Episode 42: "Wrangling the Project Scoping Phase & Hot Topics in BI"

with Mikayla Ford, Head of the BC Behavioural Insights Group (BC BIG)

As the new Head of BC BIG, Mikayla Ford is perfectly positioned to look backwards and forwards at BC BIG's ongoing evolution. We discuss how BIG's project intake and scoping process have matured, including how BIG decides which projects to pursue with which methods. Mikayla also shares recent BIG work, current topics on BI units' radars, key BI skills, and excellent advice for navigating the sometimes bumpy BI project road.

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 once again calling DIBS on Mikayla Ford. Mikayla is the Head of the BC Behavioural Insights Group, also known as BC BIG.

She was previously a Methods Specialist at BC BIG for a few years, so not only has she been a large part of BIG's success, she's had a front row seat to BIG's ongoing evolution as a BI unit. Because BIG and DIBS are close partners, I get to work with Mikayla a bit, but not nearly as much as I'd like, so today, I'm really grateful for the opportunity to talk with her about the past, present, and future of BC BIG. So welcome to the podcast, Mikayla.

MIKAYLA FORD, GUEST: I'm really excited to be here. Also, very excited to have another opportunity for us to chat.

APPELT: So, some of our listeners will remember you, but maybe can you just start by reminding us a little bit about yourself?

FORD: Yeah, for sure. I am currently, as you mentioned, the lead for the BC Behavioural Insights Group. I've been in this role since November, but prior to that, as you mentioned, I was a Methods Specialist with the team. So, in total, I've been there for about three years, working over here in the beautiful B.C. West Coast.

Prior to this, I was actually out in Toronto, working in the private sector for a couple of research and consulting firms who also were specialized in applied behavioural insights. I started my career at BEworks, which is a firm dedicated to applied behavioural science in a consulting capacity, often working with government clients. And then I had a little stint working in market research, also with a behavioural science unit. So, applying what we know about how people respond to typical market research questions, using that behavioural science perspective.

Kind of have a bit of a quantitative and qualitative background, always in applied behavioural science. Yeah, and currently acting as or, working as, the lead for the team. So different sort of pivot for my career more recently. But it's been a really great experience so far.

APPELT: Well, thanks. I actually would not have guessed it's only been three years. It feels like we've been working together for longer than that. We've gotten so much done, and had so many neat projects. So, impressive that it's been such a short time.

FORD: Yeah, it's true. I think this collaboration has gone through so many neat initiatives that it feels like it's been a lot more work time than it has.

APPELT: So, that reminds me of just how much we could talk about today, but let's start with just looking back at the last several years at BIG. And BIG started as a really small team. It's grown, and as it's changed, how have BIG's priorities shifted over time?

FORD: Yeah, I can speak a lot to like the past three years, obviously, but BIG has been around prior to when I started, when Heather Devine was running the team. So, my understanding of the priorities back then, you probably have a better understanding, but I'll kind of tell it how I saw it.

But I think starting out, you know, there was-- BI was less known and especially less known in the BC public service. So, priorities there were really around, obviously building a team. Finding the right folks to build out the BC BIG team, developing a vision, Heather just did a fantastic job of building up that vision for us. We had to have that strong start. Creating partnerships, so collaborating with you and other folks across government or outside of government, and sort of building up that business case. So that, I think was, you know, big, big priorities at the start.

And then obviously that sort of leads into creating, through the business case, making sure that there's some cool projects and some neat results that are coming out of that early work. So, the priority, as I understand it, at that point, was to identify some good challenges within the B.C. Public Service that BI could really help to address and then doing what was possible to kind of get those projects off the ground, and get them to trial, and get those neat results that would help to sort of build the case and then tell the story of BI and its potential impact. And I think that also resulted in a lot of capacity building, so building awareness through those projects, but also building awareness by teaching other public servants about behavioural insights.

I know a lot of time was spent at the beginning of my BC BIG journey, creating some really awesome capacity building programs. Whether that was like a four day in-person sessions, learning about BI and applying it to a specific challenge, or doing bespoke workshops with different groups across government, really just sort of raising awareness of behavioural insights and its potential impact. And building those relationships and just getting people excited about it. And then, I think when the excitement grew, and the team was built up and we had sort of that momentum going, there was a shift towards prioritizing, you know, being able to find some really great projects.

And so, that was about the time when I started. We had this full team and we had the capacity to take on some new stuff. There was a big focus on trying to identify the right projects, and getting those off the ground, so, that was a really fun time, and I think we worked through some lessons learned, and some growing pains and kind of figured out sort of what we were best suited for. And yeah, and then I think from there, just sort of continue to build exposure.

And now we're at a point, especially post pandemic, when I think behavioural insights got a bit of a lift in people's collective awareness where we're getting more senior folks who are reaching out to us, a lot more interested in partnering with us. And so, the focus right now is often about thinking about how we can best support our partner ministries, given the resources that we have and the size of our team.

So, my priorities right now are thinking about, you know, how can we create more efficiency within the team, standardize things like our intake process for projects or our capacity building initiatives, in order to free up that time on the team to address specific client challenges? And then how can we take on projects that, you know, take up a little bit less of the resources of the team, but still provide that value to the clients? Yeah, I'd say that's sort of one of the focuses at the moment, along with all the other ones that I think have continued on as we've grown.

APPELT: Yeah, when I think back on it, I remember the first few months and years, it really felt like we were going around kind of like the old cosmetics Avon lady going around trying to sell products like knocking on doors like, "Anyone interested in behavioural insights?"

And now it's the opposite. The demand for it to behavioural insights services exceed the supply. And when I also think about the first couple of projects, even before I was working with the team and we were just, UBC DIBS was kind of unofficially supporting Heather. Her first couple of projects, she was given, I think, like two months to pull off an entire project and have results. And there wasn't even an understanding within the BC Public Service of what an actual timeframe for a project would be and that there's no randomized controlled trial that you can do the background research on, and explore, and design, and run within that time frame. It's a remarkable transformation.

FORD: I'm indebted and grateful to the both of you for tackling that. What seemed like a super daunting task at the very beginning, but it's obviously paid off.

APPELT: Absolutely, and another, I think thing, that both BIG and DIBS have really learned over time is that, and this is something I think the capstone students working through their projects will really agree with, is that projects can be really tough to manage and shepherd through from start to finish.

There's no way to do them in most cases in two months, but even within the time frame they require, it can be really tough. And not every project is destined to be kind of a textbook RCT, randomized controlled trial, and I think over time, BIG has really found a great way of figuring out how to provide the right methodology, or right approach, the right road for each project, and different projects get different types of support. So, can you talk a little bit about how BIG distinguishes trial projects versus lenses versus kind of really short micro lenses and any other options BIG has on the table?

FORD: Yeah, that's such a good question. I think anybody working in this space has probably come up against this question and how, yeah, how do we think about projects? You know, not necessarily as field trials or randomized controlled trials, I should say by default, because I think especially towards the beginning, it was like behavioural insights is a randomized controlled trial, and you know, this is the method and this is how we do it.

But anyone that's spent time doing this knows that can be really challenging. Sometimes you invest a lot of time trying to get there and it doesn't get there. Or sometimes you know, right off the bat that this is probably not going to be the type of project that's going to be a randomized controlled trial. And you also learn that the projects that are well-suited to be randomized controlled trials can be few and far between.

So, most of the stuff that comes our way, there might be a great behavioural challenge in there, and there might even be great data and stuff, but there maybe isn't a way to randomize it. And so, you have to kind of think of other ways in evaluating a potential impact of an intervention, or you have to think of other ways to address this important issue and maybe think of what kind of advice or what kind of support you could provide outside of the type of, you know, super rigorous evaluation and sort of the limits on that.

We had those first few projects, right out of the gate, that were the RCTs, and we still have several of those that we come across. But we have had to start thinking about things like exploratory research, and how can we help clients think about their particular challenge through a behavioural insights lens while pulling in primary research. So that would be maybe through interviews or through, you know, collecting data in some other form and then providing that behavioural lens on it and really helping clients think about their challenge as a behavioural challenge, if there is one there.

And that can reveal all kinds of interesting opportunities for them and kind of make them look at it in a different way. There's also opportunities to look at existing data and provide that behavioral lens on it. So maybe, somebody who's been collecting administrative data on something, BC BIG has sometimes been able to look at that data de-identified, and provide some insights around key behaviours, and that can provide a bit of direction for next steps that people haven't thought about.

When we do activities like this, sometimes we call them a behavioural lens rather than an RCT, we'd be providing a lens on existing data or we're discovering new data. And occasionally that's, you know, a relatively quick and easy task rather than a field trial. Sometimes it can be more involved, especially if there's something like qualitative research or interviews, focus groups, that kind of stuff in it. And occasionally we get requests where either the behavioral challenge isn't super clear, or maybe there's a lot of work to be done before it feels appropriate for BI to come in and provide that lens. Like, maybe it's just not totally clear if there is a problem, or the extent of the problem. Or you know what, we might be able to benefit from fixing that problem. So in cases like that, we're starting to play around with what we're calling a rapid review or a mini lens, and that's mostly just providing a bit of guidance in terms of next steps for our clients.

So, “Here are some ideas of things you might be able to try out, some folks you might find helpful connecting with, or some resources that some that you might find useful as you're thinking about your challenge”. We might give a little bit of like a summary of kind of our perspective on it, or some thoughts about behavioural components that they might want to think about. Well, it's quite a bit more like touch and the idea is just sort of giving that support and giving that direction to folks without having to go too far down the RCT path or the behavioural lens path if it doesn't seem like the project's quite there yet.

APPELT: Absolutely, and I think that's really smart because it is about being efficient with the use of resources, so some of these things, there's only so much impact we can have. And rather than spending months of BIG's time and other groups times just figuring out ways to provide support in kind of short forms that can still be really useful.

FORD: Yeah. And there's always that fine line there, too. I find this with this work, and I think again, practitioners are all aware of this of, you know, the fine line between providing advice that you've been able to test through a rigorous means versus that kind of low risk, kind of low hanging fruit, advice. And so I think that's an area that we spend a lot of time as a team talking about and thinking about the limitations of the support we're able to offer while still doing it an ethical way. So yeah, we're still toying, as I know, a lot of practitioners are, with the right balance between these types of deliverables or our projects.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. I'm teaching a course today on scaling and the limits of scaling and how far you can scale beyond the evidence with without meaning to. All topics are very fresh in my mind right now. And I think, kind of a related idea is that over time, we've gotten more attuned to the warning signs about whether something is actually a behavioral project or not and whether it's a fit for a trial or not. And I think we've all started to develop criteria and processes to help us make better decisions during the scoping phase so that we do hopefully make better decisions about both, whether it's even something that's relevant for behavioural insights, but also, if it is, does it go down to trial route, the lens route, the rapid review route. What are some of the criteria BIG uses? How do you go through that initial evaluation phase?

FORD: Yeah, this is something that we're spending a lot of time on at the moment. Kind of relates back to your first question about priorities, and we talked about the interest and the demand for BIG services growing. And so, with that obviously comes the need to get really good at this, like really good at how do we evaluate projects, how do we identify the most promising projects. And this, to me is like not only a big challenge, but I also find it very fascinating, and it's a very cool kind of decision-making project.

Our team has been really invested in thinking about the best way of doing this and pulling on experiences from other BI units or from similar units within the BC Public Service around how they do it. And, the process has evolved. So, intake, or project intake is what we call it-- so after you and Heather had done those kinds of initial projects, there was this annual intake where we had, you know, call out for projects and we had people submit projects from different ministries. And that was really great. It was a nice kind of wholesome experience for the client and BC BIG. And they were able to look at all kinds of aspects of a few different projects and being able to weigh the different projects against one another, to identify a few promising ones.

And that process, I think, worked really well for our first few projects that gave us that opportunity to get our portfolio in order, all at once, which was really nice. As we've grown and as we've taken on projects more on a rolling basis, we're realizing that we might need to also have a bit of a process that meets the demands of the clients in the sense that it's not annual, it's maybe more on a rolling basis, as well. So, with that comes different challenges too.

And basically, what we're trying to do is optimize the amount of time that we're spending learning about the challenge and learning about the potential for things like a trial or for the potential to make a big impact, and doing that efficiently so that we're able to kind of move forward and work on the project, or potentially consider other projects. That’s sort of where the criteria piece comes in and the criteria has also evolved over time as we've grown and we've learned what's working and what's not working. And I think it's always kind of-- there's some pieces that have remained the same, and there's other pieces that have kind of tweaked through that have been brand new.

But the process that we're working on right now is also sort of like a gated criterion. So, thinking first about, you know, whether there's a clear behavioral problem that the client is able to articulate or that we're able to understand based on what we know about the challenge. Is the data there to suggest that there's actually a challenge? Do we have some research there to back that? Of course, there's the potential piece, so is there a potential to make a big impact? And who is that? What is that impact as it is? Obviously, we want it to be a positive impact. Is it a positive impact on the part of citizens and or users of some program or service? Or is it more a benefit to government for efficiency? Is there some overlap there? So, who's really benefiting? And with that comes a lot of questions around ethics, and we have some really great protocols and documentation to help us with that piece of things.

And then I think one of the pieces that has kind of been a through line, and we've heard from other units, is just some priority. So, is this like, do we have executive support and do we have folks who really want to put some time and energy behind this project? Because I think anybody who's been involved in in a full, randomized controlled trial knows that it's not a walk in the park. There's often a lot of time and energy that goes into it. So, making sure that we're aware, that the client's aware of that and that they're willing to put that time and energy behind is critical. Then there's things like obviously, if we're interested, or if there's an opportunity there for a trial, there's all kinds of details around trial criteria.

So, the data, if you're looking for an RCT, is there an opportunity to randomize, can we get de-identified data? Are there privacy concerns there? What's the touchpoint? How likely is it that folks are actually going to engage with that touchpoint? Do we have a sample population? Is it big enough? Does the randomization have to happen you know, in a cluster? Can we do it at the individual level? So, all these sorts of, experiment design questions, which can be quite a while to work through. But if there's a trial there, that's obviously a piece that we'd spend quite a bit of time working through, in terms of criteria.

And one of the newer ones that we're finding more and more important when you think about criteria is whether or not there's a really good understanding of the context and of the barriers in existence already. So sometimes you have folks who say, “Hey, we think we have this problem, you know, we have obviously a priority to solve it. But maybe the problem itself is kind of anecdotal or, you know, there's no real hard evidence to suggest there's something there”. Or maybe there's just no understanding from the user or the citizen or the individual or, you know, whoever we're talking about, maybe there's not really good understanding of their experience in their context. You know, the barriers that they face or the environment in which they're making decisions. And when that's the case, it’s just not that-- it's not a good project for us. It just means that it takes that much more time to kind of gather that information.

And so it's a really important piece for us to think about, as we're planning our projects. “Do we have the capacity to do that kind of research? And if so, what would that look like, and how difficult? And who would we need to get on board in order to do it?”. So that's becoming one that we're being more mindful of, I'd say.

And then obviously, there's things like, you know, do we have interest in this? So we have members of our team who specialize in certain things, and to me, it's really important that the projects are not only important and have a lot of potential for good, but also that the team is engaged and excited about them. So, that's one kind of, one component that we like to consider and then obviously wanting to get sort of a mix of different projects. So, wanting to make sure that we're connecting with clients from all sorts of ministries and not just focusing on one specific area. Yeah, that's kind of a collection of criteria, quite a bit there.

APPELT: Yeah, no, I think that's great. And I think, part of what you really expressed at the beginning of that, is just how there's a need to kind of compress scoping, because as some of our capstone team saw, scoping can last for months or even a year because there's always like-- you can always ask more questions to try to understand the problem better. But if you scope each project for a year, then you're never going to be getting any projects done.

So how can you kind of integrate the different criteria and assess the information to be able to make decisions in shorter timeframes? And I think some of the really important things you hit on are things like executive support or managerial or organizational support, depending on the partner. But we definitely saw a lot of projects that kind of started out strong and melted away because there wasn't support all the way up. Then on the flip side, we also saw that having project champions, so someone, not only the executive support, but someone who works with the problem more intimately so that they can be your kind of main contact within the client, the partner, to kind of keep the project going.

FORD: That's a really great point, and somebody who's really jazzed about behavioural insights, if you have them on your working group team, you know that can go a long way.

APPELT: Yeah. And then the idea that there's so many criteria and that, you know, they can be weighted different ways for different projects. So not every project that goes forward is going to look the same. Some might be, you know, a little stronger on the data side. Some might be a little stronger on having that executive support. And there's always ways to kind of trade things off and make it work. It's not something that we can just automate quite yet. It still requires a lot of thinking power.

FORD: As you mentioned before, it's about like, what's the most efficient use of resources, so we have to think about it that way. Like if there's an RCT that looks really easy to pull off and maybe doesn't hit on other criteria, maybe that is worth pursuing if there's the opportunity to do it and you can find some data you can do an interesting trial and you can prove something quickly and it's got all the pieces. Maybe it's not the highest priority, but maybe it's worthwhile doing and not only for the impact, but also for building the capacity on that team or what your own internal capacity.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. Well, talking about projects and lessons learned, the pandemic has, of course, been an unexpected development and lesson learned for all of us, and I think that's some place where behavioural insights have had a lot to say, and BIG has had an opportunity in the last couple of years to do some really neat work during the pandemic. Are there any projects that BIG has worked on during the last couple of years you'd like to highlight?

FORD: Yeah, I mean, I think the one that we've been most excited about through the pandemic and I think maybe because we were able to kind of go all the way from scoping all the way to running a randomized controlled trial and seeing a really positive impact was one that my former colleague Vince Hopkins and Isabelle Andresen and Travis Clark did in partnership with SDPR.

The Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and they were working to help get folks who had been unemployed as a result of COVID 19, helping them get back to work. And so, this was a neat project in the sense that they had actually done a little bit of research prior to COVID, and they just happened to have been at WorkBC centres, doing some preliminary research on a different project, and learning about some of the barriers to accessing WorkBC and how unemployed folks have this really great opportunity to get these services like free job counseling or job boards, and help with finding work. But there were barriers to people actually going about getting it.

They had done this really great research. Pandemic hit, and our team noticed this opportunity to kind of look at all of these folks who had recently lost their jobs and were applying for benefits with the federal government, and to kind of intercept that, and also direct these folks to WorkBC. So they put together this nifty email campaign that went out to these individuals and it just made the process of signing up for WorkBC really, really simple. It removed a lot of the friction that they heard about in some of their interviews. So, through just like a click of a button, they were automatically directed to their nearest WorkBC service centre and that WorkBC service centre would reach out to them.

And so, as a result of that project, they saw a three times increase in the number of enrolments in WorkBC centres, which is just really cool to see during a time that's just super challenging for so many folks. So that's one that I'd say we're really proud of coming out of the pandemic. And again, cool to see it kind of go all the way through the, what we call the RIDE model, through the data collection and then measuring kind of advisory type work that we did around the edges during COVID and kind of making sure that we're bringing sort of the latest insights, the latest research about behavioural science from academia or from other jurisdictions, and making sure that our colleagues who are on the ground or knees deep in COVID response work.

APPELT: Absolutely. There was a lot of opportunities for, I think, knowledge exchange during that time. So many folks were working on similar problems, so that was a really neat opportunity to be able to share wisdom.

FORD: Yeah, absolutely, it was. I think it did a lot for behavioural science to show the value of thinking about challenges from a behavioural perspective. I mean, the fact that we were able to get so much of the population to stay home for an extended period of time, like that's an incredible behavioural challenge. And so, I think it was neat to see how important people realized these types of approaches or this type of thinking was during that time.

APPELT: Yeah. I think in a lot of ways we didn't think of things like a pandemic as having behavioural components until our most recent pandemic, before we thought of them as more, you know, something that happened to us, not something that we were interacting with and something that we could have impacts on as individuals and societies.

FORD: Yeah, absolutely. And I think it also kind of highlighted the limits of behavioural science, too, which was also really helpful. Like, you know, there's a lot of talk around encouraging vaccines with behavioural insights. And I think there was just a study that somebody linked me to today, about sort of the limits of changing behaviours and changing attitudes. And if you have folks that are highly resistant to vaccination, you know, there's only so much BI can do, and I think it kind of helped to highlight those limitations as well.

APPELT: Yeah. And also, I think the intersection. So you don't want to purely rely on behavioural science, but adding behavioural science on top of things, whether it's mandates or-- and not specific to the pandemic, but taxes or policies, there's a lot of ways that behavioural insights-- as we've always said, it's another tool in the toolkit. It's not that it has to be used instead of other tools, but it can be used in and to work with and facilitate and amplify other tools.

FORD: Yeah, absolutely. Some great examples of that.

APPELT: Well, and we've looked back a bit, what are you foreseeing? Whether that's specific to the field of behavioural insights or how BIG works or what's on the horizon for BI in BC?

FORD: Well, it's interesting, actually, because I was on a call just a couple of days ago, I guess this was yesterday, with BI practitioners from around the world. And this was sort of one of the questions that came up. So, yeah, it was really, really validating to know that we were, you know, in step with the rest of the community. I think there's some uniqueness to our team, obviously, like there's uniqueness to every team that's out there, but there seems to be some consensus around what I'm hearing people want in the field.

And yeah, I think there's a lot of discussion around ethics, for sure. So that's kind of a hot topic, both within our team and from what I'm hearing elsewhere. That's around like, you know, increasing the transparency of the work that we're doing. And I don't think that's in reaction to unethical work that's going out there. I think it's more in reaction to the sense that this field is growing and with that growth, comes a responsibility to make sure this work is being done in the most ethical way possible. And also, obviously, like, you know, it's in response to folks sometimes misinterpreting what behavioural insights does. Just making sure that we're clear on the guidelines and the principles that guide our work. And so, I'm seeing a lot more focus and interest in that, and it's something that we're paying a lot of attention to here as well.

APPELT: I think the BI principles are a really good illustration of that, which is something we've talked about before on the podcast, but its something where a lot of organizations came together to agree on what are some of the ethical and non-ethical principles that we think are important in the practice of BI.

FORD: Exactly. Yeah, totally. And I think things like that, like protocols or processes that keep us in check. I mean, it's like it's our, you know, we know this is the kind of thing that you need in order to change or to guide behaviour. I think more of a focus on that, and the transparency piece around like pre-registration and around sharing. And that also serves a benefit of making sure that work is available, and results and impact and findings and insights are all open so that we can learn from each other. So increasing collaboration across jurisdictions and different BI units. I think that's also sort of the focus for a lot of teams. Yeah. I would say that ethics piece, what else was I thinking about here?

APPELT: I'll just jump in. I think too, with the communication piece, we're also finding new ways to be transparent. Like obviously, we have the BIG difference BC conference that we've had going on for a while. We're doing more with the BIG difference blog. We're doing more with trying to share case studies through the BIG Difference newsletter, through the BI Wiki. I think as a corner of BI here in BC, we're looking at new ways we can share and be transparent.

FORD: Yeah, yeah. And I think BC BIG and UBC DIBS are sort of champions of that approach since the beginning, with it being one of the pillars of the work that we do around that community building piece. So that's awesome to see. Yeah. So I think the other areas of where we're seeing things going, some other things that are on our minds as well as, you know, in the minds of a lot of people, keep hearing about people talking about moving BI upstream so that, I think a lot of people are interpreting as, let's get away from copyediting letters, and let's start thinking about more kind of policy challenges, or structural challenges, and how BI can help either in the design of programs before they've ever been launched or the design of policy, or how can we provide a behavioural lens on challenges that have a real structural component to them? And doing that in collaboration with other groups.

So that's a piece that I know we're really interested in here, and thinking more about each day. And then I think with that also comes that collaboration piece. So, not only with other BI units, but with other disciplines, and a lot of talk about partnering with, doing more qualitative research. So, either kind of increasing that capacity on BI teams themselves or partnering with other experts in that field, like I know here at BC BIG we're exploring opportunities with our service design team here. Thinking about how we can work across disciplines, in order to tackle more thorny challenges.

I think there's also interest, and we've talked about this a little bit already, but interest in exploring alternative evaluation methods, or maybe not necessarily defaulting to an RCT thinking about other means of evaluation and potentially some creative sort of ways to do rigorous evaluation, but that is maybe more accessible or kind of easier to pull off in complex situations. So that's something for sure. And then one thing I think specific, maybe to BC BIG, maybe other units as well, but one thing that we're thinking a lot about is our capacity building within the BC Public Service.

In the future, I'm thinking we're hoping to build capacity in a way where it's not necessarily learning the specifics of the RIDE model or how to run an RCT or how to do all the various steps of a behavioural insights project, but more embedding some of the key knowledge and foundational skills of the behavioural insights and the behavioural insights approach. So, things like, you know, scientific literacy. So how do we get people to think about evaluation and impact in the work that they do and have that top of mind, and think about hypotheses and evidence and quality of evidence?

And also just, how do we get folks to think using a more sort of user-centred or human-centred approach to their work? So, whether they're writing a letter or developing a form, getting them to be in that like human-centred mind frame when they're doing it, I think if we can get some of that sort of foundational stuff across, then we're doing a good job in a slightly different way with respect to capacity building.

APPELT: Well, it sounds like you'll never be bored. There's plenty of new directions to keep us all excited.

FORD: For sure, yeah.

APPELT: Yeah, well, I think kind of pulling on that last piece, I wanted to touch a little bit on the idea of capacity building. That has been an ongoing priority for BIG, and BIG has been a major partner in developing the Advanced Professional Certificate, and obviously we've already mentioned things like the BIG Difference BC conference and of course, BIG is someone hiring BI practitioners and behavioral scientists. So, with that lens, what skills and knowledge do you think are most valuable in the practice of BI?

FORD: Well, this one's always hard for me to answer, because I think it takes a variety, like it takes different folks, and some folks are really great at some things, and other folks are really great at those other things. And when you get everybody together, you kind of, you have this awesome team. When I list them out, you don't want anybody to be like, "Oh my gosh, that's a lot of things that one person doesn't have." You know, it's fair enough that some folks are stronger in some things and less in others.

But I'd say in general on the team, like in total, we want folks to have some of those hard skills, that hard knowledge around behavioral insights theory. And that's probably one that's kind of like, the through line. If you're interested in behavioral insights, then you probably know or have read or are fascinated by System 1, System 2 thinking or some of the biases and some of that sort of seminal research. I think that's always important and usually not something we have to worry about because, like I said, they're kind of coming to us with that already. But it's one thing to know the popular studies.

I think another thing to be keeping abreast and on top of all of them, you know, especially in light of things like the replication crisis and whatnot. So, like just knowing where there's caveats and where it's worked, and sort of the newest information about this type of research is always, always really helpful to have.

There's the hard skills around, like quantitative data analysis or experiment design, and obviously, our behavioral scientists always have this box ticked. But this is, you know, knowing evaluation approaches, knowing when the right sort of experiment design is going to work in the right context. And then that statistical analysis skill, you know, whether that's knowing SPSS that kind of stuff, that obviously is sort of a necessary skill in the team, but definitely isn't required for everybody. And a lot of our Methods Specialists have this piece in sort of a different way.

We've had some folks that are just really strong in thinking about experiment design. Even though they're not doing the statistical analysis, they can be really strong in knowing about creative ways to evaluate something rigorously. And that often takes some good knowledge of statistics and experiment design, but also about like government processes or, in our case, government processes. But I guess, you know, given wherever you're working, maybe it's in the data field or something like that, just knowing how systems are set up and how to go about doing things like randomizing or collecting data or whatnot.

I'd say that those are all kind of good, good hard skills along with things like project management, which is one of those ones that's often overlooked. But man, is it important. So good project management, client management, that kind of piece of things is really important to have and that policy and government knowledge is always super useful and then softer skills, you know? I think a service-oriented attitude on our team goes a long way.

If you've got client service experience or just sort of have that predisposition, that's really helpful. Things like empathy and a desire to make the world a better place, like that's huge. And everybody in our team has always come in with that. And I think if you're interested in this field, you oftentimes just have that by default as well. And curiosity. I think that's a huge one, and again, on our team, there's no lack of curiosity. I think that's what drives people to this field and that's what keeps them engaged. You might not know everything when you get here, but if you're curious, you're going to be keen to figure it all out. And that's always an important part of our team and this work in general, I think.

APPELT: So, related to the skills and knowledge, what new skill and knowledge development opportunities do you hope to see in coming years? Or what advice do you have for people debating about how to acquire skills and knowledge? Or if they should acquire skills and knowledge?

FORD: Yeah, I think, yes, you should. If you're interested in working in this space, then absolutely go for it. There seems to be more and more opportunities every day, and there was nothing like the Advanced Professional Certificate when I first learned about behavioral insights, and I really wish there was, because you just get so far with that program. So, yeah, advice I'd say, like definitely explore that option, either by attending some of the webinars that I know are hosted with informational stuff or connecting directly with graduates or current students. I think it's a great way to get a sense of the program, and how it's rolled out.

Members of BC BIG are often open to connecting on a call. So that's another nice way. And then I think like, you know, getting in touch with anybody working in a space, whether it's in government or there's consulting firms, there's market research firms, kind of getting a lay of the land, in terms of what career opportunities look like coming out of a program is always good.

The Decision Lab, I think has a really cool career path finder tool that I always thought was like a nice lay of the land in terms of if you're brand new, you don't really know what you want to do, but you kind of want to be in the space. It kind of maps out the different opportunities and what they could look like. It's a nice place to look as well. In terms of like the skills that are useful, I mentioned, all those ones that would be helpful on our team.

Development opportunities, I'm thinking like, what would I love to see more of. One thing that would be nice would be a really applied program, looking at stats, experiment, design, and evaluation. I think right now it's a bit tough for people to gather that experience without doing a really advanced academic degree. So, what's nice about some of these applied behavioral science programs is they get a little bit of a glimpse into that without having to jump full into a data science program or doing a full Ph.D. where you're learning that really in depth. So yeah, that's one area where I'd love to see, I'd love to see more of.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. And that's a skill set that really takes a while to develop. It's not something you can do like a one-time course and you're a stats master. Like, the DIBS team, we always talk about we've all taken multiple stats courses, and sometimes even the same type of course multiple times to just practice the skill and develop it.

FORD: You're talking to somebody who hasn't done that, but yeah, something a little bit more accessible. And even if it's just kind of touching on it, so that you get the basics, and then what's nice about most of the BI teams I know is that there's always somebody who's got advanced skills in that arena that can support and that can do the heavy lifting. But knowing at least the basics is just super valuable.

APPELT: Yeah. And I think one thing you mentioned before that I want to pull on is just the idea that not every person has the full skill set, like BI is very interdisciplinary. We're all bringing our different strengths. Some people might be stronger in the qualitative research. Some might be stronger in the quantitative. Some might be stronger on the decision and behavioral science theory. Some might be stronger in research design.

So, finding the area that speaks most to you and going deepest there, making sure you have at least some understanding of the full suite, but not necessarily being the total expert in all of them, which makes it much more approachable.

FORD: Yeah, and you're actually making me realize that I didn't mention that skill. The qualitative research skill. That's a huge one, actually, and just missed it. But yeah, having folks that have done interviews that have moderated focus groups like that's hugely valuable. For sure.

APPELT: Well, we'll move towards the wrap-up question, so I always ask for people who are pursuing training right now, our BI Practitioners in training through the Certificate program. Do you have a message for them?

FORD: I would say, you know, soak it all up, I think. Especially, the opportunity to run your own trial or to run your own project. I think it's important to note that it's not always, you don't always get as far as you do in the Advanced Professional Certificate, I've said this to Kirstin before when I've heard about some of the projects that have come out of that, that it's just really impressive to see how much that folks are able to do in such a short period of time because, like we said, that scoping phase can last ages.

So even if you're feeling frustrated, even if you're like “Oh my goodness, this isn't going to make it to trial”, it's not a failure. Welcome to the practice of behavioral insights. That's how it works. And trust me, you're learning some really valuable skills as you might be pulling your hair out, but it's a really important part of the process and it's the type of work that we do. So, yeah, know that you're learning those skills regardless. That would be my advice. And I think the other piece of advice is just take advantage of those connections. You're meeting academics, you're meeting individuals interested in this space. And they're people oftentimes, you know, if you're based in BC, they're people that are based in BC, oftentimes. So those connections can be really valuable as you move forward, so yeah take advantage of that opportunity, as well.

APPELT: I think those are perfectly timed messages because the students are all in the midst of their data collection or preparing the last feverish steps before a trial launch, so I think those will be very welcome words of wisdom.

FORD: You know, there's that image that I often think about. I don't actually, I should find out whose image it is, but it's like this tangly web of lines. And then it slowly kind of evens out. And then you have like sort of the straight line that comes out of it. I feel like so much of the work that we do is the tangly web of lines where you're kind of caught where you're feeling like lost. And then eventually, it all gets clear. But don't worry if you're in that mess right now, that's part of the process.

APPELT: Yeah, it happens for every, almost every project. There's very few that are just a straight line, A to Z.

FORD: Exactly.

APPELT: Reminds me too of, there's an "xkcd" comic where it talks about how when you do trip estimates, you know, it's like five minutes to destination. But then, if you're doing a file download was his joke, but for this, it would apply for the project, you know, time to trial, two minutes, five months, three minutes, 40 hours, seven years to, "Oh, we did it. It's here, it's happening." You never quite know.

FORD: Yeah, that's par for the course.

APPELT: Well, any last thoughts, questions I should have asked and didn't?

FORD: No, I don't have anything. This has been a great conversation, so thanks so much for the invite, and posing such good questions.

APPELT: Well, thank you. It's been fun to reflect back to look ahead. It always energizes me to keep our partnership going. I always really value the partnership between UBC DIBS and BC BIG, and mostly that's due to the people. Any chance to work with you or chat is a treat.

FORD: No kidding. The feeling is very mutual here. I think, a lot of these questions touch on this partnership, and how important it's been for our team. So, excited to continue forward together.

APPELT: Well, thank you for sharing your time today, and thanks to our listeners for joining another episode of Calling DIBS.