



Episode 35: "Calling DIBS on DIBS"

with Kirstin Appelt, Research Director for UBC Decision Insights for Business & Society (UBC-DIBS)

In this episode with guest host Dave Hardisty, we mix things up and Kirstin Appelt is the interviewee rather than the interviewer. Kirstin talks about her BI journey, the DIBS origin story, how BIG Difference BC got its start, and how the Advanced Professional Certificate in Behavioural Insights developed. She also reflects on the growing BI community in BC and what she's excited about for BI in BC going forward.

Transcript:

DAVE HARDISTY, GUEST HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS, I'm your guest host, Dave Hardisty, Associate Professor in Marketing and Behavioural Science at UBC Sauder School of Business. I'm also one of the founding members of UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short. And you may have noticed I'm not Kirstin Appelt, your normal host, that's because today we're switching things up and Calling DIBS on her.

Kirstin Appelt wears many hats. She is the Research Director of DIBS. She's also the Academic Director of UBC's Advanced Professional Certificate and Behavioural Insights. She is also a Behavioural Science Consultant who has worked with a lot of different organizations, most notably the BC Behavioural Insights Group, BC BIG. Kirstin is passionate about using BI to make a positive difference in the world, and I'm excited to put her in the hot seat today, switch things up and chat about all things BI. So welcome to the podcast, Kirstin.

KIRSTIN APPELT, GUEST: Thanks for having me, Dave.

HARDISTY: What led you to a career using behavioural insights?

APPELT: Well, I think it's a similar story to some of the other guests we've had over the last couple of episodes, which is I originally started not down that path, but then I found that I was really interested in human behaviour. So, in my undergraduate time, many years ago, I was an economics major and I was at a school that was very classical economics. And so everything was about the rational actor and the life cycle hypothesis of people who go to school, they get a job, they save for retirement, and they spend down their retirement savings and always optimally saving and optimally spending.

And I don't know about everyone else, but that wasn't describing me. I was sometimes overspending, sometimes doing irrational things like snoozing through an alarm. And at the same time, I took a psychology course where we looked at what people actually do. And I was really fascinated by this gap between what people should be doing, according to economics, and what people actually do. And it was around that time that the Save More Tomorrow paper by Thaler and Shlomo Benartzi came out, and I thought this was just exactly what I had been wondering about how you could bridge between what people do and where people need to be and how to make things easier for people to do what they need to do.

And so I was hooked and I went on to do a PhD in Psychology, largely focused on how people make decisions and how we can help them make better decisions. And going through various other positions along the way. And here I am several years later, still using behavioural insights every day.

HARDISTY: Can you tell us more about DIBS, when and how did it start?

APPELT: Yeah, so I moved to Canada with Dave, as many of you know, in 2013 and I had been working on behavioural insights in California at the time. And when we moved to BC, of course, there was a lot of behavioural economics work and behavioral insights work within academia, but there wasn't really a lot of it outside of academia in BC at that point. When we'd chat with people about behavioural insights, we got a lot of blank stares.

And I remember one notable conversation I had when I was explaining to people what I like to do and how I like to apply behavioural insights to things like perhaps saving for retirement, the person was saying, "Oh, so you want to work as a bank teller?". So, it seemed like behavioural insights wasn't really popularly known here in BC and because we have such a great group of researchers at UBC, we thought that was a real missed opportunity. There was really a lot of scope for behavioural insights researchers to be able to share their research and use that research to make a difference.

And so, it was a joint undertaking by Dave and myself, and Dale Griffin, Kate White, Jiaying Zhao. And so, in 2014, we started working together to create this group or cluster, goes by lots of different names, and so, we thought that it would be a great way to kind of bridge the academic work with applied real-world problems. And so it started in 2014, and still going today, and we do a lot of different projects.

So we do the, of course, academic research, we also work with partners on applied projects, things like working with BC Hydro to encourage environmentally friendly laundry behaviours, working with other organizations like the BC Behavioural Insights Group. And then we also do things like conferences and community building and education, like the certificate program.

HARDISTY: Nice. And fun fact, what was the first name of DIBS before it was DIBS?

APPELT: There was different ideas on the table. We are more focussed on decision science, but of course, the field is called behavioural insights. But Behavioural Insights for Business and Society was BIBS, which didn't have quite the same ring to it as DIBS. We couldn't really go with Calling BIBS. So we landed on Calling DIBS.

HARDISTY: So as part of DIBS' work to build the BI Community, DIBS co-hosts the BIG Difference BC Conference every year. Can you tell us a little bit more about the conference?

APPELT: Yeah. So the conference is a really neat part of the work that DIBS does to help build the BI community in BC. And it came around several years ago when we first got introduced to the BC Behavioural Insights Group, and Heather Devine at the time was just starting the group, and we realized that they were really great partners and that we had a lot to offer each other.

The two organizations, they had public policy problems and we had some ideas for ways we could work together on those problems. And so we thought it would be neat to do a conference that wasn't just academic or just public policy, but bridged the gap and had both organizations represented. And so that very first year we had a conference and it really was just government folks.

But over the last five years, it's grown. So now in the most recent one, fall 2021, we had people from all over the world, and from all sectors. We had people from beyond provincial government, from the local government, the federal government, from the nonprofit sector, from the Crown Corporation and other organizations and the private sector, academia. So it's really grown to be a cross-sectoral way to share behavioural insights, research and lessons learned, and build the community.

HARDISTY: Nice, and over the last few years, BIG Difference BC has expanded, it's more than just a conference now. So what is included under the BIG Difference umbrella these days?

APPELT: Yeah. So when we first started, it was only actually going to be a one-off conference. And then we found that it was really enjoyable and it seemed very fruitful, and it was a great way to share and build relationships. And so it became an annual conference, and then we realized that there are other opportunities to work together with the community. So, Heather at BC BIG led the development of a newsletter, which is now a roughly monthly newsletter that DIBS and BC BIG put together on a regular basis. There is also a blog.

We also now have an advisory board who supports us and gives us strategic ideas about how to support and develop the community. And we also, ideally some day when COVID allows, will have meet-ups and other opportunities for folks to get together. So, it's pretty exciting that the community is growing. We now have, I think, over 2000 subscribers to the newsletter, and so, it's just really rewarding to see how the community is growing and the always new folks and new ideas being brought forward and new relationships and partnerships.

HARDISTY: So when you're not directing DIBS or co-Chairing the BIG Difference BC activities, you are the Academic Director for UBC's Advanced Professional Certificate in Behavioural Insights. Can you tell us how that developed?

APPELT: Yes, that's another piece that came out of some of our work with the BC Behavioural Insights Group, and we at DIBS and the folks at BC BIG, we both noticed that there is a lot of appetite for behavioural insights work, and right now there's more demand for the work than supply of people who have that expertise. And when people are interested in getting that expertise, at the time, there was really these short boot camps and overnight or a couple of days sessions or even maybe a week. And that's at one end of the continuum, where you get a little bit of an introduction to behavioural insights, but you can't really go off and start using behavioural insights by yourself.

And then at the other end of the continuum were Master's and graduate programs, which would be full time programs for two to seven years, and those weren't really in scope for most folks who wanted something a little more intermediate and we didn't really see much in the middle, in the market. And so, we work together with BC BIG and with a nationwide steering committee to look at developing something that could serve folks who wanted behavioural insights training but who weren't willing to spend, you know, three to seven years on it.

So, we came up with the part-time Advanced Professional Certificate, which gives people the skills and knowledge to become BI practitioners. So, folks who can design and run behavioural insights projects, and we're now in our second year and we're quite excited that it's going well and that it seems to be getting momentum and that we can hopefully continue to offer it for many years in the future.

HARDISTY: And what's special about the certificate and what are some of the highlights of the certificate program for you?

APPELT: I think part of what's special about the certificate and sets it apart from other programs is the capstone project. So, a lot of programs, you might have classwork or self-guided learning, but with the certificate, there is a capstone project where you work with a team for the full nine months of the program to actually do a behavioural insights project from start to finish, from scoping to background research to designing a BI solution to designing a randomised controlled trial or other experimental design, analyzing the data, developing recommendations and communicating them. And I think that kind of experience really means that, you know, the skill set well and it really sets you apart. So, you finish the program with already a project in your repertoire.

And in terms of the highlights of the program, for me, it's always the students. I think we've been really fortunate to have in both of the cohorts we've had so far, a really diverse range of students who come from different backgrounds, different sectors, different career levels, different places around Canada and even the world, and getting to know them and seeing what they bring to behavioural insights and what they can offer to the field and what the field can offer for them has been really exciting and I'm always really excited to see where their journeys take them.

HARDISTY: Yeah, the capstone project is something I'm proud that we have kept in the program and that you stuck by because I know early on we're considering whether to have it in or not. And there were pressures from the school or financial pressures to drop it because it's a lot of work, right? It's a lot easier if you just deliver lecture material, have a few assignments, you can do that with tons of students and it's faster and easier. You don't have to coordinate partners and supervise teams. And so there was kind of pressure, you know, "Why do we do this extra trouble?".

But in hindsight, I'm really glad that we stuck with it because there is a huge difference between just hearing about something or reading a book and doing it yourself. It's a world of difference. So congrats and good job on sticking with it and keeping it in.

APPELT: Yeah. And I think we've both seen that. We've both advised teams both years, and it's just you really see the students grappling with the material in a deeper way. And it's also really fun for us to see BI being applied to these different, completely different areas, whether it's parking or violence against women or mental health or—

HARDISTY: Worker safety.

APPELT: Worker safety. You know, it's just that the diversity of the projects, keeps it fun for us, like we both enjoy, I know all the faculty really enjoy teaching. But doing the capstone project keeps it different for us each time. It's always something new.

HARDISTY: So what do you think is the most challenging part of the program?

APPELT: That is a good question, I think certainly seeing the students, I know that there's a lot of demands on their time and so having working professionals who are coming together from across time zones and everyone has their professional lives as well as their personal lives, and then they're adding this rigorous program on top of it. So, I think that's really challenging for the students. I know they all tell us at least, maybe not true, but they tell us that it's rewarding and worthwhile.

But I think from the instructor side trying to support the students as they go through that and help them make it all work. And I think that is challenging. And then I think also with the diversity of projects and backgrounds,

those are huge assets. But then it does also mean that we're not offering a cookie cutter program where it's just the same every time, we do have to customize our advice or our teaching to the cohorts of students.

If you're mentoring three capstone projects, it's not the same advice you're giving to each team. You have to work with the different teams and every capstone project and every BI project, even outside of the program, has its own challenges, whether it's getting access to the data, whether it's getting the partner organization to agree to a certain design of a project, whether it's data collection going awry, whether it's approvals. And so I think working through all of those is always rewarding, but it is challenging at the same time.

HARDISTY: So, switching gears a bit and putting on one of your other hats, consulting and advice for students and careers, a common question we get asked is about careers and since you've worked with a number of different organizations. Can you tell us about your work as a behavioural science consultant?

APPELT: Yeah. So, I have worked as a behavioural science consultant for about 10 years now and different places and spaces. And I think that I've seen tremendous growth in that area. So, as I mentioned when we first moved to Canada, that wasn't really an option, but I had been doing the work in the US previously. And so I've had the opportunity to work with for-profit companies, not-for-profit companies, government organizations, crown corps, et cetera.

And I think one of the biggest draws for me is that it means that I'm always learning and doing something new. Whenever you start a new project, whether it's with a project we're doing through DIBS like the BC Hydro project or a project I'm doing through my consulting work, like work with BC BIG, it's always something new and getting to learn. And so it always keeps it exciting. And it's always like problem-solving or detective work where you're trying to figure out "What's the source of the problem? What are their barriers to doing something that would be in their best interest to do, and how can we help them solve it?"

So, I've seen in recent years that there's just an increasing demand for behavioural science consulting and that it's a field that offers a lot of opportunities for people who have the behavioural insights toolkit.

HARDISTY: What's a favourite BI project that you've done?

APPELT: Oh, that's tough. So many favourites. I think I'll mention maybe two. One of them is the work I did when I was in the state of California, and the Obamacare legislation had recently gone in. So, all these states in the U.S. were working on creating health insurance exchanges, which is just jargon for a health insurance websites. And so, I was able to work with the state of California, and we used behavioural science to test different website designs, including how the plans should be described, how they should be organized. What information should be included and excluded.

And then the state of California actually created their website based on the evidence, which was pretty, sadly, it was pretty unusual at the time. A lot of states were just putting up 200 plans organized alphabetically, whereas the state of California had something that was based on the evidence that told us that it would help people make choices that would best support their own health. So that was pretty rewarding to be able to do something where it was actually put into place and the decision architecture actually went forward without major compromises.

And a second project, I'll mention that was just a really fun project is what I worked with BC Behavioural Insights Group, I got to do a number of interesting projects from fisheries to caribou. But caribou was always a favourite because we got to do a field trip, which is not that common in behavioural insights. So, getting to do

a field trip to Eastern BC to meet with snowmobile clubs to learn about the reasons why people might be snowmobiling in caribou territory.

And then we got to meet a lot of interesting people, we got to travel, and in really neat take away from that project is that the BC government realized that they could actually create apps, a map that goes into an app that exists and so snowmobilers can use that map app to avoid caribou areas. So, it was something that seemed kind of blue sky.

When someone brought it up, we thought, "Well, there's no way the BC government has the budget to do a new app", but then it turned out there was actually, the technology existed open-source and we could do it. So pretty cool to see something like that get rolled out. Of course, it got held up by the pandemic, and I'm not sure if it was getting rolled out this January if it got delayed again. But whenever it happens, COVID permitting, it's an exciting one.

HARDISTY: So to be clear, the caribou project was about nudging people to protect caribou, not about nudging caribou to make better decisions.

APPELT: Correct. I mean, the caribou should really think about what they're doing.

HARDISTY: They do a lot of System One.

APPELT: Actually, we did not see any in our field work, so I can't comment.

HARDISTY: So, what other career options do you see for folks entering the BI space?

APPELT: Yeah, I think this is something that's really exciting for those of us working with people who are entering the BI space is that there are more and more options. Like I said, when I first came to BC, there wasn't really much. And now there's positions in the BC Public Service. Some that directly are behavioural insights positions like BI Specialist or Behavioural Scientist with the BC Behavioral Insights Group.

But there's also just increasing number of organizations, whether it's in the public sector or the private sector, where although the position might not say behavioural insights, they value the behavioural insights skillset and you're able to use it in your work. So I know a lot of certificate grads or students, are policy analysts, program analysts, titles that don't say behavioural insights, but really draw on the skill set.

So I think there's increasing opportunities there and then I think we're also seeing more positions being created. I know that since the start of the program, there's actually been one or two organizations that have created positions that specifically mentioned the certificate as a requirement for the job. So I think it's really growing.

I think one issue that behavioural insights has is even though we always preach, make it easy and simple and everything, unfortunately, the career search space is not simple because it's not a standardized job title. You'll see it called behavioural insights specialist, behavioural specialists, behavioural scientist, behavioural science consultant and just any other number of names. I think it can be hard to find in a keyword search, but by getting hooked into the network, I think you start to see more and more options popping up, and I think gradually, over time, they might be moving slowly towards a standardized naming system. Hopefully, we can hope.

HARDISTY: And there are so many connected careers like user-experience is a big one. Yeah. So, focusing here on BC in the almost eight years since DIBS started, how have you seen BI grow or change here in BC?

APPELT: Yeah, I mean, I think I've mentioned a bit already, but I think we've just seen, like I mentioned with the conference, the very first time the conference was really just BC government and academics. And since then, we've seen it spread across sectors. We have an advisory board that represents all the different sectors in terms of academic government to different levels of government, nonprofit, private, etc. We see just an increasing number. I mean, at the last BIG Difference conference, we had over a thousand registrants. We had people from 52 countries. So, I think it's just growing and there's increasing excitement about the field.

And I think it's reached a point where we have that momentum. And it's not just about building momentum anymore, it's now leveraging that momentum. And I think that's exciting because the first few years when something's taking off, it's about building that excitement and then you're just trying to get more people familiar with the skill set.

But now that we have more and more folks who are using the skill set, we're seeing more and more impacts of behavioural insights. So, we're able to use those behavioural insights, skillset and the growing number of people working in BI to actually do projects that hopefully are making a difference in the world.

HARDISTY: And BC is literally on the BI map now, right?

APPELT: Yeah, that's true. So, OECD has a map of behavioural insights groups around the world and BC BIG and UBC DIBS are on it. So, it's pretty exciting to see that we are on the map.

HARDISTY: So, looking forward, what do you want to see in our local BI community as it continues to grow and develop?

APPELT: I think I just want more of the same, it's been really exciting to see the development and I'm excited to see what the different organizations can do individually, but also together. So I guess I hope to see increasing partnership where we are able to work together to bring the different skill sets together, to work on problems from different angles.

And I'm excited that the community is committed to being and working more on topics like equity, diversity and inclusion, whether that's about which sector discipline people are coming from or race or gender or other types of diversity. But I'm excited that the community is such a welcome, opening community and that everyone is really positive, and there's an agreement across the community that we're all using behavioural insights for positive impact. We're nudging for good. We're trying to make a difference in the world and not just using BI to sell widgets.

HARDISTY: And more broadly, what are you most excited about in BI?

APPELT: There's a few new directions for behavioural insights that I'm excited about. You often hear people throw around the term nudge to [inaudible] I won't use that, but I think some new directions. And one thing is, like a lot of the initial behavioural insights work has looked a lot at short-term change. Like, "Did we get someone to recycle today?", and it hasn't looked at "Have we made a long term impact?", so "Have we created someone who is a recycler and not just someone who recycled today, but someone who will continue to recycle?". And so I'm excited about the research that DIBS is doing to really look at what behavioural insights, tools and techniques create long term change, rather than just short term change, which ones continue to be effective over time.

I'm also excited about seeing BI applied in places where it has been less applied, so, there's been a lot of work looking at behavioural insights, encouraging environmental sustainability, financial sustainability. But I am seeing more and more work on social sustainability, so applying behavioural insights to help promote equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonization and other social justice topics. And I think EDI has a lot to offer BI, and BI has a lot to offer EDI and I'm really excited to see where that intersection goes over time.

HARDISTY: So wrapping up, do you have a message for our BI practitioners in training?

APPELT: Well, they've heard a lot from me, but I will say one more message, which is I just think you all are just doing such a wonderful job for each cohort so far. I'm always impressed by the commitment and the enthusiasm that you bring. And I think continuing to be enthusiastic about BI, if you really enjoy it, then I think you'll find it really rewarding because like I said, it's always something new. Any time you do a new project, you're learning more, so continue enjoying it and continue nudging for good to make a big difference.

HARDISTY: Any last thoughts, any questions I should have asked?

APPELT: I don't think so, I think you covered everything and I think it's been really fun to chat about BI with you,

HARDISTY: I suppose, since you help write the questions that makes sure I asked all the right questions. Thanks for helping prep for the interview. Thank you so much, Kirstin. It's been fun to switch seats and guest host Calling DIBS. As always, I enjoyed talking about BI with you. Thanks for joining us today, and thanks to our audience for listening to Calling DIBS.

APPELT: Thank you.
