for your policy objective.

So, you know, typically this is "What does the existing scientific literature say about this behaviour?". You know, in the medical literature, "Is there something that says that if you get more people to climb stairs more often, that will actually reduce all cause mortality or some other kind of major risk?". And if you've got that strong link, then you've satisfied the impact component. And I guess the other piece that we ask there is, "Is there room for improvement?". Keep in mind that there's diminishing marginal returns the closer you get to 100 percent compliance. If you've got something where only 70 percent of people are doing what you want. It's probably an easier target than if you've got already-- 97 percent of people doing what you want.

"S" is for sample size and power calculations are how we figure that out, and those can get fairly sophisticated. But as a general rule of thumb, we're talking, you know, thousands of observations. This is what we usually tell people.

And the "T" is for touch points. Do you have, again, a low-cost way of delivering an intervention? To the focal population before they've actually performed the behaviour. So, you know, are you already sending them a letter or do you have their email address or their phone number or something so that you can actually get an intervention to them? So that's how we if you satisfy all the MIST components, then there's a good likelihood that this is a good candidate for behavioural science.

APPELT: And do you find that certain parts of that evaluation or the problem discovery phase are trickier than others?

HOUSE: Yeah, I think the impact part is one of those tricky things, I think sometimes, work in the public sector gets political. And that might mean that people's priorities are driven not by what the evidence suggests is important, but rather by whatever is seen to be important, by a political perspective. And then, I think sometimes, it's just human nature for people to get invested in the success of their own program or their area of expertise. And it can be hard sometimes to tell people that, you know, while it might be important for your particular team that more people do this, what is the evidence that if we got more people to use your program, that that would actually benefit society as a whole? So that's usually the most challenging one. I think the other ones are more objective. So, a lot easier to kind of explain to people. And it's either a yes or no.

APPELT: Great point. So, are there any lessons learned to help new practitioners with selecting challenges and using MIST?

HOUSE: I would say, we like to develop a kind of project funnel. So, it's often the case that if you have an important policy area, there are multiple behavioural components that are important for achieving that policy outcome or furthering that policy outcome. And so, before we get into the MIST prioritization framework, we do what's called a behavioural lensing activity with our partners, where we try to look at all of the actors who are relevant for a particular policy area and then ask, you know, "What are the behaviours that contribute either in a positive or a negative way to this outcome that we care about", so that we can get as many targets for behaviour change on the table, and then put all of them through the MIST kind of prioritization framework simultaneously, so that you have a suite of opportunities to look at.

And then you can try to rank them, and that way, you know, if one is kind of questionable, then maybe it's not number one on your list, but maybe it's number three or four. And hopefully you can get some kind of rough agreement on the rank order of the value of these different targets. And then, you know, go through them kind of sequentially and say "Okay, well, perhaps after we've had a successful project on these first one or two priorities, then we'll circle back to this one that is a little bit more uncertain in terms of its impact", for example. I think it's also really useful because we're obviously just starting. We're just talking about the beginning of our project here and identifying opportunities, but then you've got to go through the whole scientific process, which may have its, you know, roadblocks at any different stage.

So having kind of that ranked prioritized list can be really useful because you find out at the next stage "Oh, there is some kind of structural issue that's going to prevent us from delivering this intervention", or "We actually need to wait for this policy to change first" or whatever it might be. So now we can just go back to our list and work down until we find one that is, you know, capable of being completed from start to finish.

APPELT: I think that's a really good point and something that is often a bit counterintuitive or goes against our first impulse, which is often to jump and go narrow really soon. Like you said, it's really useful to have this exercise of the brainstorm, get out lots of ideas so we don't get too anchored on any specific idea and give lots of ideas, opportunity to go through the MIST framework and then to give you options for Plan B, Plan C, as needed.

HOUSE: Yeah. And I think this is at every stage, right? So, this is both in terms of the problem identification. And then, of course, later on we're talking about solutions for these problems, right? Ideally, if you can have multiple solutions on the table, then it's okay if one or two of them becomes infeasible for whatever reason or if, you know, senior executives say, like, "There's no way that we're approving this", or "It's too expensive", or what have you. At all of the different stages, having options available to you increases the likelihood that you're going to be able to deliver a successful project within whatever timeline you have set.

APPELT: Absolutely. And I would imagine it also helps a bit, at least with confirmation bias. And just getting so focused on this one is going to succeed, maybe it guards a little bit against, making you keep your eyes open to other options.

HOUSE: Yeah. And, you know, I think it also helps with... The potential of failure, which is something that I think your students will have to be comfortable with if they're going to take an empirical approach to problem solving, because, you know, ideally, if you set up your empirical test properly, it will tell you in an objective manner when you haven't been successful. And if you've already got your list of, well, "Here are our you know, second and third targets", well, we know how to restart the iteration right away. And it can help speed up the delay between cycles of your kind of iterative problem-solving.

APPELT: Yeah. Absolutely. So, it's not as crushing when you have a failure because you already have your potential other options to pursue. Yeah, that's fantastic advice. So as leaders of BI in Canada and people who've been involved since the early stages of BI in Canada, how have you seen the practice of BI growing and evolving?

HOUSE: Well, there's definitely an increased demand, and this is, you know, both the good news for students in terms of demand for the skills, and I think also the increased demand or recognition of the value that this can bring. There appears to be a proliferation of teams with this expertise across the public and private sector.

So, your students will be familiar, I'm sure, with the teams in British Columbia, but there's also multiple teams in the federal government and you know, recently in the fall of last year, we were lucky enough to get a local office of the Behavioural Insights team in Toronto. I think that's one of the main changes, is that with this increased demand, there's been a corresponding rise in supply of this this skill set, and I see these as, to a certain point at least, reinforcing as well, because I think there it's still not uncommon to encounter people who say, like, "I had no idea that this was a way of approaching problems in the public sector" or whatever sector I happen to be in, and are genuinely excited to learn about this this new approach. Or they've heard about this as a theoretical kind of pop psychology notion, but didn't know that there were actually teams doing it that were available to kind of collaborate with them. And I think the more teams, the more success stories there are circulating, the more people become aware that'll, you know, again, increase demand at least up to a certain point. But I see lots of remaining behavioural challenges.

I think that's the main thing that I've noticed is just a greater utilization of this toolset by the public sector. And I don't know to what extent it's relevant to your students, but also in the private sector. So, I teach Behavioural Economics and Marketing class at the Rotman School. And each semester we have private and public sector organizations come in and give the students challenges to work on. And yet there's just been a steady increase over the years in the number of private sector organizations as well who are aware of this and who are excited and increasingly who have expertise in-house. There's, you know, more and more consulting firms that also offer the skillset, but more and more, I think you've got either people who are just really interested and do it at the side of the desk or, you know, a team of three or four people who actually have specific training in this and are in organizations across the spectrum, from retail to financial institutions. So, it's good to see that too.

APPELT: Absolutely. And I think that's a good segue to my last question, which is, do you have any other messages or advice for our BI practitioners in training?

HOUSE: I would say the low hanging fruit and quick wins are an important place to start, if you're in an organization that is new to this field. And there will be lots of those organizations. It's, I would say, not unlikely that might be where you find yourself, as in, an organization where there's not a lot of support for taking this approach because people just don't know it. They're not familiar with it. So, looking for those ways to demonstrate value locally, within an organization, I think is a really important way to show people, you know, this isn't just something external, this is something that we can do, this is something that can bring value to our customers or to our employees internally.

And I think, don't be afraid maybe to, after that, or if you feel like you've got the support right from the get-go to bite off maybe more than you can chew, because there's lots of folks out there who would be willing to provide expertise if you're lacking it and maybe a particular, you know, complicated experimental design, or

statistical analysis. As I just mentioned in the last question, there are, you know, private sector consulting companies that can come in and help for a fee.

But there's also lots of academics who are out there who are eager to partner with organizations across any sector, who have an interesting behavioural challenge and a willingness to engage in the academic publication process. It's increasingly common, I mean, it's something that's happened for decades, but increasingly common that you can have these partnerships with academia. And even if it's important to maintain the confidentiality of your organization, that's something that can be done in the publication process. And they simply say, you know, a large organization in North America or something, and it's a real win-win opportunity for you to get cutting-edge expertise, and for the academic to get an opportunity to get data in the field with consequential decisions as opposed to a laboratory or online kind of judgment task. There are experts out there who are willing to help, and it's just a matter of, I guess, finding them and asking, and don't be afraid to ask, because I think the worst that can happen is they say that they're too busy, but my colleague down the hall might be willing to help you, so definitely seek that out.

APPELT: Absolutely, I think that's a fantastic message and really speaks to what I think is a very collaborative and generous community of practice within behavioural insights, where most of us are extremely willing to share insights, whether it's just, you know, lessons learned like you're doing today or if it's actually consulting on a project, so I think that's a great, great message and a great place for us to end. So, thank you for this conversation. It's been really fascinating for me to hear more about the Ontario perspective and get more of a Pan-Canadian experience. I hope our listeners learned as much as I did. And thank you for joining us today.

HOUSE: Thanks, Kirstin, it was fun.

APPELT: And thanks for listening to Calling DIBS.

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