



Episode 48: "Behavioural Insights as a Role and a Tool"

with Anna Burrowes, Methods Specialist with the BC Behavioural Insights Group (BC BIG)

Since graduating from UBC's Advanced Professional Certificate in Behavioural Insights, Anna Burrowes has transitioned into a role that enables her to both use BI and indulge her passion for continual learning. Anna shares details about the Methods Specialist role as well as ways to use BI in a variety of roles and applications. She also draws on her policy background to offer opportunities and barriers for applying BI to policy.

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 Anna Burrowes.

Anna is a Methods Specialist with the BC Behavioural Insights Group or BC BIG, and is also a graduate of our first cohort, the Class of 2021 in the Advanced Professional Certificate in Behavioural Insights. From the start, it was really clear to me that Anna was a strong advocate for the use of BI in government and someone who is really attuned to behavioural insights. So, I'm really eager today to hear her experiences using BI in government over the last year and change. So welcome to the podcast, Anna.

ANNA BURROWES, GUEST: Thanks for having me on the podcast. Excited to be here.

APPELT: Welcome. So, a common theme that you may have heard from us is that there's different winding ways we all take to BI. What brought you to BI? What was your journey like? Where are you now?

BURROWES: Yeah. So, after listening to most of the episodes of the podcast and hearing others share their meandering paths to BI, I'm starting to think my path actually isn't as meandering as I originally thought. I do have an undergrad in psychology and not engineering or poli sci, like some of your guests, but when I graduated from Psychology "Nudge" had yet to be published.

So, I was not actually introduced to the BI until a few years later when I did my Master's in Public Administration. So, it was an Econ course where the theory originally captivated my attention, and I flirted with the idea of doing a second Master's in Behavioural Economics. But the opportunity cost just seemed too high.

So, following that, I worked in the non-profit sector, in research, project management, program evaluation and policy before I joined the BC Public Service, where I worked primarily in policy and research roles before joining BC BIG in January. So, I guess the application and the industries that I used my skills in varied but the skills that I did develop through the course of my career are definitely skills that use my current role as Methods Specialist.

APPELT: Yeah. It seems like you have one of the less winding journeys, which is really neat to hear. So, what led you specifically to the Advanced Professional Certificate?

BURROWES: Yes. So, this is going to sound incredibly corny, but it was the program I've been waiting for. I'd been following BC BIG since starting in the BC Public Service and had done their three day in-person bootcamp and was just thirsty for more BI. So, the nine-month certificate program felt like the perfect opportunity to develop practical skills in BI and was less intimidating and less of a time commitment than pursuing a Master's degree.

I think also the timing for the certificate couldn't have been better. I remember preparing my application in the early days of the pandemic, writing my letter of intent, I had my recently adopted pandemic pet by my side. And I can honestly say that 2021 would have been a much more challenging year had it not been for the program to keep me well distracted. A dog, of course, also helped.

APPELT: Totally. Yeah. I have to actually agree with you that, you know, at first, we were disheartened that there was a pandemic when we were launching this brand-new program. But then it actually, I think it worked out so well. I think it's a program where even though it's online, it does feel like you're building a community and it works really well in my mind.

BURROWES: Yeah, we were all, I think the first cohort, incredibly impressed with how the program ran. Your team did an excellent job, so kudos to you.

APPELT: Well, kudos to the pilot cohort. You were all very brave diving into this unknown. You knew it was BI, you knew it was a program, but that was kind of all you knew when you bravely dove in.

Previous to your experience with BC BIG, you worked in a lot of different roles as you spoke to, and I know you spent a bit of time in this policy space, and I'm curious to hear, based on that experience, what you think opportunities to apply BI to policy are.

BURROWES: Yeah, great question. I think a big part of the role of policy analysts, and public servants more broadly, is obviously to develop policies and programs and processes and articulate the options and the pros and the cons. And I think the more lenses that we can bring to the analysis, the more confident we can be that we've comprehensively and accurately captured those pros and cons. And I don't think a behavioural lens should be the only lens, but I do feel that BI is uniquely suited to identify some of those policy backfires before a policy or program is implemented. I think there's a lot of sort of theoretically perfect policies that have failed when they're put into practice due to a lack of insight around human behaviour or context.

I'm thinking, for example, lower than expected uptake of a subsidy due to perceived stigma. Or when the introduction of a subsidy crowds out some of those intrinsic or altruistic motivations and then also it leads to a decrease in the target behaviour.

I think BI also has a lot to contribute when designing financial incentives. So, some of those core BI principles like loss aversion or mental accounting, can help us determine both the type of subsidy or the stipulations around the subsidy that we provide and when's the best time to provide that subsidy.

And then finally, I think across government, there needs to be an increased understanding of how these seemingly small frictions can have outsized effects on the uptake of programs and subsidies. I think we encounter this in government all the time with ten-page applications for grants when the amount of the grant is actually very little for the recipients. I think it's really about finding this balance between maintaining some

degree of accountability and trying to reduce barriers to access so that the intended recipients are receiving or accessing the programs.

I think it's also really important when we're trying to provide services to marginalized communities. So, I think there's all sorts of opportunities to apply through the policy development process. But I think there's some areas where BI can provide really unique contributions that potentially have a huge impact.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. You brought up so many great ideas, and I like what you were saying about how, by no means I was suggesting that BI should be the only lens brought forward, but that it's really complementary to the other existing lenses and it adds something that the current set is missing. So, it's a nice addition rather than a substitution.

BURROWES: Yeah, exactly.

APPELT: Well, of course we can see lots of opportunities, which means that there's currently places where it's not being applied, which might be because there are some challenges. So, what are some of the challenges of applying BI to policy?

BURROWES: I think, as for challenges, policymaking is all about making trade-offs. So, we choose to do things or not to do things or even how to do things based on all these factors. Might include cost to the taxpayers, anticipated effectiveness, sometimes of course, political priorities. And there are multiple perspectives and considerations competing for attention of the decision makers. BI is just one of those things. So I think that's one challenge.

Also, I think as public servants it's our job to outline these factors in the most objective way possible. However, as human beings, we bring our own biases to any problem that we're attempting to analyze. I don't know, perhaps with a background in BI, we're more cognizant of these biases that we bring to the table. But I'm not sure that's how it works.

I think another challenge, which I know a lot of nudge units are grappling around is around this notion that RCTs are the gold standard and therefore the best way to evaluate an intervention to run, which might not always jibe with the policy development process or the time frame. So, I think this is something that people who are smarter than I am or are thinking about and grappling with. But I think it's a conversation that will continue around the world with nudge units.

And then finally, I'd say there's obviously this very important issue of ethics. So, when selecting policy tools, from the toolkit, certain tools may not be appropriate when working with vulnerable populations. And likewise, I think we may want to avoid certain nudges with vulnerable populations or be careful when selecting our research design. Not to say that these ethical considerations are a reason not to apply BI to policy. I think it's just something that we need to be very deliberative about in our approach.

APPELT: That makes a lot of sense and I like how those all kind of play together. So, there's the idea that we all have our own biases. There's the idea that RCTs can be challenging and the idea that we need to bring ethics into play. But then if we're bringing ethics into play, that can increase timelines, which can make RCTs even more cumbersome.

And of course, as we've seen in the last couple of years, a lot of policy challenges are very fast and timely. So, something like COVID, you may not have time to do a test before you roll out a policy. A policy might need to happen now. So, I can see how all of those would come together to create a lot of challenges.

BURROWES: Yeah, absolutely.

APPELT: Well, now you are happily ensconced at BC BIG and you've been in this role for a little while. So, can you tell us about being a Methods Specialist?

BURROWES: Yeah, absolutely. So, the Methods Specialist role plays a key part in the three components of BC BIG's work. So, capacity building, evidence building and community building.

So, the evidence building component is most similar to what the Advanced Professional Certificate Program participants will be familiar with. So, we work with client ministries to co-design and test policy solutions using behavioural science and experimental methodologies. And generally, there is one Methods Specialist that's paired with a senior behavioural scientist on our team per project.

And then capacity building involves co-designing and delivering behavioural insights training. So, it includes our BI Basics, which is our one-hour course for public servants, as well as our recently piloted Beyond Basics, which takes place for two hours over four days and dives deeper into each stage of the RIDE model. And then, of course, we have the Fundamentals of Behavioural Insights at UBC and then the full nine-month Behavioural Insights certificate program, which is part of that spectrum of learning opportunities for folks outside the BC Public Service as well.

And then community building. So that includes building networks with academic institutions like UBC and local and federal government and then those practicing BI in the private and nonprofit sectors. So, the Methods Specialist really has an opportunity to be involved in each of these three different areas.

APPELT: It really does sound like a dream role getting to work in all of those different spaces.

BURROWES: It really is.

APPELT: But Methods Specialist role sounds like it's really a dream job because you have these different ways to use BI. So, I'm curious to hear about literally how does BI get used in your role? What are the different ways you find yourself using BI as part of being a Methods Specialist?

BURROWES: Yeah. So, I'd say BI both is my role as well as a tool that I use for my role, if that makes sense. I think as for the tool piece, I imagine all the Certificate grads have this special EAST lens that they apply to everything they're working on. Whether that's drafting communications or designing a program. And I certainly have that lens too, in doing my work.

And as for it being my role, BC BIG very much uses the RIDE model to guide our project work. And that's what the students experience during the capstone projects, it's very similar to how we work with our clients. And as part of my role, one of the things that I'm really enjoying is developing a deeper understanding of some of the theoretical frameworks that underlie BI. So, this is something that the certificate introduced me to, but of course, there's a lot more to learn and explore. And just utilizing that theory to help formulate the rationale for our interventions or even design some of our training opportunities has been really exciting and interesting.

APPELT: Yeah, and I think that's something that I really like about behavioural insights and working in this space is that not only are there so many different theories, but that's a space where there's continual development. So new theory is being created and developed all the time. And so, we're all continually learning

new ideas of how we can understand behaviour and think about encouraging behaviour change. So, it's never static. It's always, there's always new things to learn.

BURROWES: Yes. I must admit, I'm finding it a bit difficult to stay on top of everything but I'm doing my best.

APPELT: Yeah, it is a lot. That's why we all tend to specialize at the end of the day, because there's only so many parts you can be stirring at any given time. So, the Methods Specialist role, I find when I was working with BC BIG that it brings other tools to the table besides just BI. So, what other tools do you see yourself bringing into the role?

BURROWES: Yeah. I would say the other two skills that are essential to this role are project management and relationship management. So project management, I think for the obvious reasons, is just keeping track of what can be very complex projects with multiple facets and partners.

And then the relationship management, which is critical in BI projects, whereas the certificate grads and students will know things just don't often go as planned. And so managing expectations is a really big piece of that, but also the ability to be flexible. So, no two client groups are like you need to adjust your approach with each one.

APPELT: Absolutely. And I would say kind of building on those ideas is the idea that I have yet to see a BI project that's just done by one person working in isolation or one organization branch working in isolation. It's almost always a very collaborative undertaking involving multiple individuals and usually across different branches or groupings, whether it's like the IT team and the policy team, or the front desk team and the policy team. So, I think, like you said, that makes project and relationship management super crucial to the success of any BI undertaking.

BURROWES: Yeah, it gets super complex when each of those respective units have their own priorities and objectives. So, that can be quite a task in relationship management for sure.

APPELT: Yeah. And then even also their own jargon. So, I often start each project with like a little, a little notebook, which is like my little jargon dictionary for the project. What are their acronyms that they're using? What's their terminology?

BURROWES: Yeah, absolutely. Well, we're very comfortable with jargon in government. Each ministry, each unit has its own.

APPELT: Totally. So, what are you enjoying most about the role?

BURROWES: Yeah. So, I think as someone with a variety of interests and a love of learning, just the opportunity to jump in and dive into projects with a different subject matter area really appeals to me. We get projects from various ministries across government, so you never are sure what the next area your project will focus on.

Last winter actually, we did a workshop about reducing human-goat interaction with our former colleague and past guest on the podcast, Sharilynn. So, I got to learn a little bit more about goats and why it's so important to go to the outhouse in the middle of the night when you're camping. Goats are attracted to the salt in urine, so wouldn't have learned that otherwise. So that's fun. And of course, I have to mention to my colleagues who are lovely people, they're clever, they're kind, and they're a lot of fun.

APPELT: Yeah, it's a really special team and I cherish my time working with them and I totally agree. That's one of the things I find most fascinating is just you get plopped into these different worlds and you learn all these things, like you said, goats, in your case. Everyone knows about my project with caribou and it's just so interesting learning so much about these little areas that you would never otherwise encounter.

BURROWES: Yeah, fun tidbits of knowledge to have at parties, you know?

APPELT: Yeah, totally. So, this may be a silly question, but is there a typical day in the life of Methods Specialist? Is there kind of a routine or does it vary so much by project? What can you say about that?

BURROWES: I'm not sure about a typical day. I'd like to say it starts at six, with 30 minutes of meditation and a 10K run, but it doesn't in my case. The other Methods Specialist might be more into that.

Usually starts probably a little bit too close to 8 a.m. Ideally, in an ideal world, I spend the first 30 minutes or so doing some BI scanning, maybe jumping on to Twitter or reading a recently published article or a blog. And then the rest of the day would be a mix. So, it's probably trial related meetings, so it might be providing an update to the client. It could be meeting to nail down some of the logistical elements of the trial, such as data collection or communications. There might be a training session in there, BI Basics or another training. There might be a meeting with a fellow BI practitioner, either at the local level or internationally.

And then, on a good day, there might actually be time to do the work required for the trial. So that would be drafting communication or designing surveys or conducting lit reviews or brainstorming ideas around the intervention. So, it does vary, but those are kind of some of the core tasks.

APPELT: It's really neat that you start the day with a scan. I really like that idea. I'm going to have to see if I can fit that into my schedules for the day because I love that idea.

BURROWES: That's the intention.

APPELT: So I'm curious if there's a recent project, whether it's with human goats or anything else that you would like to tell us about. Is there a recent project that you're particularly keen to chat with us about?

BURROWES: Yeah. So having just joined BIG in January, I haven't actually been involved in a BI project that is finished, but we do have a number on the go in various stages of the RIDE model. So, one that simultaneously excites me and is keeping me up at night is an initiative we're working on with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure to encourage active and public transportation among BC public servants. So, we are focused specifically on commuting behaviour, which is notoriously difficult to change given that it's deeply ingrained in habit.

And so, the project focuses on leveraging the "Habit Discontinuity" effect, which suggests that it's easier to adopt new habits during tension points when habit cues are disrupted. So, moving. Having a baby. Starting a new job. So, we are targeting net new employees during the early stages of their transition into a new job.

So, our intervention includes a planning prompt with a link to a transportation resources website that was developed, especially for this project. So. I am a commuter cyclist, so I'm really hoping to move the needle on this one. But I know it's going to be difficult. So, I'm cautiously optimistic on this particular trial.

APPELT: It's such a great example of the timeliness piece. Like you said, that idea of getting in before that habit becomes ingrained so that one sounds really exciting, I too will have my fingers crossed that you're able to

move the needle. That would be really neat. Well, reflecting back on the certificate, are there ways you think it helped prepare you for the Methods Specialist role?

BURROWES: Absolutely. I think there are aspects and concepts that we're taught within the program that were familiar for me, given my background, but the program certainly refresh and reinforce that knowledge and those skills.

But to be honest, I really can't imagine tackling a trial without having gone through the Capstone project. I think having worked only in government and the nonprofit sector, working with clients was new to me. And so, navigating a project in partnership with a group of stakeholders was really one of the biggest learnings from the program and having the supervisor to be part of that process. And that has been so helpful for me in my current role.

APPELT: It's wonderful to hear that that's been supportive. And yeah, I think that's one of the things with the certificate program we are most insistent on when we were designing it. We got some pushback around the idea of a project because it is a big undertaking and it limits the size of the program because you can only have so many projects for any given individual to advise. But I find that it's such a crucial piece because it's really hard to do a project without having had a trial project. And that's essentially the capstone project is everyone's trial project. So, you finish with already a project in your portfolio.

BURROWES: Yeah, I think it was a really essential piece of the program and so thankful to all the advisors because I know it's a huge time commitment. I know JZ had to respond to emails in the early AM from me or she did. She didn't have to, but they were coming in at that time.

APPELT: Yeah, well, then, of course, all of the advisors are big BI data nerds, we also find it really exciting to, we talked about getting to know these little projects and getting to work on them is also really exciting for us.

So, I'm curious, I know some of our grads, our current students and grads, are looking for more BI-focused roles. What advice do you have for them on how to transition into more BI-focused roles? What to look for, what skills to polish, how to talk about those skills? What advice do you have?

BURROWES: Yeah. I think despite the fact that I have landed in a very BI-focused role, I do see BI as more of a means to an end rather than an end in itself. I think for me, throughout my career, I've been really drawn to roles where I'm using my skillset to address the problems that I'm passionate about. And while I think there needs to be a group of people that are very focused and specialized on BI as a practice, that will ultimately be a much smaller group of people. So, I think my hope is that there'll be this much larger network of people who have BI as just one tool in their tool belt. I think the challenges that we have as a society are large and they require pretty much every tool possible that we can throw at them.

So, I think my advice for the students would just be to find a way to apply BI to address the issues you feel most strongly about. I think that's how we expand the reach of the field. Having individuals who can visit the benefits of BI and what the benefits will be in that particular space and can champion that within their field is really valuable.

APPELT: I think that is really well said and I hope it will resonate with folks. I think that's very true that that's where a lot of the work gets done is in roles that are embedded in different areas and are ways to channel BI into solutions. Well, looking ahead, how do you hope to use BI in your career going forward?

BURROWES: Yeah, well, I've already said that BIG is a magical place to work. So as long as I'm at BIG, I think it'll be a part of my role. But I think one of the things I said that I liked is that we get to be involved in a wide range of topics as a Methods Specialist, which I do love, but my emerging passion is the application of BI to sustainability. So, I'm trying to keep abreast of work being done in that space, whether it's work being done by you and your colleagues or by others in other jurisdictions. And so, I do hope that there might be more opportunities for BIG to be brought in on some of the climate initiatives happening in other ministries.

APPELT: Absolutely. That is an area, as you know, that the folks at DIBS are passionate about as well. I hope that we can continue to collaborate on some of those. And building on that idea, what are you excited about? Beyond just the idea of applying it to sustainability, is there any ideas or research or events or anything that are currently making you excited about BI?

BURROWES: I mean, to be honest, that's the area that I'm most excited about. So, I think that BI has an opportunity to be applied in all areas of the climate challenges, whether that's prevention or mitigation or adaptation, I also hope that BI it's brought in next to those various stages of the policy development cycle. So, whether that's the public engagement stage or the development of policies and programs or communicating about the programs.

I think the last year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report specifically emphasized the role of social and behavioural change in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. So, I anticipate this field will only continue to grow, and I'm excited to be a part of it.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. It does feel like a place where more and more minds are focusing, which can only mean good things. Well, we're running close to time here. So, I'll end with the traditional question of do you have a message for our new BI practitioners in training?

BURROWES: I do. I feel like it's somewhat similar to what parents would say to children before sending them off to college, right after the "be safe" message. And that's just find your passion and find your people. BI is no longer a nascent field, which means that there's academics and practitioners with specializations in the application of BI to a variety of topics.

So I think the BI certificate is an excellent opportunity to identify those specializations and identify the people who might be working in the areas that are of interest to you.

APPELT: I think that is great advice. And the final question, was there anything that I forgot to ask, anything you wanted to add? Any last thoughts?

BURROWES: Well, in the early days of the podcast, you used to ask your guests about their favourite BI case study, and I always used to think, What is my favourite case study? And I think despite everything I just said about these complex challenges that BI could help us solve, and given the fact that I know my answer should probably be something like Save More Tomorrow, my favourite is always going to be the urinal fly and the effectiveness in reducing urinal spillage. I don't know, something about that particular one and my knowledge of human behaviour and maybe even like men in particular, it just tracks for me and it makes me smile.

APPELT: I love that. There's always one for each of us. There's one that always comes to mind. It's always on the tips of our tongue so I love that that's yours.

BURROWES: What's yours?

APPELT: Oh, it's hard, but for me it is actually Save More Tomorrow, because that's the one that set me on this path. I came across it in undergrad in my final econ seminar, in my econ major. And it just made so much sense to me after all of these rational economic actor classes and lifecycle hypothesis saving models, I was like, but none of this is what we actually do. And then Save More Tomorrow was like "Ohhhhh this makes sense". And now something like oh, almost 20 years later, still working in this space. That is mine.

Well, thank you so much for taking the time today. It's been so nice to reconnect and I know we kind of brush against each other through our work, but we haven't had a good chance to chat in a while. So, it's been wonderful to hear how you're thriving in your new role. And I can't wait to see how you continue to nudge for good and hopefully for green.

BURROWES: Great. Thanks so much for chatting with me, Kirstin.

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