



Episode 76: "BI in Canada, Across Sectors and Organizations"

with Meera Paleja, Program Head for Investor Research and Behavioural Insights at the Ontario Securities Commission

Over the last decade, Meera Paleja has worked in academia, management consulting, and different levels of government. Drawing on her diverse experiences, Meera shares a high-level look at BI in Canada and walks us through the similarities and differences in BI challenges and methods across organizations and sectors. We also talk about the benefits of bringing BI academics and practitioners together to enrich each other's work.

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 Meera Paleja.

Meera is the Program Head for Investor Research and Behavioural Insights at the Ontario Securities Commission. Since getting her PhD in Psychology, Meera has worked with almost every top-tier BI organization with an Ontario office. I'm not going to list them all now because we'll get into it a bit as we chat, but I'll just say that Meera is like a BI wizard helping organizations along in their BI journeys. She's worked at different levels of government, in the private sector, academia, you name it.

So today, I'm looking forward to exploring the BI landscape with someone who has been all over the map, in the best way. So, welcome to the podcast, Meera.

MEERA PALEJA, GUEST: Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

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

PALEJA: For sure. My name is Meera Paleja, and I am the Program Head of Investor Research and Behavioural Insights at the Ontario Securities Commission. And here, I am leading a multidisciplinary team of researchers looking at behaviours, attitudes of investors, and tackling behaviour related challenges in the context of securities regulation. And this is really to further the overseas investor protection mandate.

In the past, I have worked in various behavioural insights units within the federal government, also Ontario Behavioural Insights Unit and management consulting. And my academic background is in neuroscience and I have a PhD and a Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Cognitive Neuroscience, very specialized in memory and decision-making.

APPELT: Awesome. Well, that makes me segue right into my next question, which is a lot of folks in behavioural science have a winding path that's brought them to BI. But from the outside, your path seems a bit more linear than the average path. Does it feel that way to you? What was your journey to behavioural science?

PALEJA: So it's funny because from the outside it does look linear, but I didn't actually feel that way a decade ago when I knew I was leaving academia. So when I was doing my post-doc in Neuroscience and kind of at a crossroads about whether I wanted to stay in academia or pursue something else, I had consulted a career counsellor, and I told her I felt I was actually going too far outside of my expertise to explore this interesting, up and coming area known as behavioural insights.

And that's because behavioural insights seem so practical and applied, and my research was very theoretical. It was, you know, putting people in MRI machines and looking at patterns of brain activity when they're completing a highly specific, specialized task. And so for me, and at that time in my mind, it was a leap, and the career counsellor gave me good advice, which was that it wasn't, and that people in industry wouldn't regard it as such. And I think she ended up being right because I think the fundamentals of doing research in an academic background lends itself to apply behavioural science very well, regardless of what your particular area of expertise is.

APPELT: Yeah, I'm laughing because I 100% agree. I think in academia we're trained to work in such narrow niches that we really think of the world that way. And then when you step out of that, you realize all the interconnections and the ways that things can apply. And like you said, the skill set underneath is so applicable to so many.

So I had a similar thing of like in academia, if you're a Psychologist, you wouldn't even think of yourself as a Behavioural Economist. And then you learn in the outside world a lot of those terms are used more synonymously, than they might be inside academia.

PALEJA: Exactly.

APPELT: Alright. So let's talk a little bit about this diverse portfolio, this linear/non-linear journey you've had. So as a PhD student, post-doc, instructor, you were in academia, you were at BEWorks, which is kind of Canada's original private sector BI consultancy. In Ontario, you were in the Treasury Board Secretariat for the province. You were also in the Federal Treasury Board Secretariat, worked in Canada's Privy Council Office at the Public Health Agency of Canada, and now you're at the Ontario Securities Commission.

And before we zoom into some of those, I'd like to just look at the zoomed-out level. As someone who has been working in BI, really since the field got its foothold in Canada, what do you see? What has been the trajectory for BI in Canada over the last decade or so and kind of where are we now?

PALEJA: So, you know, what I've witnessed in the past decade has really been quite astounding when it comes to BI. So there was a time where everybody thought behavioural insights is running focus groups and surveys, and that's about it. And as a consultant, in the early days when I was at BEWorks, sometimes it was about helping folks understand and making dual-system theory accessible, you know, talking about experimentation and other ways of thinking about solving challenges that was simply not a way that people solved challenges in their context. And it was a thing that people were completely unfamiliar with.

So in those days, I worked with a kind of diverse array of clients as a management consultant. Most folks were completely unfamiliar with what they were doing. But at the time, there were kind of popular books out on behavioural science where there was some interest, but people didn't know what it would involve.

Now, I think we're at a point where many of those organizations I talked to in those early days, organizations we were working with, organizations we were pitching, have now not only come to embrace behavioural

insights at the executive levels, but many of them have also embedded behavioural insights functions in their organizations. So we have really come a long way in the past decade, and I think people have really embraced the value of what behavioural insights could offer them.

APPELT: Yeah, I would absolutely agree. I remember when I was first coming into Canada about a decade ago and trying to tell people about my area of expertise, you got a lot of blank stares and now it's like the opposite problem. There's so many folks who are eager that we can't say yes to everything we'd love to say yes to.

So you have this amazingly diverse portfolio and have applied BI to challenges across sectors, and I'm curious at a high level, just to kind of do some comparison, does the work present differently in different areas? Do you see the value of BI differently? Do you talk about the value of BI differently when you're working in areas like health or finance or any of the other places you worked?

PALEJA: Yeah. So, I think that there are differences across sector. I think that in terms of my training and our training as behavioural scientists, I think that we see these problems and these domains in terms of what is the underlying cognitive process, like what could we be solving for, across these varied domains. So I don't want to say the domain itself becomes negligible, like it doesn't.

But, you know, from my perspective, I think of it as like the brain treats risk in domains such as health and financial decision making in a very similar way. So from, you know, my vantage point, I think that there are more similarities and differences across sectors. But, you know, I think that ultimately, depending on what organization you're in, there are different considerations on a practical level. And there are different kind of lenses that an organization uses to decide what's important and what's not.

So when I worked in Public Health Agency, for example, there was an emphasis placed on understanding the systemic factors that could be involved in health outcomes. So that was, I don't want to say a departure, but it is a little bit different from the individual level lens around individual decision making that BI is often framing problems as.

So it was like there was kind of this repeated reminder that we should be considering the systemic factors when it comes to these outcomes and not kind of isolating in terms of individual level behaviours. And that was an important consideration in that health context that has been something that in other domains that I've worked in, not to say it hasn't been a consideration, that was particularly a salient consideration in health. But something like the financial realm that I'm currently in, securities regulation, there are other kind of lenses and things that we need to consider.

So in securities regulation, the bedrock is disclosure and disclosure statements. And so one could argue that the concept of disclosure is really consistent with this model of human cognition as inherently rational, that we're going to take the time and the energy to review disclosures. And so, you know, and I think that it's worthwhile kind of considering the context of the space you're operating in, where, like the assumption is that this is the way people are thinking of information, or that folks in your organization are thinking about the way to carry out these behavioural changes that they might want to see, and you know, as behavioural scientists, we just have to be aware that we're coming into a context where this is kind of the approaches that have been used until now. So there are various kinds of different considerations that come up as you move from organization to organization and context to context.

APPELT: That makes a lot of sense. And the point about being more similarities than differences makes total sense because at the end of the day, it's the same human decision makers who are, you know, all of us are

making health decisions and financial decisions and other decisions. So of course, some of the biases we have in one domain, would apply in other domains.

So that makes a lot of sense. And then I like your point about different sectors bringing in different considerations. And I think that also speaks a little bit to something we'll talk about later, which is just the evolution of the field and the idea that as we're working in different domains, we're pulling ideas from these domains and it's enriching BI because now that you've thought more deeply about systemic lens on things, I'm sure that affects your later projects as well.

So I love that interplay and how everything is coming together. So you talked a little bit about differences and similarities in the application of BI. I'm also curious about methodological differences. Are you using different project processes, different methods, different emphases as you go through a project when you're working in different sectors?

PALEJA: Yeah. So there are a whole bunch of ways, different kinds of ways BI is practiced depending on the organization. And the reasons for those differences are varied. But some of the differences that I've observed is that some behavioural insights units are really emphasizing field experiments. So Ontario Behavioural Insights Unit has done a whole array of fabulous, applied field experimentation. And then there are other units that practice primarily hypothetical online experiments.

So this would be the case for Ontario Securities Commission, where I currently am, where many of our experiments are kind of online, asking about hypothetical decisions, and others use kind of mixed methods or various methods, they may include a qualitative lens.

So one example of that is the Office of the Chief of Human Resources Officer inside the Federal Treasury Board. So when I was there, you know, we were working on self-identification and using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. So there are various ways that behavioural insights is practiced.

Some of the things that we typically think about when we're deciding what's the best approach in a unit are things like if we're deciding whether we can run a field experiment, the obvious question is "Do we have touch points? Is there a point of interface for interaction with the folks whose behaviour we're trying to change? Do we have the data available? Are we able to track between the administration of the interventions and the outcomes?"

And those can be very real limitations in an applied context where sometimes it is a little bit like the stars have to align to be able to run a field experiment, but where you can't run a field experiment, there are always alternative options to really derive some evidence-based insights where there wouldn't have previously been any.

APPELT: Absolutely. Yeah. And I like how you kind of branched out from kind of the standard, we talk about, oh, quantitative versus qualitative, but there is more richness in there besides just those two options and within those options and combining those options. And it's nice to see the field, I think again, as we been talking about the evolution, we're starting to see it used in more nuanced ways and in ways that fit the sectors and challenges it's being used on. Are there other differences or similarities that you think are worth talking about when we're thinking about working in different sectors?

PALEJA: Overall, I would say that there are more similarities than differences, and I think part of the reason for that is that everywhere that I have gone that has a behavioural insights unit, the folks on that team have

typically been specialists in behavioural insights or some kind of research-related methodology. And what we have typically done is we've worked with the subject matter experts.

So in government, this would be the policy or the program area. So we've had access to that knowledge and we're kind of bringing the lens of a behavioural lens and they're bringing the subject matter expertise, and those kind of specific, tangible policy considerations that we wouldn't have the knowledge from at the outset.

So, you know, I found that that tends to be the dynamic, and that's why I haven't found the transition between units to be as challenging as someone might think. You know, some people are like, "Oh, how could you be in finance? It's like you came from health" and it's like, "Well, it actually is not that big of a leap when you have the common thread of human behaviour", right, that you're looking at.

APPELT: Absolutely. Yeah. And I think again, I always talk about the various things I love about BI, but that's one of the ones for me is definitely how because it's this toolkit where you can apply it to different challenges, it means that as people who work in the BI space, we can apply it to so many different challenges. And so you're never doing the same project twice.

Like you said, you might be on a health project one day, a finance project the next day, and then anti-racism the third day. And so it's just never dull. You're always learning. And I always talk about how at the beginning of a project I often have my little dictionary where you learn the jargon for that area, they're acronyms. And so it's constant learning and makes it so interesting.

PALEJA: It does. And you also get a better sense of how people in those fields have been approaching the problems. And, you know, I take the approach of like we're learning from everybody else as much as they're learning from us and we're always finding things that the subject matter experts can lend to our practice as well.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. The interplay of learning is really special about BI. That brings me to some questions about how BI is structured in organizations, because you worked at different organizations, different sizes and structures.

How have you seen the practice of BI be adopted as a, you know, consulting unit model? Is it distributed BI experts? What are the different ways BI is being used in organizations?

PALEJA: Yeah, so there are various different kinds of models. Some of these models I wrote about in a chapter for the book, *Psychology and Behavioral Economics*, that was edited by Kai Ruggeri. And so here, myself and my coauthors, Elizabeth Hardy and Haris Khan, who were previously working with me at Privy Council office, we had written about the different kinds of models that exist, and there were a few that we identified and that we had observed. So there are some that are relatively more embedded in policy and program areas. So, you know, sometimes there's an effort made in an organization to kind of mainstream behavioural science.

And on a practical level, there are many ways to actually do that. One approach has been putting behavioural scientists on different teams, like different behavioural scientists, and so they're always kind of providing that lens to every policy and program area. There are other units that operate more like consultancies. So they're centrally housed and they provide insights across different policy and program areas. So they work on a more diverse range of problems.

So an example of this is Ontario Behavioural Insights Unit, centrally located. They work with various groups in government, so one day it could be a health project, next day it's social services, another day it's something

else. And then, there are more kind of blended models. And I think a really interesting example of this is the one Privy Council has with their fellowship program, where you have fellows who are experts in behavioral science that are housed in Privy Council office, but they do these placements in various departments around the Federal government.

So it's a little bit of a blended model in the sense that there's a common place where all the behavioral scientists are, and that's their team. They're also kind of deployed to work on specific problems and in specific departments and become more embedded in those contexts. So I think there are various approaches that different units and different levels of government use.

APPELT: And based on your experience, do you see that there are certain matches between models and contexts where things work better or worse, or what do you see?

PALEJA: So my observation is that there is not always practical value to using behavioural insights in every single context, right. And every single thing that a policy and program area is working in, behavioural insights isn't necessarily always the lens that should be used. There are places where it is a great option. There are places where, you know, you just don't want to be in a position where you're trying to force behavioural insights where it doesn't necessarily fit.

So that's like one potential risk of an embedded model where sometimes it's, you know, there's this feeling of like, we have to find a place to talk about behavioural insights in this conversation. And I think there's a limited amount of work that can be done. So sometimes there's a sense that there are not always the opportunities to apply behavioural insights that just come up organically and in these policy and program areas.

A better approach, generally what I've seen, is the consultancy model, because that allows you to kind of find the areas that present with ripe opportunities for behavioural science. So it kind of lets you seek that out a little more and find places where behavioural insights really has the potential to make an impact. And because you're reaching more potential people, there's a kind of steady volume of work, generally speaking, because there are a number of areas you can contribute, so you're just increasing the size of that pool.

But ultimately, it's really going to depend on the context. If you are in a department, a level of government, an organization where you are embedded somewhere where there is expected to be a really steady stream of problems, where human behaviour is very central and behavioural insights would be, you know, used in most, if not all contexts, then the embedded model makes sense. But it really depends on the situation.

APPELT: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. This tension between you want to be able to apply BI everywhere it's applicable, but you don't want to apply it where it's not applicable. And so how do you balance that? And so like you said, that consultancy or the blended model make a lot of sense there.

So talking about the different models that work in different contexts, another thing we see that plays out differently in different places is the linkages between academia and the major part of the world that's outside of academia. And I think compared to some fields, there are stronger linkages between work that's being done in an academic setting and work that's being done in non-academic settings. What partnership models have you seen between those two different groups, the academics and the folks who are practicing in different settings?

PALEJA: Yes. So what stood out to me as a really good formalized partnership model was BIORg from the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. And so I felt that this initiative really made great strides connecting practitioners and academics. There was collaboration on projects, carrying out knowledge

mobilization efforts, so there were events, books, publications that came out of that that I think were really, really valuable. And I think just having those kinds of hubs, and universities are a great place to have a hub for academics and practitioners from all different kinds of organizations to come together, I think there's a lot of value in models like that.

But I think I've also seen different kinds of partnership models where, for example, as simple as having an academic as a consultant on a behavioural insights project, with a practitioner's organization, I think there's a lot of value in that because that's a lens that can really help situate a potential project or intervention in the theory and the latest research.

And sometimes it's hard on a day-to-day level for practitioners to keep up with the latest research. Sometimes, the nature of the job is just a little bit different that you know, we kind of know the highlights, but we're not in the thick of what are the latest papers to come out and the details of the latest papers and the caveats of the latest papers. And I think that's where having academics as consultants is really valuable.

And then I've also seen through different courses, undergraduate courses, MBA graduate courses, I think when academics make an effort to bring practitioners in, I think those are really valuable because not only does it get the students exposure to the way this work might manifest outside of academia, but I think it kind of helps strengthen those collaborations between the practitioners and the university and opportunities to find potential synergies.

APPELT: Yeah, going back to that idea of joint learning, we mentioned a while back of this idea that it isn't a one way flow of knowledge, the knowledge is flowing both ways and both audiences have so much to learn from each other and so there's a lot of value. Are there also gaps that you see. Are there gaps in how either practitioners apply academic research or how academics apply knowledge or research coming from practitioners?

PALEJA: Yeah. I think that there are always gaps. I think some of the gaps I am comfortable with, because I think that fundamentally, in some ways, depending on the nature of the academic research, that there are different questions that are being asked.

So sometimes for academics, the goal is to inform a theory and build upon a theory, whereas for the practitioners, the goal is often to find what intervention works in terms of some behavioural goal. And so in that sense, I think that those differences, it makes sense that they are there. But I think one of the things I've noticed is that sometimes I think there's an expectation from practitioners that the findings from highly controlled academic studies can always be replicated, and that might not be true.

So I think that there are different contexts and different fundamentals of the experiment that might explain why something didn't replicate. And I think in many cases that's fine. So that's different from situations where there's fraudulent data and that's the reason it's not replicating. So that's a completely different issue.

But I think there are a lot of considerations around a specific context that you're now running this in. You have less control over your experiment, your discrete conditions that can lend themselves to very different results, and that's okay, right? Because ultimately you're kind of looking at a different question.

APPELT: Yeah. So in some ways, it's not so much gaps as just differences, because again, going back to the idea we talked about before, about you have to fit the context. So different ideas, different models, different processes, different research designs will make sense in different contexts, and it's more just about continuing to learn from each other and see the areas for mutual learning and for complementary work.

Are there places where you think there are opportunities for practitioner-academic partnerships that we're not currently taking as much advantage of as we could? Are there places where we could get more value from these kinds of partnerships?

PALEJA: Yeah, I think in terms of what I had mentioned, in terms of the university being a really good spot, a really good hub, it's kind of perceived as just more of like a neutral, collaborative space where it's really like the curiosity that's bringing folks together and needing to learn.

It's a little bit different than another organization hosting something, and there might be like various dynamics involved. But I think that where there are opportunities for academic hubs to kind of bring folks together, I think that often presents itself as a really good opportunity for folks who might not connect otherwise to come together and talk about their mutual interest in behavioural insights.

APPELT: Yeah. Going back to what you were saying before, when we were talking about how BI is this tool kit and it can be applied to different challenges, it also makes sense that a university is kind of a neutral hub in multiple senses of the word neutral, where there were more working across those sectors, where organizations tend to be more specialized in the university, if we're looking at the underlying behaviour or the underlying question, we might be able to do some convening that wouldn't naturally happen in other ways, so that's a great point.

PALEJA: Yeah, that that's true. And that's, you know, as me, as working in the financial regulatory space, there wouldn't necessarily be a certain conference or something like that where I would just naturally have a place to have a chat with folks like my former colleagues at Public Health Agency right, outside of something that's behavioural insights related.

And so and that's why, you know, folks that are practicing behavioural insights in different domains, that's where I tend to see them is at these conferences and these events that are typically hosted by academic institutions.

APPELT: Yeah. And then again, going back to that idea of just because you learn so much from working in different sectors, I think it's so valuable to bring people who are working on BI in these different sectors. I think we're seeing, and this is a bit of a segue to my next question, but I think we're seeing the field really evolve a lot. And I think part of that is because we're bringing in these ideas from other challenges as we work on them, and then helping spread ideas between sectors and applied areas.

So opening up that question to you, we've talked about growth in Canada of BI over the last decade, but looking at where we are now, looking at the next five, ten years, what are you seeing on the horizon for BI in Canada and what are you excited about?

PALEJA: Yeah. So, I think that over the next little while in BI in Canada, I think that we'll continue to refine our models, our methodologies. What's the optimal place for behavioural scientists to be housed? What's the best way for them to get that reach in an organization and for the practice to get reach in an organization?

And I think that we will continually work on improving the way we are linking our research findings with some kind of outcome in policy. And I think that that is something I kind of see as a recurring theme that when I'm presenting research, there's always the question around, well, you know, "What's happening with the policy, and as an organization, have you done any anything to actually put this into practice?"

And I think that is going to be a continual kind of question is just around the scaling of our findings and ensuring that we are actually able to put our findings out there in a way that can ultimately make people's lives better. So I think that's going to be kind of a recurring theme, something that we continue to aim for.

APPELT: Yeah, I love that as a theme because it does feel a little full circle because a lot of being Canada was pioneered with the help of folks like Dilip Soman, who famously wrote "The Last Mile", which was about individual behaviour change and the problem of the last mile towards getting something done. And now we're kind of looking at BI as a field, and one of our more last mile problems is that scaling piece and how do we actually get things scaled and implemented into policy.

So we've gone from kind of the individual last mile to now as a field our last mile, which I'm sure we'll have other miles after that. But it's exciting to think about how that has all grown and continues to grow. Well, do you have a message for our new BI practitioners in training? One of my traditional last questions.

PALEJA: Yeah, I do. So I think that one thing I would suggest for BI practitioners in training is that, you know, Kirstin, I would be curious to kind of hear your opinion on this as well, but from my perspective, I have a lot of students that ask, "Do you need a PhD, and do you need a PhD in psychology or in economics to be able to be a practitioner in this field?"

And from my perspective, and when I'm hiring, my main focus is around, of course, the technical aspect is important that you possess the technical knowledge, but a lot of it is about the way you communicate findings, the way you present your findings, framing things so that people on the receiving end of that information can understand that you're giving them something tangible to work with. And so I think there are a whole host of kind of soft skills that are really important in addition to working on those technical skills.

So, my answer to that question is no, I don't necessarily think you need to have a PhD, I think that there's a lot of value that different folks with different backgrounds can add to this field.

APPELT: Yeah, I absolutely agree. I think one of our themes is complementarity today. And so I think that's a place where I would say if you had a field that had no folks with PhDs, I wouldn't want to be in that space, but I also don't want to be working in a space where there are only PhDs because I think both sides, different backgrounds, all bring a lot of skills and experiences and expertise. And academia is changing, but a lot of academic programs are training people to become academics. And so you don't necessarily get exposure to field studies explain results in a way that will make sense to an audience who has no understanding of, for example, what a p-value is.

And so how do you communicate value, is skills that people with PhDs can develop, but they aren't necessarily taught as part of the traditional PhD program, whereas folks who come from other backgrounds might have those skills. And so again, I think it's complementary to have folks with different backgrounds.

So, I think things like, of course, our Certificate program or various Master's programs or other programs as long as you get an understanding of behaviour and research design and then there's different positions with different levels of requirements. So I think there's a whole host of opportunities out there without PhDs.

PALEJA: Absolutely.

APPELT: Well, thank you, Meera. That is a wonderful note to end on, our continuing idea of complementarity and how we can all work together. I'm really thrilled we had the chance to chat today. I feel like we've barely scratched the surface, and I hope we can have more conversations in the future.

But in the meantime, I know BI in Canada is in the best of hands with people like you at the wheel. So thank you for being so generous with your time and energy today.

PALEJA: Thank you so much, Kirstin. Really appreciate chatting with you today. It's been great.

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