Episode 39: Pathways to Behavioural Insights

with Maria Giammarco, Senior Lead of Research & Development
with the Business + Higher Education Roundtable

Through the lens of her interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral BI journey, Maria Giammarco and I talk about the inadvertent ways that many of us stumble into our love for Behavioural Insights. We also discuss how to build an intentional and inclusive pathway to Behavioural Insights for the next generations of BI Practitioners.

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 Maria Giammarco.

Maria is currently the Senior Lead for Research and Development at the Business + Higher Education Roundtable. As we'll see, Maria has worked in the field of behavioral insights in a number of fascinating ways, and one of those stops along her journey, Maria and I just barely overlapped in some of our work with the BC Behavioral Insights Group. Ever since then, I've been keen to find new ways to work with Maria, and this podcast is a great opportunity to do just that. So today I'm excited to pick Maria's brain and talk about BI careers. So welcome to the podcast, Maria. Thank you for joining us.

MARIA GIAMMARCO, GUEST: Hello. Thanks so much for having me.

APPELT: Why don't we just start by having you tell us a little bit about yourself?

GIAMMARCO: For sure, for sure. And I will start by saying that I too am also looking for opportunities for us to always work together Kirstin, and this podcast is just one example of that, and thanks again for having me.

So as you noted, I'm a senior lead for research and development at the Business + Higher Education Roundtable or BHER for short, but I am a behavioral scientist by training and I would say an implied researcher by trade at this point. And a little bit about myself, so I currently live in Ottawa, but today I'm joining from the wonderful city of Mississauga, which is probably one of the least reliable places in Canada, but it's where I grew up. So I'm here visiting my parents and, you know, usually I just tell people I'm from Toronto because I don't think you're cool.

And you know, I am definitely a psychology nerd through and through as we'll learn throughout the course of this podcast episode, but instead of just being a nerd, I like to also consider myself pretty, pretty fun and outdoorsy. You know, I like things like hiking, camping and all that kind of stuff, but still very much honing my ruggedness, honing that craft. But it is also why I sort of longed to be back in B.C. a lot of the time where I lived briefly a couple of times, as you noted, when we overlapped at BIG. And yeah, that's a little bit about myself.

APPELT: Great, thanks. Yeah, I think we always think our hometown is uninspiring. Yeah, I have that same feeling. Well, maybe we can eventually get you back out here, whether for a short stay or a long stay.

GIAMMARCO: I'm here for that.

APPELT: So as you noted that you have had a bit of a twisting path, and I think that's kind of a common theme among many of our guests is that a lot of us have had a winding path to get to where we are in behavioral insights, probably partly because it is a newer field. So maybe you can tell us a little bit about how you got your start in behavioral science, where your interest in behavior began?

GIAMMARCO: Yeah, for sure. And you know, it's definitely a twisting path, like you say, seems to be such a common thread with the behavioral insights folks. And I'll go way back. I'm going to go right back to the origin story.

And, you know, I think I was interested, I got my start in behavioral science before I even knew it. I'm not going to claim that I was actually doing behavioral science back in high school, but I think the story really does start back there where, you know, making these decisions about going into post-secondary and thinking about what I wanted to do I was always sort of fascinated by human psychology, maybe without even really realizing it, didn't even really know what psychology was, didn't fully grasp, thought it was a science even and I was like, you know, in high school, whatever like science is so lame. But I took, you know, philosophy and sociology kinda -esque courses towards the end of high school, and I think that really solidified for me this curiosity that I had about how the mind works, how people work, why we are the way we are and do what we do.

And I was interested in this in the sense that, you know, something that I thought seriously about pursuing in post-secondary, but again, I didn't really know exactly what psychology was. I knew I was like, oh, that sounds really cool, and it sounds like the kind of thing I want to do. But you know, it's high school and you don't really know what's up. And I just thought I was like, I thought it was so deep at the time, right? Like, oh, I'm going to study, I did this, you know, this project in Grade 12 and like the psychology of religion like here, I was just like, you know, so hardcore, read like Adbusters and listen to a lot of Rage Against the Machine, and it was just like, yeah, I'm this like philosopher and like going to study all these amazing things. But anyway, so that's kind of where it all began, just like, this bright eyed, bushy tailed, like didn't know anything super naive.

Then I went off to post-secondary and I studied both psychology and philosophy because I couldn't choose between the two. But that choice became very clear to me by the end of my four years, and I stuck with psychology, obviously. And, you know, early on in post-secondary was when I actually began to realize what psychology really was all about, where I learned that it really was a science and that science can actually be super, because you get to study psychology and you get to study the human mind, how people work, why they do what they do. And you know, it was this really fantastic way of answering these same initial questions I had about who we are, about why we do what we do back in my high school days. And throughout undergrad, I started working in research labs, primarily in cognitive science, and things really took off from there. It really solidified for me that this is the career path I want to take, kind of left that philosophy side of me not entirely behind, but in terms of a formal pursuit and in really stuck with the cognitive science route and went on to grad school in cognitive science from there.

APPELT: Yeah, that's so interesting because I think we were kind of similar but different. So I didn't really realize that psychology was a science in the way that it was pursued, but I was coming at it from the angle of like, I'm a science nerd. And definitely was not as cool as you were at high school, I didn't have the Rage Against the Machine, grunge phase.

But then it's interesting that post-secondary, I think, is the first time you're exposed to some of these things beyond just how they appear in pop culture. So, you know, in pop culture, psychology is always portrayed as just the more psychiatry side of the house. And so for me too that is when I first started to click that, oh, this is something that really appeals to the questions I have.

GIAMMARCO: Absolutely. Yeah, that totally resonates with me, that just lack of awareness about what psychology really is and kind of reaching for things and having these sort of ideas or questions about things, but not really realizing what you're asking or the discipline that that that belongs to and what that means in terms of pursuing or exploring career paths.

APPELT: So I think that really resonates with me as well, and one of the things that I think is interesting about behavioral insights, additionally, is that because it's interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral, a lot of times we don't really grasp it until we're in it, so that seems like that's part of what we're both saying, and I think your path really illustrates that.

So, during your time completing a Ph.D. in Neuroscience in applied cognitive science, you also did come over to UBC and work in the UBC psychology department with our own Jiaying Zhao and her behavioral sustainability lab, so what drew you to that experience?

GIAMMARCO: Yeah, and that was, you know, that was such a pivotal experience, I would say, in my BI career path. So, you know, as you mentioned, I was doing my Ph.D. in neuroscience and applied cognitive science or I'll say cognitive neuro for short, but the work I was doing was really sort of your standard basic, fundamental cognitive science work, right? Like studying fundamental processes of attention and memory and doing so in in these very sort of stringent lab based environments where you're measuring effects on like the milliseconds and, you know, looking at behavior from the lens of like reaction times and accuracy to these computer tasks where you're really trying to isolate individual memory, attention and whatnot processes and all really fascinating stuff and so critical to the foundations of applied work of behavioral insights and interesting and important in a lot of ways.

But I also at the same time kind of felt like I didn't fully belong in that space. And I don't know if that was because I didn't feel like I was super good at it or if I just wasn't super interested in it at some point along the way and kind of realized that, you know, I wanted to do something that was more applied, but again, didn't really know what that meant. I hadn't really had any sort of applied research experience. The department that I was in at Guelph, we had some exposure to social psychology, industrial organizational psychology, but there wasn't anything that really looked at human cognition or cognitive science in an applied way. So again, I was kind of grasping for something that I could feel myself drawn to, but I didn't really know much about it.

And funny enough, Jiaying, the lab that she had done her Ph.D. in was the same lab that my Ph.D. advisor had done his postdoc in. So they had done some work collaborating together, and my advisor was working on sort of a continuation of their collaboration, and it ended up being a project that I was working on. So Jiaying was one of our collaborators on that work, so her sort of origins in in cognitive neuroscience as well and a continuation of that work, and so that's how I got to know her by collaborating on this project.

And then I believe it was a conference that we were at, like maybe the second year of my Ph.D I think it was, maybe the first, I can't remember now, but it was pretty early on and we had this opportunity to meet at this conference and talk about the project we were working on, and in the meantime, I had learned a little bit about some of the other work that Jiaying was doing, the applied work, especially around sustainability and sustainable decision-making, and I kind of probed her on that, and at the same time, part of my program at Guelph was to do a practicum placement where essentially you go and you work in another researcher's lab

for a semester, and they encouraged folks to go to labs outside of the school. So the same time kind of scientists need opportunity to maybe do my practicum placement with her, and Jiaying was absolutely so lovely about it and so excited to have me come, and we set that up and I had the chance to go over for summer in Vancouver. It was my first time actually in B.C. as well, too, so it was my first time in Vancouver, first time ever going to UBC and my first time having this exposure to this really, really interesting applied work.

And I had the opportunity to work on a few different projects while I was there. Primarily, I was working on the initiative around waste sorting. So the design of the new waste sorting signs on campus and the game that Jiaying and her lab designed around that to train folks on how to better dispose of their waste and to accurately dispose of waste. And so I got to work on that, mostly going around and getting people on campus to practice with the game and to get some of the preliminary data there in terms of if people play this game and they played a second time and they got feedback the first time around, are they better the second time, what were their initial biases when they were sorting garbage or sorting waste and whatnot, going around campus and getting people to play this game and collect the data, and then a lot of the data analysis side of things. So I didn't have to do the waste audits, which I was very grateful for.

So I got exposure to this, this project, as well as some of the other really, really neat, neat work going on in Jiaying's lab, as well as including on the sort of poverty reduction side of things were the impacts of poverty on cognition. And I was just like, oh my gosh, this is it. This is the kind of stuff I want to be doing, this is what I've been looking for and super excited about it.

And I had to go back and finish my Ph.D., which of course, power through that, and towards the end, I decided I was going to leave academia. I made that decision before I graduated, I knew that I wanted to be doing applied work outside of the academy. And so I made that call and I started looking for opportunities, and the first thing I did, and I'll just talk about that first experience and we can talk about where it led, but I had this opportunity to work with a small consulting company within Guelph.

So I did my Ph.D. at the University of Guelph, there was a local consulting company that did applied behavioral science, applied pedagogy work as consultants for clients in different sectors, and they were looking for a graduate student to help them out with some focus groups and interview work, and I was like, well, I've never done qualitative data, but this sounds really cool, and it sounds like exactly the kind of thing I need to be doing to look for opportunities outside of academia, and it also happens to be something that takes cognition specifically and applies it to real world challenges. So again, that really neat intersection that I was looking to be at.

And so I reached out to them and I was like, hey, I'm willing to do this. And it started off as being a note taker and quickly evolved into me being a research consultant on their team as I was wrapping up my work at Guelph, and, you know, things really took off from there.

APPELT: Well, I can see why you were allured by BC if you were here in the summer, that's how we rope people in. But yeah, I think that is really interesting and it sounds very similar to me, is this idea of you start down a path and there's parts of it that draw you, but it doesn't quite feel like the right fit, but you can't really articulate why it's not the right fit until you find it. And that was similar for me with the idea of that, like, this lab-based stuff is really interesting, but it's not quite what I'm looking for. And then, like you said, you can't really put your finger on the fact that you're looking to do applied work until you see it and then you're like, oh, that's for me. That's what I want to do.

GIAMMARCO: Yeah, it's so true, so true.

APPELT: And like all the different pieces are very valuable, but it's about finding the right fit for the right person, which of course, is what behavioral insights talks about; how the importance of having a good fit between the person and the message or the BI solution.

GIAMMARCO: Totally, totally.

APPELT: So as you're starting to allude, you've done many different things outside the academy, you've applied BI in different sectors. Can you tell us a bit about that part of your journey? So, you did the initial qualitative work, and then what happened next?

GIAMMARCO: So, starting with that research consulting job that I had right out of graduate school, I want to talk about this because I think you're going to like this Kirstin. I'm coming back to this because the big project that I worked on while I was there was on behalf of Royal Canin, and it was actually focused on pet owner behavior and how pet owners essentially feed their pets, and like, you know, if a pet is overweight and you know, how do you nudge behaviors to healthy eating behaviors and whatnot for pets, but ultimately you're nudging pet owners. So that was a super fascinating project, and it was also my first like, I was mentioning, that role in general was my first exposure to doing, you know, qualitative research in a really meaningful way. Like most of my Ph.D. research and whatnot was heavily quantitative. And so it was looking at behavior and cognition through qualitative models as well too, which was really, really interesting.

And then from there, I happened to get an opportunity to work in science policy in Ottawa. So that was what brought me to Ottawa in the first place. And so I was doing some work for the Council of Canadian Academies, again working on science policy, which, you know, in that role I wasn't necessarily focused on behavioral science, but it was this really neat opportunity to expose me to bigger picture policy issues in Canada. And at the same time, when this was all happening too was around the period where there was a lot of activism from scientists in Canada to promote or to advocate in favor of evidence-based decision making with within government. Many of you might recall the movement to unmuzzle scientists within the government, and so it was all around this time where there was this really, really big push for evidence-based decision making.

And even though I wasn't focused specifically on behavioral science again, it was this exposure to big picture policy challenges, especially in the domain of science policy and how we integrate evidence into decision making and policy decisions. And no matter what sort of the subject matter area or what the disciplines sort of come from, it's this notion of, you know, rigorous evidence-based decision making. So that was a really, really interesting experience, it was a six month sort of internship program for graduate students or for people who had finished graduate school to gain that exposure and to bring research methods and a research background into the policy space.

And then from there, continuing along the science policy path, I then did a fellowship with Mitacs, the Canadian Science Policy Fellowship, and that was my first formal behavioral scientist role because it just so happened that the BC Behavioral Insights Group was one of the offices within the B.C. government that was looking to participate in this program and to bring on a science policy fellow into their office or into their team. And so that was my first exposure to sort of the formal work around nudge and applied behavioral science in the public sector, so for government, and I worked on so many different fascinating projects, some of them overlapping with you, Kirstin.

But I worked on everything from tax compliance, getting folks to pay their taxes on time to improving internal H.R. processes, so how do you make hiring processes more efficient and more effective? We also did some really cool work partnering with a local hospital on anti-microbial resistance challenges and behavioral

challenges there, you know, at first glance, you might not think like, oh, anti-microbial resistance, behavior, like how does that come together? It does. And it's really interesting.

And then my favorite project that I got to work on was with the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, I think I got that right, and that project was a really, really awesome endeavor where we were looking at improving access to income assistance, and it was this big, crunchy policy challenge. And again, was this really neat opportunity to bring in qualitative research and understanding the challenges that folks on income assistance have with the system and the structures of income assistance and looking at how we can address those challenges by nudging folks and by making the process easier for people to apply for income assistance and get it on time. So those are some of the projects there. Really, really fascinating stuff.

And then, what was neat about BIG too is we got to work on such a range of challenges because we were this sort of internal consulting, or they are an internal consulting sort of body for the government. Folks from ministries, offices all over the government come to BIG to work on the challenges that they have and identify what's behavioral and how do we address and how do we intervene with those challenges.

And then I did a brief stint with the federal government where I was part of their Behavioral Science Fellowship Program, but I was deployed to Environment and Climate Change Canada. And there I worked on sort of a range of challenges within the context of sustainability. So mostly in the domain of regulation, because environment and climate change is sort of the major regulatory body within Canada. So we're working on things like regulatory compliance on corporate emissions and whatnot, so some of these sustainability challenges, and it really brought me connected back to that BI origin story with Jiaying and the work we did there. So those are some of the different ways in which I have worked on BI challenges and in different sectors and whatnot.

And then that brings us kind of to today where more recently, since my time in the federal government, I focused more broadly on sort of skills and talent, post-secondary education, the labor market and whatnot. So it's been quite the winding journey.

APPELT: It's so interesting and so many amazing opportunities, I'm kind of in awe of the different things you've gotten to do, like working on policy, and at such an important time in science policy, and then being there for the early days of BIG and then getting to work with environment and climate change Canada, who now have their own behavioral science unit developing. What a rewarding journey it must have been. Or be. It is.

GIAMMARCO: Yeah, still I think. Haha.

It's so interesting, you mentioned timing too, I feel like in so many of those experiences, I happen to come in like on the cusp of things, like when things were just kind of getting started or really launching and whatnot, and so it's been really interesting to look back and see where things have come since those points in time. I feel like I was, early on and we'll probably talk about this more a little bit later on, but I did have a lot of hopping around when I got out of graduate school for better or for worse. So it was really neat to collect all these different experiences and again, look at the timing of where a lot of these organizations or teams were. I got really lucky in that sense, too.

APPELT: It might not all be luck, there might be a connecting thread. If Maria is there at the right time, the practice grows and thrives. That special sauce.

GIAMMARCO: Well, that's very generous. I'll take it, sure.

APPELT: Well, given that you have had this variety of experiences, what are some of the similarities and differences in how behavioral insights is used, whether it's in public versus private sector or different levels of government or government versus other parts of the public sector? What are some of the differences and similarities you've seen?

GIAMMARCO: Yeah. Well, maybe I can start with some of the similarities, like, I think what's so neat about behavioral insights, especially within Canada, and you know this very well, Kirstin, it's such a wonderful, tight, small-ish community of behavioral insights in Canada. And there's a lot of dedication, you know, whether it's units within post-secondary, in public sector, varying levels of public sector, even private sector in a lot of ways. You know, we're all working towards building out this really robust practice of behavioral insights or applied behavioral science, whatever you want to call it. And you know, there's a lot of convergence around the ways in which we do that, whether it's some variation on the RIDE model that BIG uses in that DIBS uses, or some of the kind of higher level goals of behavioral insights, to save people time, to help improve their lives in various ways and whatnot.

So I think that's a really neat thing about behavioral insights, and I'm speaking specifically to Canada because I haven't worked outside of Canada, and that's the communities that I'm most familiar with, but it's really nice to see that I think, and to know that you can kind of bounce around behavioral science jobs and, you know, they might look a little bit different, they might have slightly different goals and visions and mandates and whatnot, but ultimately, we all kind of converge around the same things and you can take your experiences from one sector or one BI office to another in really effective ways, and I think that's pretty awesome.

APPELT: The acronyms may change, but the underlying processes are the same.

GIAMMARCO: Acronyms are everywhere, and they're always different and they're always changing, but they all mean the same thing effectively. So, yeah, so many acronyms.

And then in terms of some of the differences, I would say, well, caveat, I do have a limited private experience. My research consulting job right at the beginning there with Dialectic was probably the one major private sector experience that I've had. But in terms of what I've just had exposure to and whatnot, I think you tend to see that within the private sector BI work tends to be a bit more client driven. And sometimes that might mean some risk aversion around implementation, or, you know, clients are really just looking for a behavioral lens on something or BI background to kind of justify what they already want to do.

And that sounds a little bit cynical, and I'm not painting the private sector with that brush in any way, but that is something that you can kind of see pop up in and it pops up in the public sector too, but that is just sort of one thing that comes to mind is that sometimes a private sector can be much more client driven, whereas working in the public sector, it tends to be even though, you know, if you're an internal consulting body working for different ministry clients, effectively, the public sector goals are all ultimately the same. And you know, at the end of the day, you're all public servants, and there's a lot of similarities in terms of what that means for your work, whether you're doing BI or some service or policy development or whatever it is.

And you know, I also found that within the public sector and this might have just been a function of the timing when I was there, there was a lot of push for capacity building within the public sector around behavioral insights. So just as much as doing the BI projects and, you know, building and testing the interventions, there is also the familiarizing of folks across the public sector with what behavioral insights is all about is sort of getting them on board with, this is an awesome and legitimate tool to have in your public sector toolkit and you can draw on it in these ways, you can work with us in these ways, and this is how BI can help the work

that you do in your part of the public service. So that capacity building piece was big and that was the case both in the B.C. public service as well as when I was with the federal government.

And yeah, and I think, you know, even within different levels of government, so provincial versus federal, I've never worked in municipal government, but even just between those two, it's really interesting to see how the jurisdiction that the different governments have impacts what you can do and even what kinds of BI projects you can really do, what kinds of interventions are feasible, what kinds of touchpoints you have with people, with individual citizens. The federal government has, of course, certain jurisdictions that are different from the provincial government, but really has that cross Canada national kind of scope to the work, which can be really impactful and really powerful. But at the same time, the touch points aren't always as obvious or as present as in the provincial government, where some of the jurisdiction is a lot more local, regional, service based, and has a much more of a close tie to the individual citizen. So those are a couple of my observations. I'm sure there's many, many more that I'm not capturing here, but those are the ones that stick out to me the most, I think.

APPELT: Yeah, and I think those resonate a lot with me too. I think, like you said, the BI community is fairly close knit and there's a spirit of sharing and kind of paying it forward. And that's something that I think, like you said, is particularly true in the public sector, where we see a lot of the capacity building work and community building work where that's really taken on and a very generous spirit.

So maybe you've already started to cover this, but what are some of the lessons along the way that you've learned?

GIAMMARCO: I think, you know, and I'm probably pretty biased in saying this, but I think that there is a place for some form of the BI, or at the very least, you know, some lens on behavioral science in almost any of the policy or social challenges that we're sort of faced with, whether in the private sector or the public sector, the nonprofit sector.

Whether it's, you know, a big national challenge or local or regional challenges, you know, human behavior is essentially at the heart of most everything, and at least when it comes to policy and business challenges and social challenges and whatnot. And that doesn't necessarily always mean every challenge necessitates behavioral insights and something like the RIDE model, but instead, it means that a behavioral lens, I think, is so applicable and so valuable in so many different places and spaces. And it doesn't always look like a behavioral scientist, you know, doing nudges or doing interventions. But that lens and the sort of perspective that it can bring to so many different challenges, whether you're working as a behavioral scientist or not, it's such a valuable and interesting kind of perspective on problem solving and dealing with the sort of wicked challenges that we're faced with and in many different ways in many different sectors and industries across Canada, so that's one of the big lessons learned, I think I would say for myself.

APPELT: Yeah I feel like the more you know about behavioral insights, the more you see it everywhere around you. Like some of the most mundane problems, like maybe like dog waste on the sidewalk, like you are going back to your example of working with Dialectic and dog food. There's human elements to pretty much everything, and then there's really neat ways to apply behavioral insights in different ways.

GIAMMARCO: Totally. And then you kind of start seeing BI everywhere too, in the sense of like, oh, that hasn't been BI-ed, or you'll be like, oh, this seems like a nudge, I feel like whoever designed this is like trying to nudge us to do something. Something about the type of messaging or the way that something is set up, or like, even some of the apps that are out there now for different things like fitness and whatnot, you're like, hmm, I smell a behavioral scientist.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. And you can't go through a bad form or a bad survey ever again without being like, ooh, we could just tweak this, tweak that.

GIAMMARCO: So much sludge.

APPELT: Yeah, totally. Well, one of the things I really wanted to dig into a little bit more was your experiences at BHER and the current work you're doing there. So can you tell us a little bit about that?

GIAMMARCO: Yeah, for sure. So my work with BHER, I can start by talking a little bit about the organization just to give some context there.

So, BHER is a national nonprofit that was built out of the Business Council of Canada, it was originally their skills and talent arm, and sort of the main force behind BHER is that we bring together leaders from post-secondary and from large private sector companies in Canada and bring them together in a unique way that encourages them to collaborate on and help solve some of the biggest skills and talent challenges. And a lot of, I would say, a pretty high level kind of foundation behind a lot of the skills and talent challenges is a lack of coordination and collaboration. So by bringing leaders from both those sectors together in a new and different way, we think that that is a really important sort of catalyst or mechanism for positive change. And then we do all the things underneath that to support this sort of bringing together of post-secondary and business, and that looks like doing research and development. We do sort of applied research on a number of skills and talent challenges, and I can speak to what some of those are.

So we do that and we also do programing work as well. We focus on work, integrated learning primarily. So bringing work integrated learning opportunities to more students across the country, especially for students who are in programs or come from communities that are underrepresented in the work integrated learning ecosystem and looking at that as a really powerful mechanism to help students transition into the workforce and build meaningful careers for their future. So that kind of gives a summary of the work that we do at BHER, again, focusing primarily on skills and talent challenges, my team focuses primarily on how we can build more sort of equitable and inclusive pathways from post-secondary into the workforce and throughout folks' career. And so that's where most of my time goes, as well as the Canada Comeback Challenge that we're working on. So that's kind of a rundown of our work and BHER. Very quick rundown.

APPELT: But it's so interesting, and I think it goes back a little bit to our point before about how BI is one of those fields where it can be harder to get on the radar of people early in their careers. And maybe you can tell us a little bit about the Canada Comeback Challenge and the BI addition of that, which is new this year.

GIAMMARCO: Yeah, for sure. So the Canada Comeback Challenge is an initiative that we've been running for a couple of years now, and it started as part of our COVID recovery efforts. So when COVID hit, we had some amendments to the work that we were doing, the programing specifically for work integrated learning, and we launched this initiative to help students obtain experiential learning opportunities through the pandemic.

Knowing that a lot of you know, co-op placements and internships and whatnot were either canceled or severely modified in some way or pushed to the future and whatnot, or just weren't as accessible and not as many students could access new work integrated learning opportunities. So the Canada Comeback Challenge was one way, an internal program we created because primarily we fund partners to deliver working great learning programs, but this one was an internal one where we figured, you know, let's build something to give students an experiential learning opportunity during the pandemic and actually have them work on challenges that businesses and levels of government and nonprofit organizations are facing through the pandemic,

actually had them work on these real world challenges, develop skills along the way and make connections to employers in different industries, in different sectors.

So it's essentially a challenge competition or a case competition where, you know, our industry partners, our challenge partners provide us with a bunch of different challenges for students to work on, and they work on them in teams, and they build towards essentially presenting a solution to industry partners in a pitch form and the feedback from the industry partners and whatnot. And it's a way for them to practice various sort of transferable skills, things like communication, collaboration and, you know, critical thinking and being able to take sort of their knowledge and their skills from undergrad and apply it to real world challenges happening in real time as well.

And so about not quite a year ago, we started thinking about ways to expand the Canada Comeback Challenge. And me being the biased behavioral scientist that I am was like, wow, we should really do a behavioral insights stream, how cool would that be? Because, you know, I love BI, and I thought it would be really awesome, but also because, well, a couple of reasons, I think behavioral insights provides a really good structure to something like a case competition. Like, it is a discipline that comes with a set of methodology that you can learn and use and practice. It's very experiential to help solve challenges and to, you know, to do things like scoping, and how do you go from a big, crunchy policy challenge down to a specific kind of behavior that could be changed for positive impact.

And also, like we've been talking about, isn't necessarily a discipline that kind of exists within post-secondary. It's not something that undergrads can do a degree in behavioral insights, right? So it's not something that undergrads incidentally get a lot of exposure to. And at the same time, students in programs like psychology and whatnot don't have as many experiential learning opportunities outside of working in research labs in the ways that maybe programs like engineering say would have or business. So it's also this opportunity to bring experiential learning work, integrated learning to students who don't typically have the same access to it. And so a number of reasons that came together and just it just made sense to do this.

APPELT: And then so exciting that it's in its first year, and it's under way, and like you said, I think it's filling this gap.

And so I think we're having kind of a theme throughout our conversation today about how being interdisciplinary is both a strength of BI, but also at times something that makes it hard for people to learn about BI until oftentimes they're a bit more advanced in their career or later in their education. So beyond things like the Canada Comeback Challenge, what do you think are ways where we can get students and working professionals aware of and interested in BI earlier in their career and educational journey?

GIAMMARCO: Yeah, I think providing more opportunities like this, you know, looking at what are the different ways in which we can give students these experiential learning opportunities, whether it's something like the Canada Comeback Challenge or some other type of program or initiative that kind of helps to embed that exposure into undergraduate programing, whether that's, you know, capstone courses in psychology, for example or whatnot. And just looking at how we can scale this kind of work and bring it to more and more students and how we can get more and more BI partners involved in this as well too, and really just build this kind of intentional pipeline, maybe not pipeline, but pathway of opportunity for students and opportunities for exposure. So I think more of this and looking at how we can do this in different ways and what's the best point in time or point in an undergraduate journey to expose students to BI or what are different kinds of programs and initiatives that we can look at beyond something like the BI Canada Comeback Challenge, which is full semester in time. Are there shorter stints? Are there longer stints even that that we can get students involved in? Are there actual work integrated learning placements that we can do for students? You know, can

we build BI into work integrated learning, you know, get by employers on board with having a student for a semester work in in their organization, for example.

I think these are all different things that we can do and continuing to help practitioners understand the value of connecting with students. A lot of what we do it BHER is, how can we understand the value that employers see in work integrated learning, and how can we sort of build on that value proposition and make it even stronger and help employers realize, like, if you invest in students and you bring them into the workforce, it's going to bring you these benefits, xyz benefits, and continuing to work on the employer side as well too, and in this case, maybe BI practitioners and a lot of the time, folks in BI, especially if they're coming in as behavioral scientists tend to already be, you know, at the master's level or Ph.D. level, but what kind of opportunities are there for folks who are in undergraduate programs or in diploma programs as well for BI? Especially because it's so interdisciplinary, we look for so many different skill sets and experiences.

APPELT: Yeah, and I think, like you said, there is, I think, BHER has just such a fundamental role there because I think there is interest from students and there is interest from organizations, but it's hard to make those connections. And so I think things like the Comeback Challenge and work integrated learning are just so perfect. And like you said, I think not only is it getting it on people's radars, but it's also a bit of expanding the reach so that we're recruiting across sectors, backgrounds, races, genders, et cetera.

GIAMMARCO: Absolutely, absolutely. And like, how can we be an effective connector? And, like you say too, how can we reach students not only from a disciplinary perspective in terms of who has access to work integrated learning, who would benefit from exposure to BI, but also in terms of, you know, the communities that are often excluded within STEM fields, including psychology, including behavioral science? And how can we just make the field of BI itself and the kind of work that we do more inclusive, both in terms of the methodologies that we use and the approaches that we take and the people that we partner with, but also in terms of structurally and more sort of like a systemic level, who we're trying to reach and bring in and who we want to foster belonging for? And that's everyone, so how can we do that? How can we make the field of BI more inclusive and more built towards having everyone sort of feel like they can belong in behavioral science or in behavioral insights? And historically, we, as well as other sciences, haven't done a great job of that, and there's a lot of room for improvement there.

APPELT: Amen. Yeah, that sounds just, you put it perfectly, I'll just say that.

So I notice that we are running short on time, so I'll ask you our famous last question, which is do you have a message for our BI practitioners in training who are coming through our Advanced Professional Certificate Program?

GIAMMARCO: Great question. I think that one thing, I guess another common theme that we've talked about through this is like the winding path of behavioral insights and in sometimes how a lot of behavioral scientists come from sort of a collection of experiences, and I think that, you know, being open to different experiences and being open to exploring things that maybe are outside of your comfort zone or paths that you didn't necessarily see yourself on. I think looking back, that's what allowed me to collect all those experiences and to kind of hop around in different places. And I think that's one thing that I would say to BI practitioners in training or students even more generally is like, be open to all those different experiences as much as you possibly can and try those experiences that sort of get you out of your comfort zone.

And I think a lot of times too, when we're students, we kind of worry about big decisions like, oh, what's my first job out of school gonna be? Or if I go down this path that I'm closing the door on all these other things. And I think that it's important to remember that no decision is final, right? Like, we have these pivotal

moments in our careers, but also and especially in BI, there's so much opportunity to explore so many different avenues in subject matter areas. And again, like I had the privilege to do so, and not everyone necessarily can just jump around and do whatever job they want or drive from one end of the country to the other, but, you know, as much as you can look, at those different experiences, and especially now in an era of hybrid work where we can be so much more open to different opportunities that maybe physically or fiscally we couldn't before, you know, taking advantage of that. And every little thing, every little decision that you make, big or small, builds towards the next opportunity and the next experience.

And again, coming back to this idea that having experience and building experience and behavioral insights can take you so many different places into so many different jobs, whether it's the typical behavioral scientist or you know what I'm doing now, which is more of a broad applied research role where I infuse sort of elements of BI into the work that we do, and there are so many, so many different opportunities. So being open to those and trying different things out, I think is what I would say.

APPELT: Yeah, I love that. And I think it also goes back to our point about how behavioral insights is everywhere. You know, behavior is everywhere. So even if the role, the title of the role or the job description doesn't seem like a BI role, there's often really neat ways you can apply BI and then that rich experience will fill out your kind of repertoire in really neat ways and open up future opportunities, so I totally agree.

GIAMMARCO: Awesome.

APPELT: Well, thank you, Maria. It's been a treat to hear about your BI journey, to discuss career pathways, so thank you for sharing your time with us today.

GIAMMARCO: Thank you so much for having me and for giving me this space and time to talk about all things BI.

APPELT: And thanks to our listeners for joining us for another episode of Calling DIBS.