



Episode 13: "Shifting the Needle Towards BI and Rigorous Evaluation"

with Sarah Smythe, Service Design Specialist with the BC Ministry of Citizens' Services

Sarah Smythe is formerly a Knowledge Translation Strategist with the BC Behavioural Insights Group (BC BIG), currently a Service Design Specialist in the BC Ministry of Citizens' Services, and always a really strong communicator. Sarah shares tips for how to communicate about BI with different audiences; she also talks about finding ways to use BI in a role and team that is less familiar with BI.

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 DIBS on Sarah Smythe, a Service Design Specialist in the Ministry of Citizens' Services. And it's really lovely to have Sarah on the podcast today with us, because Sarah is an excellent communicator and such a positive addition to any team.

She joined BIG as a Co-op student while she was completing her Master's of Public Administration at the University of Victoria, and she stayed with BIG for two years as a Knowledge Translation Strategist before moving onto a role with the Service and Content Design Team in Government Digital Experience. So personally, this is a great chance for me to get to catch up with Sarah, since we don't get to chat as much since she left BIG in August, so I'm looking forward to today very much. So, welcome to the podcast, Sarah.

SARAH SMYTHE, GUEST: Thank you so much, Kirstin.

APPELT: So, can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself?

SMYTHE: I'm not from Victoria, from Vancouver Island, I'm from the East, I grew up in Ontario, that's where I went to university. I studied at the University of Ottawa. I did my Undergrad in Psychology. I have an Honors B.A., and after graduating, I worked for quite a few years in the non-profit sector. My work there focused on children and youth programs and services, supporting their mental health, and also doing community development, working with community organizations and other service providers to come up with creative ways that we could support the children and youth in our communities.

And then I decided to go back to school. I got a little bit more curious about kind of the bigger systems we were a part of in the nonprofit sector and how policy influences the programs and services that we were working on. And so, yeah, I applied to do my Master's of Public Admin., in Victoria. I thought it would be also really cool to live on Vancouver Island for a while. So, yeah. 2017, I came over to start the program and I'm still here today, it's a great place to live.

APPELT: Awesome, and with that background and your education experiences, how did you initially get matched with Behavioural Insights Group?

SMYTHE: Yeah, so the Masters of Public Admin or MPA program at UVic, they've got a great Co-op program. I did my first Co-op with the Ministry of Health, and then thinking about where I might do my next co-op, that course-based semester we did a project where we had to write a paper on BI. And so, I learned a little bit about behavioural insights then.

And the Head of the Behavioural Insights Group, Heather Devine, she's actually an alum of the MPA program, and we had a mentoring kind of networking session for students and alum. And I wasn't matched with Heather, but I did get an opportunity to speak with her and my interest really got piqued then. When I saw through the co-op program that the Behavioural Insights Group had a co-op posting, I was really excited to apply for it because I thought Heather would be a really amazing person to work with, and how cool would it be to be part of something that's just really new to government? The job and the team just sounded so different than what I kind of had thought at the time working for government would be like. And so, yeah, I was really excited to apply for the job.

APPELT: And hopefully all of those wild dreams came true because Heather is an amazing person to work with, and it is such a fun team to work with.

SMYTHE: Absolutely.

APPELT: It sounds like you didn't have much exposure to behavioural insights before joining BIG, is that accurate or how would you characterize that exposure?

SMYTHE: Yeah, I think that's true. I think I had some exposure to, I guess like related, complementary areas. I studied Psychology in my Undergrad. I had this kind of base understanding of human behaviour. I also, through my undergrad, got exposed to some of those key research methods, like randomized controlled trials, so I had a bit of an understanding of that. And my interest in evaluation in the public policy realm kind of continued to grow through my Masters of Public Admin program. My first co-op actually at the Ministry of Health was in program and policy evaluation, that kind of tied into a bit. So, although I didn't have BI-specific training or exposure, I think I had some complementary skills to bring to the field.

APPELT: Absolutely. It's like you had all of the different pieces and you just hadn't put them together in that specific way before.

SMYTHE: Totally, exactly.

APPELT: What led you to stay with BIG for two years?

SMYTHE: I mean, there's quite a number of reasons. Like the field that's so vast and so diverse and so you're always learning. There's always something new to do. The diversity of projects that come through the team is incredible. There's always something interesting to work on. The team is just awesome. I think the quality of work that they produce and the, you know, how experienced and knowledgeable everyone is, just constantly learning from each other, just a lot of creative and dynamic energy that kind of keeps driving everyone along, which is so much fun.

And I think also for me, you know, I got to do two different roles within the team. I was a Co-op and then I moved into the role as a Knowledge Translation Strategist. And so that really kept things interesting, learning about BI from a couple of different angles, which is really cool.

APPELT: Absolutely, and I totally agree with everything you said, obviously, about the team, and Heather, and also just that the team as a whole, and I think in the BI field more generally, there is this commitment to ongoing learning and getting exposed to new ideas and learning new ideas, whether it's a new bias, or new research method, or data analysis method. And I think that really keeps it engaging.

SMYTHE: Absolutely, yeah.

APPELT: What would you say is the biggest BI-related lesson from your time with BIG and what has stayed with you the most?

SMYTHE: Yeah, I think there's kind of a handful of things, they're all related in some way. I think BI does such an incredible job of bringing a level of rigour into government, really highlighting the importance of testing and testing really well, with rigour. But I think it also, and I think BIG has done some learning in this space too, understanding that we also need to meet government teams where they're at. And so, looking at this continuum of evidence that we can provide, whether it's, you know, our rigorous literature review, or pre-post testing or a full-scale RCT.

I think, you know, understanding that if you're bringing more rigor to the team than they had before, that you're still providing a lot of value. And you might be setting them up for the next time they're looking at a challenge or a problem, that maybe they'll be able to increase the level of rigor that they apply to that problem. That's something that I've really taken with me for sure.

And then another one is just the importance of testing and how important it is to check our assumptions and that, you know, our intuition that a certain program and service should work because it's objectively better just simply isn't always true. And that's why we test. And, yeah, just understanding that we have our biases and that context is so important. So even if you are able to find, you know, other jurisdictions or studies that have done work in a similar space, it doesn't always map on to your specific context. And so that's why you're doing your own kind of evidence production or building is so important.

APPELT: Absolutely. I think those are fantastic takeaways and I don't know what the version of a takeaway when you're still working with the team is. Take-ins? Take-ons? I think they're very true for myself as well. During your time at BIG, you helped with a lot of "big" projects, pun intended. Can you tell us a bit about your role as a Knowledge Translation Strategist and what that role involved?

SMYTHE: For those who might not know, knowledge translation originally comes from the health field, and it's about taking evidence that's produced usually in academia and translating it or finding ways that it can be communicated so that it can be up taken and applied in the field. And so, my role in BIG was to do that for behavioural insights.

I would take the complex scientific subject matter of behavioural insights and find ways to share out, you know, findings from projects, whether they were our own or from other areas as well. Share them out and teach them also to people who are new to the field or curious about BI. And so that meant doing so many different things, you know, focusing on kind of written communications, whether it's case studies or web content or blogs, newsletters or events, like supporting Kirstin at BIG Difference, or trainings like BIG's bootcamps and kind of 101 presentations. So, yeah, lots of different mechanisms for translating BI knowledge to the masses.

APPELT: And you did a fabulous job with that role. What were some of the challenges of the role?

SMYTHE: Yeah. One of the challenges I found is that in this role, you had to be able to articulate really quite complex and nuanced projects and subject matter in a way that, you know, even a lay audience could understand. And the audience for our subject matter could be quite diverse because we might be communicating also to experts, and people who do have experience of BI.

Finding that balance of, you know, making things really simple to understand while also providing enough detail that it's still providing value or sparking curiosity of those who are more, you know, embedded in the field. And I think kind of related to that, as a Knowledge Translation Strategist, I wasn't myself embedded in the projects that BIG was running, but I still needed to have a really, really good understanding and grasp of the project work so that I could communicate it effectively, and some of those really important BI concepts.

And so, you know, it was always this balance of going deep into understanding the projects and the research, and talking with the project team, and reading their project outputs and data outputs while then, you know, taking all that and communicating it in a way that was really simplified for the audience to uptake. So, yeah, that part of the role is challenging, but also provide a lot of opportunity to be quite creative in the way we displayed information. It was also really fun.

APPELT: Yeah, I think that is very true of, I think specifically for your role, but also in behavioural insights in general, because it is, in its nature, communicating to these different audiences of academics and practitioners. Every time we do something, whether it's the BIG Difference BC conference or something else, we are always trying to keep these multiple audiences in mind, that is very challenging. But then you mentioned the ability to draw creativity into the role. What else did you find rewarding about the role?

SMYTHE: Yeah, I mean, I already talked about it, but just getting to learn every day from such a cool team with diverse experience, you know, the backgrounds on the team, there's people with experience in psychology, in business, and sociology, public administration, political science, communication. It's just a really cool kind of multidisciplinary team all focused on BI. So just lots of learning to be had every day.

And yeah, the team and the way they work and kind of their mindset is just so different than what I had assumed working for government was like, and kind of coming from the nonprofit sector, I was a little bit skeptical about joining government, and I think working for BIG but also the BC Public Service at large has really challenged a lot of my initial assumptions, and has made me really proud to be a public servant. And just seeing this new field be championed so passionately and really see it grow, even over those two years I was with BIG, it was really amazing to see the leaps and bounds that BI has made in the public sector and also just in BC. It's been really cool to watch and be a part of.

APPELT: Absolutely. I totally agree with that. I've been in BC I think, for going on seven years now, and it's just the growth of BI in that time has been phenomenal. It's really exciting to see it spread and catch on, which sounds bad today, when we think about things spreading and catching on, but this is a positive spread.

SMYTHE: A different kind of spreading.

APPELT: Is there a favourite project you can tell us about?

SMYTHE: Yeah. I'm not just saying this because I'm talking to Kirstin and I'm sucking up, but I really like working on BIG Difference for BC, which is BIG's in partnership with DIBS, and some others sponsors as well. That's the annual conference that BIG does. And you know, my first time working on BIG Difference was when I was a Co-op.

APPELT: And, you'd been there for like two weeks, right?

SMYTHE: Yeah. I was very, very new to the team and also to BI. Yeah, the first BIG Difference conference, it was kind of a two parter - one session full day in Victoria and then a half day in Vancouver. So I got to travel to the with a team over to Vancouver. And for the Victoria session, we did a half day long workshop, and so as a Co-op, I was spinning up all the different policy challenges, behavioural policy challenges, that the different groups were going to hack on in the afternoon. So, yeah, that was a really cool opportunity as a Co-op, and so, yeah, I got exposed to BIG Difference at that point, and then, you know, staying on with a team as a Knowledge Translator, I got to keep working on BIG Diff.

For the second year we got to see it kind of grow and expand. And we took on a number of other sponsors and had more speakers sharing their own experience, and evidence from BI, and then this year, although I left the team before the launch of the conference, which happened just last week, last Friday. November 6, although I left the team before it, I did get to help kind of in the lead up to it, in the months leading up to it. And it was just so cool to see, you know, was it a 1000 online?

APPELT: Yeah, we had 1200 registered and then over 700 actually came, and they actually the average person stayed with us for over four hours, in an election and all the other 2020 uncertainty, we were pretty happy with those numbers.

SMYTHE: That's incredible. Yeah. To see BIG Difference grow from, you know, something that was, it was still big the first time around, but to grow, to be over 700 participants, fully digital, being really, you know, innovative and agile, the way it's delivered. And just to see the quality of presenters, and experience that people were bringing forward. Yeah, it just is really cool to see the field grow and expand and to know that I've been a part of that.

APPELT: Yeah, you were a huge part over the three years. It was amazing that you' were there for the first one and then your role in the third one, even though, you know, you left the team shortly before, it was still a major role over the course of the spring and summer, so you made a big difference on BIG Difference. That's a good segue, so you left our team in the end of August and then transitioned to your new role. Can you tell us a bit about your new role?

SMYTHE: Yeah. So as Kirstin mentioned earlier, I'm a Service Design Specialist. I work in a division called the Government Digital Experience. So that division is responsible for all of BC Gov, so all of BC Gov's web pages. They kind of are responsible for the back end of it. And then also helping ministries to manage their content and setting the standards for that content. So, lots of web developers. We also have an analytics team in the division. We've got access to lots of data and this team sits within the Ministry of Citizen Services.

And Citizen Services helps other ministries provide services. All of like FrontCounterBC, ServiceBC, and then supporting a ton of the kind of web applications, the digital services as well. My team is kind of embedded within that, and the Service and Content Design team, which I'm a part of, they, similarly to BIG, work as a corporate consultancy. We work on contracted projects across different ministries in the BC government. My role is to apply methods of design thinking to help improve government programs and services. And so, much like BI, this involves kind of a human-centred approach to looking at programs and services.

APPELT: That's a great exploration and really helps me understand all of the different, I know your new title has a lot of words in it, so it helped me understand those.

SMYTHE: So many words, very government.

APPELT: And one of the reasons I really wanted to talk to you today is I thought that your current role might resonate with many of our students because many of them aren't going to have BI-specific roles like a Methods Specialist or a Behavioural Scientist. Instead, they have other roles, whether it's Program Analyst or as a Service Worker or something else. There are roles that have a different focus, but they hope to be able to use BI as part of that other role. Are you able to use BI in your new role? And if so, how are you able to use it?

SMYTHE: Yeah, absolutely. I think there is a really strong overlap between service design and BI. I don't know how far along in your studies folks listening in might be, but if you've gotten to the RIDE model yet, R is for research, and that's when you go, you know, a little bit wide to learn more about the problem, you're looking at defining the problem and you're doing some desk research, and hopefully some field research as well. And so, my role is to do that 'R', is to really understand the problem. And the kinds of contracts my team takes up is that we're going really deep. We get to do lots and lots of field research to really understand that problem.

Bringing in that mindset of understanding the needs of the people who use the service, in a really holistic way, it's the same for BI as it is for service design. We're using methods like doing interviews with folks, or doing observational research, further down the line we will do some kind of pre-user testing, watching how people interact with websites and collecting some data along the way. And also conducting jurisdictional scans and seeing what other people have done in the field, doing some desk research as well. I think this role and my time in BIG have been super, super complimentary in that way. So, yes, absolutely. I use BI a lot in this new space, too.

APPELT: That's fantastic to hear. I imagine there are some differences using BI when you're in a BI-specific team versus when you're using BI as maybe one of the only people who have used BI deeply. Could you talk a little bit about that?

SMYTHE: Sure. And I think I'll try to also answer this question as like if you were a Policy Analyst on a ministry team as well and what some of those differences might be. I think the exposure to what rigorous evaluation looks like will probably be different. And I think, you know, I spoke to this a little bit earlier, even if your team isn't ready to run like an RCT, there might be a little bit of needle pushing you can do in terms of increasing that rigor, and that might be doing, you know, a bit of a literature, "What does the behavioural research say about this problem? What work has already been done on the behavioural insights side in this problem area or policy area?"

And I think there's also a lot of times, when working on a problem, government teams might not go as deeply in to that problem definition phase. And talking to the people who actually use the service, on the ground, might not be as common. And that might be something brand new for your team or your ministry, but it might be worth exploring if you'd be able to do that.

And, I think also making sure that you're looking for data. I think my experience with BIG has taught me that, like the data exists, it often exists, but it's really hard to find sometimes or access. And so, you know, just, you know, starting the process of asking those questions. Where is the data? How might we measure this? And then if you find it's, you know, in another division, in your ministry, maybe reach out to that other team and see what it would take to gain access to the data. I think there are these smaller things that you can do to kind of push that needle and kind of increase the rigor of how your team might be looking at a problem.

You could also, I think just doing that behavioural lens is something that can be so new to people, too. Coming at problems from a human-centred approach, understanding the needs of the people who are using the service first and then building a solution based on those kinds of challenges and barriers that they are facing is

so, so important. And it's not something that's done super consistently across government. I think we're getting better but there's still a lot of work to be done there. And so that's why it's so great that folks like you are taking a program that supports that.

APPELT: Absolutely. I think that's a great plethora of options that are there. Whether it's pushing on the behavioural side or the evidence side or pushing the two together. And I think, like you said, there's so many ways to move the needle. And if the needle gets moved enough, eventually you get all the way to where you want to be. Another part of that that I was curious about is what tips you might have for communicating about BI with others who are newer to BI or haven't even heard of BI?

SMYTHE: I think this is a great question, because this was like my role, as a Knowledge Translator. I think for people who are brand new, like keep it simple, and start small, you know, you might not be ready to go in and do an hour presentation on behavioural insights.

You might have to start smaller than that at first, presenting or talking about case studies that are really relevant to your area of policy work can be really impactful, and just to show how positive an effect BI can be and maybe even talking about the importance of testing and how, you know, finding examples of when you would assume a program might work, but in actual fact, after and RCT is conducted it actually didn't, those that can be really, really powerful examples to bring people along.

I also think, like having a really good elevator pitch is super important. It took me a while to get to that. But, you know, working for BIG and, you know, having tables at conferences, and that kind of thing, you get asked that a lot like, "Oh, what's behavioural insights?" You get really good at kind of summing up your job or the work in a couple of sentences. I think that's a really important, effective way to hook people in.

And then I also think it's really important to just find your people and find those who have the mindset already to do things differently and to be innovative and who might be open to testing. Find those people and latch onto them, and see how you can work with them and who will be open to using kind of the latest tools in the policy toolbox, because not everyone is going to be interested or necessarily have the bandwidth. People in government, you know, they could be really focused on their area for good reason.

And so, I think also just being mindful of other people's demands in their job and in their areas being respectful of that and then finding those other teams and areas where there might be a little bit more, I guess, leniency or leeway to push the envelope.

APPELT: I totally agree. I think also the idea of the elevator pitch, like you said, it's so important. And as I was interestingly having a conversation with my mother-in-law just this week, and she's like, "Well, BI is one of those things you can't define in a single sentence." And I was like, I have one, I have it!

SMYTHE: I beg to differ!

APPELT: I think you already had a lot of amazing messages for our BI practitioners in training, but as a last question, do you have any additional last thoughts you'd like to leave the BI practitioners in training with?

SMYTHE: Yeah, I think you know, maybe just take chances. You know, try things and apply to jobs that seem new or interesting or that you might not necessarily consider applying to. Opportunities are going to come up that you don't anticipate. And, you know, for me, the best laid plan is a flexible one. Kind of just be open to opportunities as they arise.

And I think one of the things I haven't really touched on, but I think is really important to know is that BI is not easy. This can be a really challenging space to work in because you are constantly challenging the way things have been done in the past. BI is inherently about making things different and change and making them new.

Change is not always easy. And so, you'll come up against, you know, systems that have been in place for a really long time and you'll have to work with folks to think about how they might change and inspire them that change is good. And that's not easy, but it's part of the job. I think being resilient and, you know, celebrating the wins, even if they're really small, is really important. And, yeah, you might not change the world, but you will absolutely push the needle. And I think that's all part of the process and is a success in itself.

APPELT: Absolutely. And I think, you know, sometimes the needle pushes feel small. But if we're all doing them together and over time, that big change can happen. I think that's a great, great message.

Well, thank you. This has been really lovely to reconnect. And if we had time for more questions, I'd start asking about how we can get you back to BIG, but luckily, we're out of time, so you're safe. And we say that Calling DIBS provides the behind-the-scenes stories about behavioural insight. I hope everyone enjoyed listening today to a bit of a different type of story. So, thank you, Sarah, for joining us today.

SMYTHE: Oh, thank you so much, Kirstin. It's such a pleasure and good luck to everyone in the credential program. I'm so excited to see what you all do after you're done your schooling.

APPELT: Me too. And so that's a great note to say thank you to our listeners for joining us for another episode of Calling DIBS.
