Episode 1: "Scoping BI Challenges"

with Sasha Tregebov, Director of BIT Canada

The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) is the original "nudge unit" and Sasha Tregebov has overseen a number of BIT projects, from "What Works Cities" to the creation of BIT Canada. "Calling DIBS" couldn't ask for a better first guest. To kick this series off, Sasha and I talk about the value of BI and the challenges of problem discovery.

Transcript:

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 Sasha Tregebov, Director of BIT Canada. I'm really excited for you to hear from Sasha because he has such a wealth of BI experiences from overseeing BIT North America's 'What Cities Work' initiative to spearheading the creation of BIT Canada. On a personal level, I always enjoy chatting with Sasha because he raises such interesting points about the practice of BI and how it's evolving and growing.

Welcome, Sasha.

SASHA TREGEBOV, GUEST: Thank you very much!

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

TREGEBOV: Sure. I'm currently the director of BIT Canada, the Behavioural Insights Team's Canadian office. As you may know, the Behavioural Insights Team is one of the first organizations dedicated to the application of behavioural science to the work of government.

We actually started out as a part of the British government when we were formed in 2010. In 2014, we were spun out of government, giving us the opportunity to really extend our reach and our ability to work with a much broader set of partners. Excitingly, it also allowed us to set up shop in areas outside of the U.K. Our most recent international office or non-UK office is our Canadian office, which we launched just under a year ago on October 1st, 2019. So, I've been leading that team as we've grown.

About myself, I am born and raised in Toronto, I got my start and came into this work indirectly. I got my start working for the government of Ontario, as a public policy advisor, and then in a management consulting role, again, with a focus on public policy advice and supporting the work of government.

APPELT: What led you to make that pivot from more of the traditional public policy to more of a behavioural insights role?

TREGEBOV: It's actually sort of a fun story, or a fun story for me anyways. Actually, I can still sort of remember the moment in 2011 when I was at my desk. I was still early on in my career working in government, and I

don't remember how I saw it, but I ended up reading a report from an organization that I had certainly never heard of called the Behavioural Insights Team.

The paper was called "Fraud, Error, and Debt", and it was actually the first public report that BIT ever developed. It was about what at the time was just sort of mind-blowing to me—about how a deeper understanding of human psychology and behaviour can solve some very practical issues that governments around the world were facing at the time around collecting tax debts, reducing errors in user interaction with government forms, and also, as the title suggests, reducing fraud. And it just really struck me. I think I had been reading some other stuff around behavioural economics. I had read "Thinking, Fast and Slow", and that was a powerful and eye-opening book. But I hadn't really been able to make the connection to my own work as a public policy professional, until reading that report.

It just struck me that so many of the conversations that I was in, so much of the work that I was doing, in terms of policy analysis, had just completely missed this really critical piece of the puzzle. We really were, I think, designing policy for these icons, these sort of idealized, rational agents. It explains so much about why some really powerful policy instruments and solutions that the government of today and previous governments had developed weren't having the sort of impact that had been hoped for in society. So, from that point on, I just wanted to do whatever I could to point myself in this direction of applying behavioural science to the work of government. It took me many years to the point where I could really say that that was my job all day, every day. And I'm thrilled that it is today.

APPELT: That's great, thanks. Do you have a favourite BI tool or a case study?

TREGEBOV: Yeah. You know, I think we may talk about this a little later in our discussion. But, you know, one of the things that I'm really passionate about when it comes to the practice of behavioural insights is that, these solutions that are informed by behavioural science nudges or otherwise, they work because they address real barriers that people experience in their day-to-day life. Vis-à-vis, the sort of, you know, behaviour of interest. And so, BIT recently launched this barrier identification tool, leveraging a framework that had been developed by Susan Michie and others at UCL, called the COM-B Framework: capability, opportunity and motivation. And so, we've just sort of done a bit of a clever web design that the team did so it's free and accessible, so that everybody, you know, can just search it up online.

That barrier identification tool, can help you identify some of the barriers that may be interfering with the sort of behaviour of interest in your work. So that's a brand-new tool, and I think it's a really exciting one because it covers this really critical part of the behavioural insights project process around understanding, "Well, why aren't people behaving this way already?" "What's really sort of interfering there?".

APPELT: Yeah, I think that sounds really like a useful tool in terms of breaking out what we often lumped together, so separating out the capabilities, opportunities and the motivations.

TREGEBOV: And you know, it's always helpful to have these sorts of structured frameworks to make sure you're not missing some important part of the puzzle. When it comes to favorite case studies, I often go back to a really early piece of work that the behavioural insights team did many years before I joined the organization. It was about helping people get back to work more quickly. In particular, it had to do with how jobseekers, unemployed people, interacted with employment counsellors or coaches at employment service centers in the UK, which at the time were called job centers, and it was this really sort of eye-opening trial and project.

The intervention was of two key parts. It was really about anchoring the conversations between the job seekers and the employment counsellors on getting back to work, not about trudging through the administrative requirements to get one's unemployment benefits, but really "future" focused and "back-to-work" focused. The second element of the intervention was around the use of commitment devices, of getting jobseekers to commit not just to the mandatory minimum of job search activities, but to a much more ambitious goal of how they could take ownership of their job search.

Another really cool thing about this project was not just the design of the intervention, but also the way it was refined and implemented over time. So, it was initially sort of co-designed and co-developed with the employment counselors in one of these job centers, and did a pilot evaluation just at that one job center. And then to really evaluate it at scale, we expanded it to a much larger number, I think about 50 or 60 job centers in one region of England. We used this really neat methodology of a "step wedge trial" where you randomize when the intervention is rolled out. So, it's just a very clever evaluation methodology and a clever and interesting intervention. More than anything, it just had a really major impact. Like, this intervention actually, was conclusively shown to have reduced the amount of time it takes jobseekers to get back into work. And therefore, the amount of money that needs to be paid out in terms of unemployment benefits.

APPELT: Yeah, that's a great one, and I think that adds a nice amount of colour to the -- Students will be reading about it a bit in EAST, and in the new Behavioural Insights textbook, but it's nice to hear kind of the human side of that story. That's a great one.

One of the topics we are going to be spending a lot of time on is problem discovery and how you kick off a project, and navigating those decisions. Can you tell us about a time when problem discovery helped you realize a project was actually not a good fit and shouldn't be pursued?

TREGEBOV: Yeah. I think, you know, often at the very early phases of our projects, we try to zero in on moving from an organizational goal or a policy goal, if we're working with government, and trying to translate that into what are the behaviours that really, really matter. And so, then once we've got that understanding, we need to, and this sort of goes back to that barrier identification tool, we need to understand, "Why aren't people already doing this thing, why aren't they already, you know, going out and engaging in a much higher number of job search activities or making sort of concrete plans and commitments for how they're going to do so?" And, you know, when you do this work, and when you do this work thoughtfully, sometimes you realize that it's really not– the barriers are really not psychological. They're really not sort of behavioural, in our jargon or vernacular. They're sort of systemic or structural.

Just as one example, some of my colleagues were recently working with the city of Longmont in the US, and they had this really neat program about the community rangers. So, some individuals employed by the city that were employed to do, sort of, homelessness outreach and also work on keeping public spaces safe. And, you know, we had this great workshop with them trying to understand the challenges that they were experiencing. But what we realized is fundamentally the problem wasn't about behavioural issues. It was really about role definition, and the sort of core skills, and education of these city employees. So, we thought, well, there may be some behavioural science work that needs to happen down the road, but right now it's just core education and role definition.

I think we've got loads of these stories where, we either have to pivot the focus of the project, or say, "Hey, let's move on to a different project altogether," because you've got a real problem to be solved here. But the behavioural insights tool kit and in particular the ability of the behavioural insights tool kit to design interventions to address these psychological or behavioural, situational, behavioural barriers to change. That just isn't the right one. It's not the most important issue to be solved right now.

APPELT: I think that you made some really good points, including how if a project isn't a good fit, it's not necessarily a hard no. It can be a not right now, and once you do these other pieces, there might be room for behavioural insights later. But sometimes it's not a good fit at the moment. Not just at all.

TREGEBOV: And we come up to this a lot. I'd say that the most common reason that we end up having to come to a decision like that is a little bit more technical. It just may be about the way we think about behavioural insights as an approach, right? It sort of includes, you know, adopting a more nuanced and realistic model of human behaviour and applying it to these organizational challenges and the design of these new approaches. But it's also about evaluating those ideas and evaluating those ideas as rigorously as possible in order to provide evidence-based advice on, "Where does that organization go next?" right? Do they adopt a new model? A new approach? And so, often what we find when we're doing our early due diligence and problem definition on these projects, is that the data is not currently available. The organization, the government doesn't collect the data that would be required to understand effectiveness. There, we really pivot to saying, "Hey, we can work with you, other folks can work with you, you can work internally, to establish these data collection mechanisms."

You know, I worked in one project in Oklahoma City. This is back when I was working with the Behavioural Insights team in New York. And we were all over the country working with cities, having an awful lot of fun. And, you know, Oklahoma City had this issue where they had this incredibly high error rate in business license applications, and it was driving the business community crazy. It was driving the city itself crazy because they'd be sending these forms back and forth and back and forth. And what we realized early on in the project is, they knew anecdotally the error rate was really high, but they didn't know how high it was. We couldn't really assess the effectiveness of an intervention in reducing the error rate. And so, you know, we worked with their I.T. group, in their software that they were using to manage this licensing, to add some new fields to capture "Was there an error or not in the initial renewal application?". After a little bit of time of them sorting that out and getting that in place, subsequently we were able to run the trial that we wanted to run.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely, I have many stories of my own about when the data piece was not there. I think that's a really important piece to consider, early on.

So, what do you think is the trickiest part of that problem scoping, problem definition, initial phase of projects?

TREGEBOV: Yes, so tough to boil it down, and maybe this answer will be a little bit meta. But, unsurprisingly, maybe, I actually think the trickiest part of this phase is actually really behavioural. You know, speaking for myself, and I think probably speaking for other practitioners who do this work day-in day-out, there's a real desire, even a non-conscious or subconscious desire, to shoehorn a problem into a definition that BI can help solve, right?

You know, we ourselves as behavioural insights practitioners are, just as susceptible to some of these cognitive biases and heuristics as others. And so, I think there's this real confirmation bias, where you can be listening to your partners describing the challenges that they're facing, the things that they want to do in their community, and you start thinking to yourself, "OK, well, what parts of that are really well suited to the tools that I have at my disposal? You know, let me just sort of grab onto whatever information suggests that this challenge is fundamentally behavioural and can be meaningfully solved through a behavioural insights approach." I think you need to work really, really hard to not be susceptible to that, right? To very diligently think about, "Is this actually aligned to people's incentives?", right? Is there just a core, rational economic issue here? Are there structural, systemic issues that are going to mean that, even if we can better motivate

people, even if we can make things easier or more attractive, more social, or more timely, to refer to that EAST framework, we're still not really going to solve the problem because there's something deeper. There's something more fundamental here. It's hard to do that, you know, because we're humans, too, right? And we want to be useful and we want to be the right tool for the job.

APPELT: That definitely resonates with me as something that I catch myself doing sometimes, where you're like, "Oh! But if we tweaked it this way," then too many tweaks and it's not the original problem anymore.

Well, based on that, what lessons learned do you have for new practitioners who are first sitting out on their challenge, and trying to figure out what that challenge might be, how to select it, how to scope it?

TREGEBOV: Yeah. I think you need to build some iteration into your project plan or approach. I don't think you can think in terms of – "Early in the project, we're going to define the problem, and that problem definition will sit untouched and unexamined as we go through the subsequent phases of the work". I think, instead, you need to build into that plan, returning to that problem definition, as you learn more and more -- for example, through your exploratory research activities. I think that's part of it-- building in some iteration. I think perhaps an even more fundamental part of it is active listening. You know, are you really creating an opportunity for stakeholders, for users, for experts, for colleagues, to weigh in on that problem definition, to validate it, to challenge it, to re-articulate it in their own terms.

APPELT: I think that's a really good point and speaks to all of our joint efforts to really try to grow our community of practice here in Canada, so that we all can build on each other and work together.

One last question about the problem discovery phase, and I'm curious to see if this is something that BIT runs into, because it's certainly something I've run into with my work with the B.C. Behavioural Insights Group and with DIBS, is those problems where it starts out as a concrete project and then it kind of just keeps growing and spreading, and then pretty soon, the scope has expanded, doubled, tripled, from what you originally agreed to do, which can be good. But sometimes, you know, if that happens with every project, then you can only take on a really limited number of projects. So how do you guard against scope creep or is that something that you encounter?

TREGEBOV: Yeah, it is something that I encounter. I mean, I do agree that at a certain level, scope flexibility probably leads to better outcomes, right? If there is a sort of openness towards, you know, reframing your problem or pivoting, you realize actually, "This behaviour, over here, that we thought was really important, either isn't that important or is going to be really, really hard to move". We actually say, "Let's sort of think about another part of the overall theory of change and let's focus our energy here". And I think those types of movements in projects scope, they may be frustrating and challenging in the moment, but may get you to a better outcome.

I think where I get really worried about scope creep is where it creeps beyond the competencies and expertise that you have as an individual or as an organization, right? I think, you know, at the Behavioural Insights Team, we think of our expertise in quite well-defined ways, right? It's about bringing those more nuanced, realistic models of human behaviour, that sort of existing evidence base from the behavioural sciences. Bringing that to bear a practical challenge, thinking through the design of an intervention and then ultimately all of this work around testing and evaluation. But, you know, generally that's where it stops, right? And, these problems and especially these sorts of complex problems that organizations may want to deal with, that's not going to be sufficient to solve the whole thing, or to get all the way that you want to go, right? There may be a need for some really advanced data science. There may be a need for some really great human-centered design. There may be a need for, you know, legal analysis, sort of, traditional marketing expertise. And so, where I get really

nervous is where there's scope creep that leads us into areas of work where others are better suited to do that work at a really high quality.

I think the thing there is to be really clear and consistent about your expertise and about where a behavioural insights approach is going to yield a really high return on that organization's time and resources, right? So, you need to be able to say, "You're asking a new question, that question is really important, that's not a question that my organization or that I personally can tackle. And therefore, it can't really be part of the scope of this initiative as it is currently defined and construed."

APPELT: I liked how you brought up that need to balance flexibility against the parameters. I think that's a really important consideration.

TREGEBOV: Yeah, and I think about, you know, at BIT, we often talk about the importance of intellectual humility, because that's such a critical enabler of evaluation, right? Why are we so focused on rigorous evaluation, and good causal inference? Because, you know, we have this intellectual humility around our intervention ideas. But I think you also need to sort of extend that value or principle of intellectual humility to recognize, all these other amazing disciplines that can also contribute to solving these organizational problems, right? So, I think there's another dimension of that.

APPELT: Absolutely. Do you have a message for our BI practitioners in training? Any advice or things you wish you'd known?

TREGEBOV: Yeah. Well, my mantra with my team, you know, we're building this amazing team here in Canada, and it's one of the most, I don't know, rewarding and exciting professional experiences certainly that I've had. My sort of mantra with the team is, I'm sure they're like totally sick of me saying it, but like, "This job is hard. This work is hard".

It demands of us, to do this work really well. You have to understand the behavioural science literature. You have to understand the organizational or sort of policy environment, the operational environment. You need to know how to run projects. You need to know how to analyze data. You need to know how to do really good research design. And on and on and on. Define problems, conducting user research, et cetera. And we can't, right? No. Or I should say no one person can.

The importance of being collaborative, of working in teams, of tapping into the expertise, right? Look, I just think about the incredible expertise of the DIBS faculty and how complementary a lot of that expertise is. I would just really encourage new practitioners or practitioners in training to not set unreasonable expectations for themselves and their mastery of this sort of inherently interdisciplinary practice. To be really collaborative, to seek out advice and expertise and to be curious beyond the limits of one's own current capacity or capabilities.

APPELT: I really like that. It brings to mind that, you know, we always talk about system two about others, but doing the work of behavioural insights is definitely system two work, it's a lot of hardcore, engaged thinking, it's not something we do on autopilot.

TREGEBOV: Yeah. Certainly not if we're doing it well.

APPELT: Exactly. Any last thoughts, questions I should have asked and didn't?

TREGEBOV: No, I thought this was a great conversation. I think this is an incredibly exciting field, and whether you're sort of early in your career, mid-career or even already deep into your professional experience, I think and hope it's going to be intellectually rewarding and practically useful to develop some expertise in applied behavioural science, in the behavioural insights approach. And so, I just wish everybody luck.

APPELT: Thank you. Yeah. I love how you said it's intellectually rewarding. And, you know, we said it does require that system two thinking, but the payoff is really great. You're just so engaged. You learn so much every day, that's part of what I love about it as well.

TREGEBOV: Yeah.

APPELT: Thank you, Sasha. This has been such an interesting and fun conversation. I wish we could continue, but I know we both have more to do. More system two work to do today. So, I think everyone will really enjoy hearing your insights about behavioural insights. And thanks for listening to Calling DIBS.