Episode 62: "Be the Voice of the User"

with Brittany Burrows, Behavioural & Product Designer

In her career in behavioural and product design, Brittany Burrows draws on an understanding of human behaviour to design products and experiences that meet user needs. Brittany shares important lessons that apply to both design and BI projects: understand the problem before you create a solution, work across teams to ensure solutions are feasible, actively solicit feedback, and always know, love, and represent the user a.k.a. the population of interest.

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 Brittany Burrows. Brittany is currently a Behaviour Design Fellow with Culdesac, and Brittany and I actually met back when we were both in the San Francisco Bay Area exploring how we could use behavioural science in ways that would take us outside of academia.

Since then, Brittany has focused on product design in a number of capacities and even in different countries. So today, I'm excited to get a chance to catch up with Brittany, learn more about what she's been up to over the past several years and learn what's on the radar for her. So welcome to the podcast, Brittany.

BRITTANY BURROWS, GUEST: Thanks. It's great to be here.

APPELT: So, we usually have folks start by just telling us a little about themselves. So, who are you and what are you up to these days?

BURROWS: Yeah. Hi, I'm Brittany. I am a product and behavioural designer. And I, as you mentioned already, I recently wrapped up a role at Culdesac as a behaviour design fellow. Culdesac is a real estate development company that's building car-free neighbourhoods in the US. So basically these neighborhoods where you're not allowed to have a car as part of your life, but we support our residents in learning how to get around car-free and yeah, just living that whole life, which is pretty different for the US. I wrapped up that fellowship recently, but I am continuing to consult with them a little bit, just continuing the work I was doing.

Prior to that, I was working at Dott, a European-based micro-mobility company. We had electric scooters and electric bikes in many markets across Europe, and I was leading the design team there. And then prior to that, I was a product designer at Lumos Labs, which creates Lumosity, a brain training app.

Other than that, I am a mom. I love being outside, and biking, and powerlifting, and trying to play cello, which is a newish instrument for me in the last two years, and trying new arts and crafts things. Yeah, that's me in a nutshell.

APPELT: Love that. I remember lots of fun biking and crafting adventures. That takes me back. Well, you told us a little bit about the recent past, but we also often like to hear about the winding road. So how did you go from a PhD in Neuroscience to a focus on more of the design space in the private sector?

BURROWS: Yeah, maybe I'll take it back a little earlier than that. And I love hearing from other people and also sharing the winding road, because I think, at least for me, I had this idea that everyone except me just had a really clear idea of what they wanted to be when they grow up. And they just saw it and they just went for that thing and they took all the steps in between that needed to happen. But I've learned, since then, that almost no one does that. And it's those meandering moments where you learn about yourself. And in any case, I like to share it because it's always been helpful for me to hear this.

So going back a little before the PhD, I was a physics major in college, at least for a couple of years, and found myself kind of unhappy to be a physics major, but not sure what to do about it. I knew generally that psychology was a thing. I wasn't that interested in that as a major for whatever reason.

But I didn't really realize until I was talking to one of my friends that you could study the brain basis of behaviour without being a doctor. I didn't realize this was a whole thing, so that's how naive I was. But after chatting with her, I figured I'd give it a shot for a semester and signed up for a few neuroscience classes. And that was really all it took for me to change my major from physics to brain and cognitive sciences. This was at MIT about 20 years ago. Yeah.

I'd always been interested in human behaviour. It just hadn't occurred to me, like I said, that this is a thing I could actually spend my professional effort on, I guess you'd say. So, from there I went on to, well I worked for a little bit as a research assistant, which is a common path, and then started my PhD at Stanford and really, you know, enjoyed the interrogation of the brain and understanding behaviour and everything.

But again, was finding myself with these questions of like, "What am I doing?". This time it was, "Do I want to stay in academia or do I want to be a professor?". And kind of just observing the professors around me and, you know, other people following this path and not feeling like it was a good fit for me, but again, not sure what to do.

And I stumbled upon the "d.school" at Stanford, the design school. And this is another moment where I was like, I had no idea product design was even a thing, and didn't understand what I was signing up for when I when I signed up for a boot camp at the d.school, but ended up loving it. And there's a surprising amount of overlap with neuroscience that being like it's about behaviour at its core. It gave me a chance to still kind of scratch this itch of like wanting to understand people and behaviour, but at a different pace and a different way of interrogating it, and a different outcome too.

Whereas in academia you're forging into like the unknown and publishing papers about what you find. In product design, you are trying to create something to address a need or solve a problem. And then moving very quickly too, I think that was another piece that was missing for me in academia. Yes, I continued to take classes there while finishing my PhD.

One, I like to finish what I start. I didn't really consider dropping out, even though I found the d.school pretty early in my PhD, and also allowed me to take those classes, you know, for free, essentially, because I was already a student. But upon graduation, I, you know, I didn't follow the postdoc path. I started working at small tech startups in the Bay Area. That's just what you do.

But I took on roles in product management as well as product design, and eventually found myself more aligned on the product design side. That was really where I think my heart was and where I had the most fun. Yeah, that's essentially it. I mean, like, you know, and then up until those roles I mentioned, like I continue to do product design roles at these tech companies until here I am today, just finishing this role at Culdesac.

APPELT: Wow. Shocking to think it was 20 years ago that we were coming out of undergrad. But beyond that, a welcome surprise. So much of what you said really resonated with me like that youthful naivete. I too didn't really realize that you could study decision making and behaviour, and that was a light bulb moment for me to get that really dictated where my career would go from that moment on.

And for you, that insight led to the design world and for folks who aren't a part of that world like myself, can you help us understand the distinctions between design, product design, UX, product development, product management, etc.?

BURROWS: Yeah. And just to reassure anyone out there listening, I didn't fully know, you know, I wouldn't have had answers for these necessarily, even as I was starting my design career. It's-- you have an idea, but it, you know, your understanding of these becomes deeper as you actually do them. So, you know, it's just like any other new field. There's a lot of nomenclature and stuff to understand, a vocabulary to understand, and you'll pick it up as you go. But I'll do my best to define these things, maybe hopefully create some clarity around them.

Starting with design, just it's kind of a big one and it touches a lot of different disciplines because "design" can apply to a lot of different things. But I think as a noun, design is essentially a plan for how something will work and look. I think it's important to include look, but I also want to call out a lot of people when they hear "design", they think of beauty and form and what something looks like only. But I really think design is fundamentally about problem solving and function or a marriage of the both at the very least, it's not just make it pretty.

We talk about what a design is as a noun, a plan. It's also a process. You hear "design thinking", that's another way of describing it. That's a phrase that has become very popular in the last probably 15 years, is where it really started to pick up, but as a process, so it's a way of working through solving a problem. And the plan itself is kind of the outcome of that process. I would say generally speaking, the process of design involves identifying and addressing a need. So, another way to say that is a problem, some people find that negative, but I think problems are exciting. So, need is another way of saying kind of the same thing.

At the very highest level, a good design process includes understanding that problem, like even kind of articulating the problem. Like maybe you have a sense there's something there, but you don't know how to say that problem in a sentence until you've sort of investigated further. And that often I would say, I mean, even always includes talking to people who you think your users or customers are, talking to them, observing them, identifying where those things maybe are in conflict. People will often say one thing and do another. People will often say something, but, you notice something in their body language that's worth interrogating.

So that's kind of the first step is what is the thing you're actually solving with your design. I'm getting a little bit on a tangent, but just like one thing that you will often encounter when it comes to like product design is someone's come up with the solution before really identifying that they're solving a real problem.

That's another thing to keep in mind if you go into this field, it's very important to know what you're solving before you have that solution and not get too tied to any solution first. So anyway, you talk to people, you

observe people, you kind of synthesize that information and come up with some insights about what you think is actually going on.

And here's where I get, I definitely lean on kind of my science training, but I do a hypothesis kind of driven process. So now I have some hypotheses about how to address the need with a product or a service prototype those solutions, you know, in the different hypothesis buckets and kind of figure out which direction feels like it's got the most traction and then continue to prototype in that direction, test, iterate and then you can put something out into the world and measure whether it's having the impact you expect it to have.

Maybe an extra wrinkle here is in the business world when you're designing, you also need to not only consider users, but you need to consider the business. You need to consider what is going to help that bottom line or what are the business objectives. So that's important.

And then also technical constraints. So, maybe something is feasible generally speaking, but you don't have the time or the support staff to build it in that way, so you need to think about alternatives. So it's a you know, it's a give and take. So that's kind of design. I'm kind of getting into like a tech bend on defining it. But it's a plan and it's a process.

Product design is that but applied to products. That's really just, it is like you can have you can design all kinds of things. For example, you go to a museum, someone has designed the flow for an exhibit, like "What are the photographs that come first versus last? What are maybe the like pieces of furniture where they're placed within the flow of the museum? Why are they there? Do they echo the exhibit? Do they echo maybe the environment of the actual museums?".

So for example, S.F. MoMA fairly recently went through a big renovation. And if you go and take a tour of the architecture inside, they have a lot to say about why they put the stairs there and how they are connected to San Francisco. And, you know, there are all kinds of things you can design that aren't an actual product, but product design, it's designing products.

You mentioned UX, so maybe let's talk about that. That's very, I find in the tech world. UX and product design are used pretty interchangeably. And honestly, I think they're basically the same with the caveat that UX design is also applied to non-product things. So, what I just described of like how you design a museum experience that's a user experience situation without a product. But usually if you're looking at job listings and you see UX design, they probably mean product design.

Basically, UX refers to user experience. That's worth defining in itself, and it just refers to the full end to end experience that you want your users to have when they engage with your product or service. So even if your product is app-based, which many are, yes it's the design of that app, but it's also the design of "How are you introducing the product to people? What is the emotion arc of your user? Like thinking about what they might be in when they come to use your products and how you want to meet them there?".

Either you want to acknowledge that emotional state, maybe you want to try to influence that emotional state. And then is there any real-world component to the service that you need to consider when you're working on this product.

For example, yeah, working at Dott its you know, it's a micro-mobility company. So yeah, there's an app, but that's not what people are thinking about, right? They're thinking about, "I want to get on this scooter. I want

to be able to scan the QR code on the scooter so I can get started. I want to enter my payment information. What are the things to consider?". Well, you know, it's like loud or maybe it's dark or maybe it's bright, thinking about how you want to make that really easy for them so that they basically aren't even thinking about the app. Uber and Lyft are other examples of, yes, they're app-based, but in reality, you're trying to get from point A to point B and just acknowledging that full experience outside of the actual app.

Product development, I think you mentioned that one, I think of this as kind of a pretty general term, so it's just bringing a product to market. And there are lots of people and disciplines that go into this. So, it's not just product design, it's someone's doing research on the market opportunity, the competitive landscape. Yes, there's user research, there's technical feasibility, there's prototyping and road mapping. So, it's all the bits that get you from the idea, the kernel of the idea to actually putting the thing in front of people just to give a sense of how broad this term could be applied.

I was a chocolatier for a while, so and I worked in product development there as well on occasion. And so it's like, "Hey, Christmas is coming up. Maybe we want to have like a peppermint", I remember we were working on like a peppermint, some kind of peppermint chocolate. And so it was like thinking peppermint is something people think of when they think of Christmas. "What can we do here?" and working on all the bits to actually get delicious peppermint chocolates in front of people.

Let's see the last one. Product management. Yeah, this one's interesting. So definitely there's some overlap with product design, but so product management kind of stands at the intersection of like user-focused stuff, business-focused needs, and technology. A product manager is going to try to identify an opportunity that will fulfill a customer need but also address business objectives at the same time. They're going to scope out the full roadmap of delivering that product to customers. They're going to define the success metrics. So, both like maybe user-focused metrics, like "We want X number of people using it, you know, five times a day or one time a week" or whatever it is, as well as business metrics. Maybe you're trying to improve conversion on your product or something like that.

And then finally, it's herding cats, right? You're coordinating across a multidisciplinary team to actually execute this plan. At a tech company, at its very core, it's usually like designers, product managers, and engineers working together to deliver something. And then you'll kind of consult with a data science team or the marketing team. So, there is some overlap, like I said, with in terms of the need finding and the understanding users piece, but it is a more business-focused role.

APPELT: That's really helpful, it gives me a lot of context and helps to sort all these terms so they don't just feel like these nebulous terms, but it's clear like how they relate to one another. And I think listeners will hear a lot of things that sound familiar because we also talk about having to understand the problem before you come up with a solution. Otherwise, you might be solving the wrong problem or a problem that doesn't exist.

And the other thing that I thought would really resonate is the idea of technical constraints or feasibility constraints because a lot of times you have the students working on capstone projects and they come up with an amazing behavioural insight solution to the problem. And then they learn that the public sector organization can't send text messages or that the different databases don't talk together. So, they can't actually measure behaviour in that way. So those sound very familiar.

BURROWS: Yeah, it's amazing how often you encounter those sorts of things along the way. And that's why a good product designer is kicking off projects with their technical partners from the very beginning and working very closely side by side throughout the process versus I think a lot of people have this like "Steve Jobs model" in their mind of what product design is, where some genius goes off in the corner, comes up with this great idea and then people build it for them. Maybe that happens. I mean, that happened for him, but that's not like the typical or I would even say the best way of operating.

APPELT: That actually makes me wonder because one of the things we find is that we're often kind of working as consultants in the space, whether it's internal to an organization or with an external organization. And so often we're contacted by one division within the organization, and then it's only through a process of discovery that we find out who all touches the problem in terms of like, "Is it the tech group, is it the finance group, etc.?" So, do you find that you also have to do like a discovery process, or is it more often a team that's already pulled together because that's how the organization is created or structured?

BURROWS: Yeah, I mean, I think all models exist, but I think the most successful/typical situation I've seen is, well, I guess there are a couple. One is there are sort of like business objectives defined by the company and then multidisciplinary teams created to achieve those objectives. So, you'd have a team of engineers, designers, and a product manager addressing one specific set of problems that will impact the business objectives or hopefully will impact the business objectives. And so it's part of their job.

One, they're brought together maybe with a lot of that stuff you mentioned in mind of like "Who's going to be touching it" and stuff. But it's also largely the product manager's job to like understand the full scope and coordinate not just within the team but across the whole company to make sure, you know, like "What are other teams working on, what are the other products being developed?".

Because when I say products like Lumosity, for example, the product is this brain training app, but we break things down much smaller than that internally. So, there's somebody who's working on, let's say that there's a free experience and there's a subscriber experience. So, you might have a team who's focused only on the free experience and the other ones focused on the subscriber experience. That's one way of breaking things down, but then they obviously need to also be talking to each other and coordinating.

I do think, as you mentioned, when you're a consultant, things are a little bit more of a black box. So, I think that's a more common experience, unfortunately. The other way I've seen things broken down and it's hard to say that one way is better than the other, because I think it depends on the product, but also the stage of the company and just various factors. So, I wouldn't necessarily recommend this, but I have seen it work okay sometimes, is by platform. And what I mean is you might have a team that's focused on the mobile experience, like again let's take Lumosity, and like what is Lumosity like on your phone versus the computer desktop experience? Like how those differ.

Again, you still want coordination because there's the back end that marries the both. So like, the databases and stuff is still the same behind both probably. Anyway, it should be. But I think sometimes when you break up by platform you risk diverging look, feel, experience a little too much because a lot of people will jump between platform and they don't want to feel like they don't know what's going on. I diverged a little bit, but I guess like my point is, is like communication is essential for delivering a good user experience internally. And I think unfortunately consultants get kind of locked out from the full picture sometimes.

APPELT: Yeah, finding the full picture can be tough and I totally agree that if you don't have that coordination and syncing of the different groups, so you get these either disparate experiences or unhappy surprises down

the road. When you learn that something that group A told you is feasible, Group B says, "Oh, no, that's not actually how the system works. ".

BURROWS: Exactly. Yeah.

APPELT: Yeah. Well, kind of pulling on this idea of the different teams of folks, when you're in these different organizations, have you typically been one of many folks with a behavioural science background, or are you kind of the only one representing that background? And how does that play out in either scenario?

BURROWS: Yeah, there's a range. I guess if we focus on the product designers I've worked with, there is a range. I really think that you can come from any background and I think I say this as someone who has often felt like I am interloping because, you know, I just always felt like, "Oh, well, I don't know, I'm not a product manager. I didn't go to school to be a product manager. I didn't go to school to be a product designer".

And so feeling a little bit of imposter syndrome, I guess about it, like I want to say to anyone who is listening that like even yeah, well, I guess you all have behavioural science backgrounds, but I just want people to realize that there's a lot of value that comes from different perspectives, especially in a discipline like product design. I wouldn't want anyone to feel like they don't have the background for it. Certainly, there are some things that are useful, but so who have I worked with?

I guess like I've seen some people with master's degrees in HCI, so that's human-computer interaction. Obviously, there's like behavioural components there, psychology, but also engineering. So, software engineers who, you know, develop an interest in product design and want to lean in more in that side of things. Former product managers, same deal. Like maybe they are less interested in the business side and more interested in the user side. I've worked with people who majored in economics, art, poetry, and so I think there are a couple of ways to get into it, whether you do or don't have a behavioural science background.

And one is to just find someone who will hire you to give it a shot. And then the other side is there are all these boot camps which, you know, like they're not going to-- you're never going to be totally prepared until you jump in and do it, but at least gives you some idea and it gives you a chance to develop a portfolio. But yeah, I just feel like all backgrounds.

I've been impressed with designers who come from all sorts of backgrounds and maybe like I don't even think that there's like a strong correlation between people who have done stuff in the behavioural sciences versus not for how good they are at design. It's really like an interest in understanding people.

APPELT: Yeah, I think that's also one of the things I love about the applied behavioural science space more generally is the diversity of backgrounds that are feeding into it and how interdisciplinary it is. Like you said, for the variety of folks you work with, our cohorts have similarity had folks who've had MFAs in Fine Arts and there is engineering and hard science, soft science, and social science.

And I think that really actually strengthens everything because you're getting these different perspectives all coming together. That's one of the things I really, really love about the field, and it sounds like that's a similar experience.

BURROWS: Definitely.

APPELT: So you may have already answered this question because I think we touched on it in various pieces. But anything else you want to say about how an understanding of human behaviour plays into the work in the product design and design product development space?

BURROWS: Yeah. I think in so many ways, maybe just like a quick overview, research. So having sort of a toolbox of methods for gathering and synthesizing data, that's extremely valuable. As a quick aside, there is a separate role you'll often see called user experience researcher or user researcher. But as a designer you are probably doing a little bit of that research anyway. So yeah, you still want to have that in your back pocket.

And sometimes there's a UX research team. It's also like not necessarily there for a lot of companies. If there isn't a team then you're doing it anyway. I think it's good that if there is a team you can partner with them really effectively. So, methods for gathering and synthesizing data.

Interviewing is probably one of the most common methods. So being able to read body language, hear those contradictions that I mentioned before, notice what they say versus what they do. Non-leading questions, five whys, all those sorts of things are really helpful. That's kind of like the research side.

That's also for crafting solutions I think very beneficial because as part of having that background, design is all about identifying the root causes for behaviour and then designing products to influence behaviour. So knowing about behaviour allows you to, one, identify things based on your, your background, like behavioural economics principles. You'll notice people doing all the things that you're used to reading about and studying in that field, and then thinking about how you might be able to push people towards the behaviour that they want to do or that the business wants them to do.

There's a whole other conversation there about balancing good and evil with that, that we can maybe get into. But yeah, so I rely on behavioural economics principles and psychological frameworks all the time when I'm developing solutions. And then maybe at a meta-level, it's not to say that because one has studied behaviour that you're necessarily good at this. I mean, my experience, people are at least more aware of, I guess, higher EQ.

This is designed as a very collaboration heavy role, and your interpersonal skills are everything in terms of your success. So how can you bring people along? How can you have very low ego, open, curious, all of that is going to get you so much farther than, you know, the opposite. And I think that's true of everything, but especially design, because you do need to work so interdisciplinary and engage with all kinds of people to come up with the best solution.

APPELT: Absolutely. I find that similarly for most of the applied behavioural science projects, it is very much a team experience and bringing together not just people within a team, across teams like Cross Functional, where people are speaking different quote unquote languages in terms of the acronyms and jargons. And like you said, having that ability to navigate those situations is hugely important.

And something else I did want to pull on, if you're willing to chat about it, is the idea of how do you balance the needs or desires of the consumer up against the business needs or business goals? So how do you navigate that nudge for good nudge for evil divide, or is it even a divide?

BURROWS: Yeah. I mean, yeah, I guess you could at most places it not. Just to be clear. I think most people want to do right by their users while of course, you know, it's a business at the end of the day. And in order to keep doing those things, you need to make some money. How to balance it, I mean, it's just showing up every

day and representing the user. You are their voice. It sounds kind of cheesy, but they aren't there in the room, right?

And so, I think what helps you do this is talking to users all the time and it can feel like a pain. It's like one of those things where it's like, "I got a schedule, I got to find people I've got to send out, you know, like an email or whatever it is to kind of get people into a study or get people to talk to you about the product". But more often, first of all, more often than not, people love to talk to companies, especially if it's a product they are excited about.

You will often get a lot of enthusiasm about it, but two, it is just the most energizing thing to talk to your users. It gets me excited every time, even when I was kind of if dragging my feet about like, "Oh, I've got to set up all these interviews. I do one and I'm just like so excited to do the next one". And so, I think the more you integrate this into your process, you don't get that kind of dragging your feet feeling of the logistics of it all, and that allows you to really kind of empathize and feel what they're feeling. And then it comes to pushing back on maybe business decisions that feel like they're not in the best interests of the user. You can really help paint the picture for the people you're collaborating with.

But I think it's also on you. It's not just to like fight against an idea, but rather it should also give you fuel for bringing a better solution to the table. So don't just say "No, that's a bad idea. We shouldn't do it because it's bad for users", but rather understand what the business is trying to achieve and come to the table with something that will also be good for the user. And that's something just like partnering with your technical colleagues from the beginning so that you're not building something that can't be built or supported or whatever.

You need to have those business things in mind very early on so that hopefully you don't get to the point of like somebody wants to launch something that you think is bad or someone's pressuring you to design something in a particular way. So yeah, know your users, love your users, represent your users and keep business stuff in mind from the beginning so that you can sort of influence things in a way that feels good for everyone.

APPELT: I like that perspective. That makes a lot of sense and I like how it brings away the tension of that, "Is it good? Is it bad?". You're representing the user, so if that's at the core, you can't go wrong. Well, taking a slightly different track, just talking a little bit about this idea of the winding path and what was that transition from academia to the private sector like? Was it fairly seamless? Was there a lot of learning upfront? How did that go? What lessons learned do you have?

BURROWS: It wasn't seamless, but it wasn't like, you know, I'm still doing it right. So, it didn't traumatize me. But I guess like if I could, it's so hard to like take this advice I find when you're, you know, on the receiving end, but I really mean it. And I wish I could have convinced, you know, the younger me of these things, but it's okay to not know stuff. It turns out it's fine.

And I was very intimidated by like the vocabulary and not understanding, like I was a product manager in my first couple of roles. Yeah, but I was like, "What is a product like? What is it like? What am I doing?". Like, I didn't fully understand it and I think that's okay. And so, what I ended up doing, was just like networking and reaching out to people who were in product management and had been longer, and it took me a while to understand, but like I was doing all the things that a product manager does.

I was like, "I don't know if I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing". I was. And it's just a matter of realizing that just feels uncomfortable because I hadn't done it before. And you develop your way of doing things and

your process by doing it. And I think that was maybe a trap that I've seen some people transitioning from academia to private sector they encounter like, "Well, I need to take a class on that because I don't know how to do that". No, you don't. You just-- if someone thinks you can do it, you know, you probably can. You just have to think you can do it really. But I think assuming you need some official training or seal of approval to do a role is like you don't need to wait for that. You can just do it.

I think another thing that was hard for me, this could be just me, although I think I've, you know, I've known enough people in academia. There are at least others out there like me where I think that academia often comes with like this "lone wolf" sort of approach. And I think that is attached to the ego in a way. And I don't mean like that everyone thinks that they're the greatest, but rather like, you know, the outcome for a lot of, you know, the academic track is like, have your own lab, your name is on that lab.

People are like, "Oh, have you heard about this stuff coming out of so-and-so's lab?", and I don't think that's going to take you very far in the private sector. I think stripping yourself away from that and not feeling the need to pretend that, you know, things that you don't know, asking the questions, networking, getting mentorship, which I mean, these things are true in science, in academia as well.

But I think that this collaborative way of approaching things, it took me a while to get there, I guess, and once I did, I was like, "Wow, this is amazing. This is the way it should be. So it should be this way in science, too". The other thing I didn't I at least didn't encounter in my training and I think is the most incredible thing, I think design teams are really good at this, but tech companies in general, I think, asking for and gracefully receiving feedback is a gift. That was very hard for me. And it's very important because you will only get better with feedback. And I think learning how to ask and then learning how to receive, yeah, that's a skill that's worth investing in.

So those are, I think, some of my bumps, maybe one other general area to consider for people making this transition. I didn't have this trouble so much. I think it's why academic science was also not a fit for me because this actually felt more natural. But when you are working in a business, you need to learn how to make decisions without having all of the data and having all of the perfect information. Yes, you should investigate the data. Yes, you should sort of control the variables. You can control to learn, you know, important, insightful bits.

But you're going to have to also make decisions with a little bit of inference, a little bit of a hunch, imperfect experiments, your best guess, all of that and move forward and learn from it and then do it again. I've seen people get really sort of hamstrung or paralyzed by like, "Well, we don't know everything, so how can we do this for sure? What if it's the wrong thing?". And just getting comfortable with that like imperfection, I guess.

APPELT: Yeah, I think those are definitely good takeaways or lessons learned. I think the feedback one is really true. I think the way feedback is presented in academia, it is always in a very judgmental mode or in my experience it has often been in a judgmental mode.

And so, it's hard to take that collaboratively. And so I think we said like that's a different experience when you're in different situations and understanding feedback as, like you said, a gift to help improve what you're doing or the product or whatever is a much better vein or much better feedback practice.

BURROWS: It can be very scary to ask, but yeah there should be training on this in academia, but there's often like trainings about this kind of thing in, in companies. And so that's also helpful when the entire team or company is on the same page about feedback and then becomes a more natural part of your process. But it's hard. It's really hard.

APPELT: So any other insights about the private sector, things that you like about it, things that are challenging working in the private sector?

BURROWS: Yeah, I mean, this is probably true in academia as well, but learning how to balance resources. So, like maybe you could do this really cool thing if only someone from the data science team could work with you. But the data science team has a bunch of other higher priority projects, so figuring out how to still deliver value while, you know, not getting the full resources you would prefer for a project.

So that's challenging. We already talked about balancing business and user needs. It's challenging, but it's also, I think, there's creativity and constraints. So, I think it's actually also kind of fun to think about how to balance those things. Coordinating across the company. I've often worked at companies that are kind of in this like going from start up to scale up and there's like a lot of growing pains associated with how to coordinate across this growing company, you know, like new departments, more teams, more functions that didn't exist before. I think making sure everyone's moving in the same direction and communicating what you're doing to the right people at the right time is really important.

One thing I've encountered is actually more in Europe than here, but the role and the value of design specifically can be challenging. So, like basically gets back to what I mentioned very early on in this chat of like design isn't pretty pictures, it isn't like, so as part of my job, I'm often delivering sort of high fidelity mock ups of what the app will look like.

You know, "This button looks like this. When you push this, this happens", like all of those bits, helping, bringing people along to help them understand that like the design isn't this like beautiful rendering that I've created, the design is that I talk to people, I figured out what we needed to actually build and then going through and refining the design so that actually has the impact we wanted to have or what we assume it will have. And then this beautiful like mock up is the deliverable that came out of all of that.

I think helping people understand why you're there and what is like sort of like a downstream output, if that makes sense. I think all the stuff we just touched on, which is learning to ask questions and collaborating and sharing early and often, even those like ugly first ideas that won't actually work, but then getting feedback on them so that you can go in the right direction. So I think that's been the challenging stuff.

What I like is you get to move quickly, sometimes quicker than you want. But like compared to academia where I, I knew that I wasn't enjoying the day to day. This is just me. And I know that like some people find a lot of joy in the day to day of academic research science. I wasn't enjoying that. And then when my first first-author paper was published in like my third year, and I felt nothing like maybe this pace wasn't for me. So, I really love getting to move quickly in the private sector.

And that's, to be fair, that's not true everywhere. If you're working at a behemoth of a company, you might be working just as slowly. But you know, there's a spot for everyone. I like seeing the difference that you're making, so especially if you're aligned with the mission of your company. And for me, that's always been important of like caring about what the company is actually putting out into the world.

And so, seeing that the things you're designing are having this impact on people is really cool. And sometimes a lot of people like, if it's a big company, you have a lot of users you can say like, "Wow, I designed this thing and tens of millions of people are using it". I think there are a lot of interesting problems too.

And you don't have to specialize like you can be kind of a domain expert like health care or mobility.

Those are kind of the spaces I've been in. But you can also change later. Like you have this set of skills, product design, behaviour design, whatever that are applicable in many different domains. And so I think compared to academic research science, there's a little more flexibility there to go for the problems that excite you without feeling constrained to what you've done before.

APPELT: Yeah, that's one of the things I really love about the applied part of behavioural science is just each problem you work on is so different. Even if you work on two problems in health, one may be reducing antibiotic use, another might be increasing vaccination. And then that's just like the problems, the more you get into them, the more you learn. And then it just always keeps it interesting.

Well, we've used up a lot of your time today, so I'll move to our final couple of questions. And the penultimate question is, do you have a message for our new BI practitioners in training, folks who are just starting out in the Applied Behavioural Sciences?

BURROWS: Yeah, you can do it. Your skills are valuable. I think I hear a lot of doubt from people who want to make this jump and I had the same doubt. But trust me, like people, people want behavioural science backgrounds for a lot of different roles. And it's not just product design. So yeah, don't doubt yourself. You're needed, you're valuable, that feedback piece like learn that one early, earlier than I did.

It's super scary but it's so, it's so valuable and I think it's part of that, well connected to that I would say network so like as you encounter people on LinkedIn let's say, or you know, maybe you go to a meet up, follow up and have a conversation. People are really, really open to talking and giving sort of their perspective on your journey. And I think that's something to be doing from the very beginning. Yeah. Just don't be too academic. Like I said, like nothing, no experiment is perfect. You'll never have all the information you want and just learn to kind of balance those things. And yeah, you'll be good.

APPELT: Those are perfect. And any last thoughts, questions I should have asked and didn't? Anything else you wanted to say?

BURROWS: Yeah. I think I'd be happy to get into, like, more specifics of where behaviour has come into the roles I've had before. But I don't know. We've also covered a lot of different bits so, yeah. I don't know. I'm happy to also chat, if anyone wants to reach out, if I can offer some perspective on that networking note, I'm happy to be one of those people for anyone who finds themselves a little bit lost, I know what it feels like.

APPELT: I'm sure people would love that, so thank you for that. And more generally, thank you for all of your time and energy and insight and wisdom today. It has been really neat because I feel like I'm often adjacent to design work, but I don't ever get that real deep dive into what it is. So, it's been really interesting to hear all about what you've been up to and so exciting to see, to interface with you every few years and see what you're working on. So, it's really interesting to see how you're in the transportation space now, and I'm excited to see what you do and what you do next. Thank you for joining us today.

BURROWS: Yeah, thank you so much. This was great.

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