



## Episode 50: "Behavioural Insights in the Federal Government & International Organizations"

*with Heather Devine, Senior Lead of the Behavioural Science Office at the Public Health Agency of Canada*

*After founding the BC Behavioural Insights Group, Heather Devine has crossed Canada to help co-found the Behavioural Science Office at the Public Health Agency of Canada. Heather shares a look at how she is seeing BI spread across the "federal government family" of ministries, branches, and partners as well as into international organizations like the UN, OECD, WHO, World Bank, and Save the Children.*

*Transcript:*

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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 Heather Devine.

Heather is now the Senior Lead and Co-Founder of the Behavioural Science Office at the Public Health Agency of Canada, which has the delightful acronym, PHAC. As long-time listeners know, Heather was previously the Head and Founder of the BC Behavioural Insights Group, or BC BIG. Heather was one of the early champions of the Advanced Professional Certificate in Behavioural Insights and was involved in many a brainstorm session involving sticky notes and pizza.

So, it's really exciting to have Heather graciously returning to the podcast for a record third appearance. I couldn't be more excited for a chance to reconnect, even if there's no pizza in sight. So welcome back to the podcast, Heather.

HEATHER DEVINE, GUEST: Thank you so much, Kirstin. It's my pleasure to be rejoining you again from the other coast of the country. Lots of changes since last time we chatted on the podcast. Very happy to be here and excited for the conversation.

APPELT: Awesome. Well, like you've mentioned, you've changed roles and coasts since your last year. Can you tell everyone a little bit about where your BI journey has taken you since your time at BC BIG?

DEVINE: Absolutely. The last time we had chatted on a podcast, I was living on Vancouver Island, in a beautiful little community, where I had lived and worked for many years, with my family, so my husband and my two kids. And during the pandemic, we had an opportunity to move to the East Coast. So, all the way across the country to Nova Scotia, which is closer to my family.

So right now, we are living in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, which is in the beautiful Annapolis Valley, surrounded by orchards and wineries and farms, which is quite a shift from the life we had on the Island. And as you mentioned in the intro, I'm working with the Public Health Agency of Canada, working remotely, and most of

my team are distributed across the country. That's kind of a neat experience, having people from coast to coast.

And I'm launching a new behavioural science practice. So, looking at different issues and some things the same and some things different, working in the federal family, working on big public health issues. And yeah, a big shift all around personally and professionally, over the last year or so.

APPELT: Absolutely. And I'm really curious to hear a little bit more about that because we previously chatted on the podcast about the landscape of BI in BC. So now that you're on the East Coast, maybe we can zoom out and chat more about the landscape of BI across Canada as a whole. And you've also now had experience in different levels of government. So where are you seeing BI be used? Which federal government areas have BI units? What provinces are using BI? What are you seeing?

DEVINE: Well, just speaking from the federal standpoint and what's happening in the federal government. I mean, obviously, at BC BIG, we had colleagues or counterparts that were in the federal system that we were connecting with as part of our broader Canadian community. And I've reconnected with many of those folks who have either practices or are practitioners working in their respective departments.

But as I'm now on the inside, I'm seeing how much uptake there's been of behavioural science broadly across the organization, various central agencies and departments. So just as a few examples, the Privy Council Office has an Impact and Innovation Unit, which many people will be familiar with if you listen to this podcast, and they've got a well-known fellowship program.

And what's interesting is we use some of their fellows in our program at PHAC, but also in the last year they've just launched a Program of Applied Research and Climate Action or lovely acronym of PARCA. And there it's portfolios that are in the Natural Resources Canada, and Environment and Climate Change Canada, so two departments that are collaborating to recruit fellows into their programs to tackle climate change and climate adaptation. That's pretty cool and exciting.

There's the Office of the Chief Human Resource Officer in Treasury Board Secretariat, and they are working on a number of files related to people management and in particular focusing on public servants that need more internal focus. Also in TBS, there's an experimentation works program with connections to BeSci. There's the Implement Social Development Canada Innovation Lab, and they've been doing really cool research with a kind of a blended innovation methods toolkit for years.

And there's kind of a smattering of other practitioners in CMHC. Global Affairs, Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. D and D. Canada Revenue Agency. There's just a wide variety of folks out there, either working in small BeSci units or working as practitioners in program shops. So, it's really cutting across a wide variety of several portfolios right now.

APPELT: That's so interesting to hear about. And do you see the different units or groupings using the same model of BI? Or are they using BI in different ways? Like does everyone have a BI team or are there different ways of BI being integrated into these units and organizations?

DEVINE: I would say there's a combination. There are those departments that are committed to having a more established practice or center of expertise, could be located in a policy shop or a research and innovation shop. But really, where you've got at least two or three people or more who are coordinating the behavioural science activities within that department and who are bringing in behavioural scientists and other adjacent practitioners to provide either kind of deep dive research expertise or behavioural lens advice.

So there are those, and then there are those working kind of on their own, where a particular program area has identified a need, whether it's kind of a short term project or longer term need for behavioural science expertise, sees the value, is kind of a champion or an advocate for the practice and is brought in to work on a file or to have kind of regularly feed in on some of the planning and decision-making that's happening within the organization.

So, it's kind of a, it's a wide variety of models being applied. In fact, we have a hybrid hub and spoke model, so we have a bit of a combination of a centre of expertise with a number of behavioural scientists, designers, knowledge translators, guiding the practice, building community, offering training, and also providing rapid advice and deep dive analysis to program areas.

But then we also have a group of embedded fellows, once the model's fully implemented, it will be a group of embedded fellows. Right now, the research fellows are all in our office. But eventually, by next year, we will have fellows embedded in program areas after and onboarding with us, to work closely with those program areas to understand the machinery of government, which is important for new folks coming in, but also to be there to feed in rapid advice for decision makers. And there's probably other models out there, too, that are being used in different departments that I'm not even aware of. But those are sort of most common.

APPELT: It's interesting to see that as the practice continues to grow and mature, there are different ways it's being used. I also think it's being applied to more and more problems. So, what problems have you seen BI be applied to, now that you're on the other coast?

DEVINE: I mean, just even the growing list of federal departments. And of course, the practice has expanded not just in the public sector but also in the private sector, there are more independent firms that have been stood up. The government of Nova Scotia, for example, at the province level, has a behavioural science unit now. So there's been growth beyond just the federal government.

But looking inward at the federal family, I would say what's been most interesting is seeing how people are combining behavioural science with other disciplines. So, for example, artificial intelligence or data science or human-centered design. That's been a really interesting evolution in the field and in the federal government and probably in other sectors as well. But that's been a really interesting and more recent event activity.

APPELT: Yeah, I think we're seeing that over here too, now that more and more folks have the BI tool kit, they're also bringing their previous toolkits to bear. And so, we're seeing these interesting interactions between, like you said, BI and machine learning, or BI in UX or BI and service design. It's interesting to see that growth. Are there other things you've been seeing about how the field has been changing over the last five or so years?

DEVINE: Yeah, I would say there's been a lot of change in the last five years. It feels like it's an entirely new -- we're in a different stage of maturity of the discipline as it's been applied specifically in the public sector. There is much broader application. It's reaching into new fields and more hybridizing.

As I mentioned, I would say it's being applied further upstream, the policy-making process. So, it's on the radar for a number of senior executives who are now inviting behavioural scientists into some of those conversations a little earlier on, before legislation, regulation, policies, programs are developed so that that kind of intel can be factored into laws and programs and services. And as they're thinking about the evaluation process to evaluate the effectiveness of those programs, behavioural science is being brought to bear in that planning as well. So that's been interesting.

I would say also just more practitioners flooding into the field and more demand for them. We're seeing a lot more behavioural science roles popping up. And I would say also just a lot of behavioural science information available now that was not readily available five years ago. Even three years ago, there wasn't the volume of research articles or events or blog posts or podcast videos, all the various great content that people are pulling together and sharing out through various channels that just wasn't there.

So, I think if you wanted to start a behavioural science practice today, it would probably be a lot easier than it might have been five years ago because there are a lot of lessons learned and best practices that people are sharing. So that's been kind of exciting.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. And I think you have contributed to that quite a bit because of your work and starting BI units and sharing that knowledge and paying it forward, which I think is something that's really special about the BI community, that there is the sense of everyone pitching in and supporting each other rather than everyone carving off their own piece. That's one of the things I love about the Canadian BI community. I'm curious what you want to see in the Canadian BI community as it continues to develop and grow.

DEVINE: I would say I'd love to see a relaunch of the, there was an FPT community practice, federal, provincial, territorial, we're actually kind of multisectoral because I think we ultimately expanded to other sectors, nonprofits and academic sectors. But reconnecting the behavioural science community, I think we're all sort of staying in touch through Teams, calls and online, through social media channels, but it would be nice to relaunch that community practice and welcome in all the new folks who have joined the field in the last few years, but then also see where there are opportunities for us to collaborate and share what we're learning. Both in terms of findings, but also in terms of the growth and maturity of the practice.

And relatedly, I would say I'd love for there to be a conversation about how we preserve the integrity and sustainability of the practice as it continues to expand and evolve. How do we keep it going as we have founders of units moving on to new roles? How do we make sure that we don't lose momentum? How do we make sure that we maintain focus on the practice and that we're maintaining the scientific integrity, the ethics, and the talent that has been joining the field, especially, I'm thinking from a public sector perspective, we welcome people in often from academia or other sectors, and how do we keep them interested, engaged in public sector work and applying behavioural science in this somewhat tricky environment where there are new and different barriers and constraints?

APPELT: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, and I think I like what you were saying about the having the community of practice. And I think that can be tricky because people are all doing their own BI and it's hard to have time to pop your head above what you're doing and make those connections. But I think when there have been those opportunities, it's been so fruitful, like the BI principles, the BIG Difference conference.

When there are these opportunities to collaborate across the different groups or various boundaries, I think there's been a lot of really neat work that's come out of that. I, too, hope that continues to develop and grow.

DEVINE: Absolutely. And related to that, I would love to see more opportunities to come together in person, because now that many of us are working remotely from outside of city centres, there are fewer opportunities, it seems, for us to get to cluster and connect in person and form those connections. So yeah, conferences or seminars or even if it's just an annual thing, some way for all of us to connect would be welcome.

APPELT: Yeah, I think Zoom conferences have done a lot, but they certainly don't have that feel of networking and getting to hang out that you get from an in-person conference. That meeting around the edges of the actual content of the conference.

Well, thinking about the new practitioners joining the field, which you've mentioned, what skills and knowledge do you think are most valuable in the practice of BI for folks who are wanting to join the space, what skills and knowledge should they be gaining or thinking about how they can phrase what they do to capture the skills and knowledge that are required?

DEVINE: So many skills. So much knowledge. I would say something that is really important, regardless of the sector you're joining, obviously, my experience is from the public sector, working for government, but system navigation. So, understanding the culture, the norms, the people, the sort of approval chains within the organization, the existing sort of barriers and constraints that you need to work within to move things forward and to make change.

Because ultimately, the practice is about behaviour change. It's about changing policies, programs, services, what have you, so that we can improve outcomes for folks and shift behaviour. So, understanding the system within which we're working and trying to feed intel into decision-making and evidence into decision-making, its really important to understand how it works and how to navigate it. And so that's a critical one. Besides projects and behavioural lenses are involved in many stages of the project management lifecycle.

So really strong project management and stakeholder management skills are key. You're often working with a client, a program area, and trying to understand their problem and hopefully co-designing with them some solutions that they're going to test and knowing how to move projects through the various stages and know when to escalate, know when to be kind of reaching out, keeping people informed and are really critical skills when you're doing this work.

Obviously developing and expanding BeSci knowledge. So just continuing to stay plugged into the literature, following the latest findings that are released and shared, incorporating that into your knowledge base, and obviously just strong research skills.

Quantitative and qualitative research skills. Being able to identify problems and problem definition, designing and coding surveys, analyzing data, all of those sort of basic research skills are going to be key to be successful in the field, and that will be kind of more on the behavioural scientist side.

Obviously, if you're in knowledge translation or if you're more on the human-centered design side of the behavioural science practice it might be a slightly different proportion of those skills we might need. But by and large, those are the key ones that one looking for as we're hiring talent into the team.

APPELT: So not a small amount of skills there.

DEVINE: But often people come with a lot of those skills already from previous experiences, whether it's in academia or in their previous work roles, a lot of people come with those skills already. So it's not a necessarily a huge undertaking, but yeah, those are pretty key skills that are successful in behavioural science and some of those can be developed on the job as well.

APPELT: Yeah. And like you said, a lot of them come from previous experiences. For folks who are hoping to add on BI to their existing skill sets and they're thinking about if and what level of training to pursue, what advice do you have for making that kind of decision?

DEVINE: Really tricky one because I feel like it's a really individual case-by-case decision. Obviously, speaking to practitioners at different levels and in different roles and different organizations probably would be a good idea to get a sense of what's out there and what kind of career path they've had. It's really going to vary.

I think there's many different routes into behavioural science, and you don't have to be a behavioural scientist to be involved in the practice, as I've mentioned. You can be on the human centered design side. You can be more on the policy side and use it as one of your lenses. There are lots of different ways to be involved in the field. Maybe if you've got a strong communications background and are really interested in science communication, a knowledge translator role might be of interest. What might be a way in. And then you can sort of continue to develop your skills and your knowledge to advance into a behavioural scientist role.

But in terms of training, there are a growing number of programs out there. There's obviously the Advanced Professional Certificate Program in Behavioural Insights, which I strongly encourage people to consider. That's a great way for folks who already have a pretty solid foundation in, you know, in whatever their field may be and who want to complement that with knowledge and skills in behavioural science in order to dip into the field. It's a great place to start.

There are also Master's programs and PhD programs, depending on how deep into the field you want to go, and how specialized you want to become. And what kind of goal you're targeting sometimes for behavioral scientists and some organizations require a PhD, some are fine with a Master's degree, and even others are applying with a Bachelor's degree and lots of experience doing applied research. It really depends on the organization and your end personal goals, as well.

APPELT: Yeah, I think we are, like you say, there's multiple paths into BI and multiple ways to go through BI, and I think we've certainly seen that in the podcast over time with the different guests we've had. I was also going to ask what opportunities are there for people to get involved in BI but I'm not sure if you feel like you've already answered that question. Are there other opportunities you haven't mentioned that you'd want to mention?

DEVINE: Yeah, I mean, I would say certainly as we've talked about over the last five years, lots of growth in the field across sectors public, private, nonprofit, academic, etc. But where I've seen a lot of growth recently is in international organizations who are developing dedicated units and hiring in folks from around the world really to come and lead the development of the practice. For example, the WHO, the World Health Organization, OECD, the World Bank, UN, Save the Children has a new unit called CUBIC, and I'm not going to remember the acronym, but it's a behavioural science practice focused on children in the nonprofit sector.

There are a lot of growth opportunities in those areas, which is really exciting to see and especially around the world. So that is an area that is worth exploring and you can find out about those opportunities by going to those websites, but also just by kind of tracking the fields on Twitter seems to be where a lot of the behavioural science community gathers and shares is on Twitter.

There's also on LinkedIn, which is a place that a lot of folks are sharing job opportunities and kind of amplifying those postings with their extended networks. And then I would say there are a lot of communities of practice that are popping up in lots of newsletters and virtual conferences that people can attend. And I think we're getting better with virtual conferences at finding ways for people to network on the margins or somehow embedded in the conference because that's a bit of an unmet need.

We haven't quite figured out how to do that, but as well as would be possible in person. But I think with technology we're making progress, so I would say that would be another way for people to find out about the opportunities, meet people and stay plugged in.

APPELT: That's a great point about the international opportunities because a lot of times we're so focused on where we are, we don't think about the international options. And like you said, that's such a growing space in BI right now.

DEVINE: Absolutely. And I will also say a good plug for the Impact and Innovation Unit in the Privy Council Office of the federal government, they have a fellowship program that we draw in heavily for our PHAC behavioural science office and also that PARCA program with climate change that I was mentioning.

So, for anyone who does have a background in behavioural science and wants to come in as a fellow, they do have fairly regular intakes at least once a year, they just wrapped up their more recent one. But definitely something to be again monitoring and tracking through Twitter and LinkedIn, because they do a lot of that heavy promotion when they when they do launch their intake.

APPELT: Yeah. It's really nice to see the opportunities growing and growing for folks. Well, speaking of the folks who are newer to the field, do you have a message for our new BI practitioners in training?

DEVINE: Wow. So many messages. I mean, I'm just, I'm so excited that the field is growing and more people are finding their way to apply behavioural science, and in particular, my bias, apply political science in the public sector and government. And definitely I think a couple of things that would that I think would be helpful as learners are looking for opportunities, looking to build a career in this field, whether they're already steeped in it or whether they're new, is building their network, starting now, not waiting until they finish the program, not waiting until they're sort of officially in a behavioural science role, but actually starting now to build their network.

So, finding out who's who in the behavioural science community and even starting with one person and that's who they might recommend. These contacts that you're developing and this network that you're developing, these are going to be the folks who will be sharing best practices with you and you'll be exchanging ideas, maybe looking for opportunities to collaborate and partner on projects and even folks that you will be commiserating with down the road, especially if you're leading behavioural science research projects or building a behavioural science team, establishing that network of trusted, kind of allies in this space is going to be really worthwhile.

And then the other thing I would say is telling your stories, finding ways to share your experience coming in to the field. You know, there's a lot of reasons why it's important to tell stories. I mean, I think, for public transparency, talking about what it is we do, the kinds of projects we're working on, what we're learning, but then also the operational transparency.

So, allowing others who were sort of hearing in to see a little bit behind the curtain. What goes on in the day-to-day of doing applied behavioural science work? What are some of the challenges? What are some of the fun, exciting things that are going on? I think it's just really important for us to tell the stories in really compelling ways in a variety of different channels. And you don't have to be an expert yet to do it.

I think that's the other thing is I think people hold off from sharing their story because they figure they need to wait until they're a behavioural scientist or till they're in some position of authority to be able to speak to certain issues. But we can all share our experiences and what we're learning. And I think the more we do that,

the more vulnerable we can be with sharing those stories, the more people will feel welcomed into fields and feel the warmth of the of the BeSci community, especially here in Canada.

APPELT: Yeah, I think that's a wonderful message to end on, thinking about the warmth of the community, and how, when you were earlier in your journey, you would have appreciated hearing from people who are still feeling early in their journey, not just for the people who have made a lot of progress on their journey. Any last thoughts? Anything else you wanted to raise today?

DEVINE: It's always a tough question. Any last thoughts? No, I think it's I'm really excited about where the field is going and having some of those deeper conversations that I was mentioning in terms of the sustainability and integrity of the practice, things like diversity and inclusion. Conversations about how we measure success in the field, how we move beyond sort of the initial founders and keep the practice going as people are kind of moving on and then how we retain talent.

I'm just excited, looking forward to having those conversations through community practice or through conferences or whatever venues are available to share and collaborate. Kind of hungry for opportunities to get together with folks in small groups or large groups and keep the sort of heart of the BeSci community beating and strong and thriving, continuing with the leadership role that I think Canada has had in behavioural science over the last few years.

We've really made our mark on the global map and we've been recognized and been offered opportunities to be involved in some international work. And I think that's due in large part to the generosity of the community and the hard work of folks like yourself, Kirstin, and our academic partners and folks at UBC and UofT and other places in Canada that have been doing behavioural science work either kind of on the forefront or sort of more behind the scenes. Yeah, it's just a great time to be in this field and to be at the beginning and to watch it mature and grow.

APPELT: Yeah, I would agree that it's a really exciting time to be in the field because I think a few years ago was exciting because we were starting to see momentum. But now it's exciting because now that we have the momentum, BI is being used in more and different ways. So like you said, applications to EDI, applications to diverse challenges, new ways of doing BI, new ways of working together. It feels like a very exciting time.

DEVINE: Absolutely.

APPELT: Well, thank you, Heather. It really feels like old times to get to reunite and talk shop with you. And I wish we could go on for a few more hours, but I know with time differences and such that might not work out well. So, thank you for always generously sharing your time, energy and wisdom. It's been a pleasure to talk to you today.

DEVINE: Well, thank you so much. It's always a privilege to get to chat with you and to connect with the B-Sci community through podcasts and other means. So thank you and thanks for keeping this podcast going. This is amazing.

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

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