Episode 8: "Perspectives from a BI Academic, Consultant, Client, and Practitioner"

with Christine Kormos, Senior Behavioural Scientist with the BC Behavioural Insights Group (BC BIG)

Christine Kormos may be the most well-rounded BI practitioner in BC! Christine started her career as an academic pursuing a PhD in psychology and is now a behavioural scientist with BC BIG. Along the way, she's worked as a BI consultant and as a BI project client. Christine shares the inside scoop as she compares and contrasts the various roles and their approaches to BI.

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 Christine Kormos, Senior Behavioural Scientist with the BC Behavioural Insights Group.

It's wonderful to have Christine on the podcast today. She's someone who's joined our growing BI community over the last couple of years, and we first met almost a year ago at the 2019 BIG Difference BC Conference. And this summer, the team at BC BIG was lucky enough to bring Christine onboard, proving that 2020 isn't all bad. And on a personal note, I'm looking forward to this conversation because we always have so much to chat about, but so few opportunities to actually chat. So welcome to the podcast, Christine.

CHRISTINE KORMOS, GUEST: Oh, well, thank you. Hello. Thanks for that warm welcome and it's nice to be here.

APPELT: Excellent. So can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and your current BI role.

KORMOS: Going back in time, I have an undergrad in Bio and Psych, and then I have a Master's and PhD in Applied Social and Environmental Psychology. And I've also worked as a consultant, a behavioural science and behavioural economics consultant. So, yeah, I guess my sort of initial kind of foray into government really was last year when I started working with the Ministry of Agriculture as a Mitacs Science Policy Fellow. And then, as you mentioned, I was very fortunate to come on board with BIG in June.

So, yeah, in terms of my current role, really, I work in close collaboration with various colleagues at BIG, most often with one of two Methods Specialists on the team. We work on various projects and really the goal is to support client ministries, including crown corporations, by applying insights from the behavioural sciences to better understand how people make decisions in their day to day lives and ultimately to try to improve public sector programs and services. My specific role is really trying to kind of initially assess the viability of projects, exploring whether there's actually an opportunity there for experimentation and if so, designing the experiment and then ideally analyzing the subsequent data.

APPELT: What led you to a career using behavioural insights?

KORMOS: Yeah. I actually, I love this question. And it's interesting because I was thinking about it and I think that there's two kinds of components here. There's what led me to a career focused on behavioural insights,

and then there's what led me to a career using behavioural insights. I really sort of see there as being a demarcation there and a distinction between the two. But I'll get to that in a moment. So, again, traveling back in time, my journey kind of started as a biology intern during my undergrad, and I pretty quickly realized that it was actually human behaviour that I was most interested in. And so rather than looking at the kind of downstream effects, I'm looking upstream at what are the factors that are causing people to make the decisions that they're making, which are then in turn having the impacts that are being had on the environment.

I think really what kind of has driven me since that time is just a strong curiosity about human behaviour and a sort of underlying intrigue about why people sometimes don't do what they intend to do and why they sometimes don't do really what's in their best interest or what we might think they will do. It's sort of this intrigue about, you know, “Why is it that we do the things we do?” and I find this intriguing in my own personal life when I don't do the things that I think I should do, like exercise more often, but we won't talk about that. And so, yeah, it's really essentially that drive to better understand that really has sort of led me to this career.

But coupled with that, I sort of have a long history of trying to conduct research that's as applied as possible. And given that my journey started in Psychology, it was interesting because initially I felt this kind of tension between me wanting my research to be applied, and then me receiving the feedback that behaviourism was dead. And I just felt in my gut, but behaviourism can't be dead because this is the essential, fundamental of ultimately what we're trying to do with a lot of this work. I'm not saying that it's not important to understand attitudes and opinions and these factors that underlie behaviour, but ultimately, if you're trying to understand those things so that you can understand behaviour, then really that's the ticket. You know, that's what you want to really understand. I think I very quickly sort of narrowed in my focus on behaviour itself as this sort of gold standard metric that I wanted to better understand and to ultimately try to help change for the better.

I had this kind of long-standing suspicion that self reported behaviour perhaps didn't map very well onto objective behaviour. Of course, in psychology, you know, self report measures, they are in a lot of disciplines. They're used all the time. They're easy to use. They're cheap. There's a lot of benefits. They're very flexible. And so, it's tempting to turn a blind eye to their shortcomings because they have all these wonderful advantages. We want them to be valid measures. But ultimately, if the goal is really to design interventions that are changing objective behaviour, then I sort of had this suspicion like, “Wait a minute. We can't just be measuring self reported behaviour. We have to go all the way”. Part of my journey is that the suspicion that I had led me to conduct a meta-analysis looking at the association between self reported and objective measures of sustainability behaviour. And I was quite shocked, honestly, to find out that 79% of variance between those two metrics remained unexplained between each other. I found this massive array of heterogeneity or variance among studies that had included both measures of the same behaviour in the same people.

So really, that kind of sealed the deal for me. I think once I found that, I was kind of sold on the value of objective measures. But beyond that, I really just have a strong desire to help people. To try to simply improve outcomes for people and for places. I think behavioural insights is a way that I can apply my knowledge and skills to really try to be helpful and to have an impact. Over the years, I've just come to sort of realize repeatedly that many, many of the issues that we face in various sectors of public policy, programs, et cetera, our own lives, they're ultimately related to behaviour, and that decision making lays at the core of so many of these problems, and so by association, decision making also lays at the core of our potential opportunities and solutions. So, this is what has driven me.

APPELT: I love that answer, you brought up so many excellent points and they really resonated with me. I like the idea of, that doesn't explain what we're actually doing. And that really is the realization that it's not just them, it's us. Like we are doing these same things. So, you know, why are we all doing these things when it's not in our best interest? And also, why is what we are reporting about ourselves not lining up. And I'm impressed that you were even able to find that much coherence between self report and an actual behaviour. One of my projects, the correlation was zero, so real discrepancy.

And then also just your message about, I find that so many of us in this area, we're really interested in helping people. And it's really amazing that this field can have such a pro-social impact on people, even whether it's small or large things, they can improve people's health, wealth and happiness. And that's just really rewarding.

KORMOS: For sure.

APPELT: You've already gone a bit into what's involved in your role, maybe could you tell us a bit about what are your favourite parts of being a behavioural scientist?

KORMOS: Sure. Yeah, I guess kind of what I maybe perhaps have already alluded to a little bit, but just kind of the intrigue. I love the excitement of analyzing data. I love that moment when you have your data back and you're like going to do the analysis and you don't know what's going to happen. And it's you know, it's like surprisingly dramatic. I find that it, I personally find that it's exciting, I guess I would use that word.

I also really like the variety. This is something that I realized was lacking for me a little bit in my previous, more academic, role. I found that I wasn't really being exposed to the kind of variety of projects that I would have liked. I was more sort of focused on a specific area, which in my case was sustainable transportation, which I loved, and it was very fascinating. But I kind of had to ask myself, you know, “Can I focus on transportation for the rest of my life?”. And for me, that wouldn't have been as rewarding for me, also on the level of just sort of stimulating my own intellectual curiosity and keeping me engaged in the kind of work that I'm doing, as engaged as I would like to be, which is when I feel I can do my best work. I suppose I love the variety. I like how dynamic the position is. You know, that things are always kind of changing. There is like new challenges all the time, which keeps it really interesting.

I also love the teamwork aspect of it. My own personal opinion was that I had come to feel that in my role as more of an academic, I felt that it was a little bit too solitary, even though I was working on a lot of teams and team-based projects, the vast majority of my work, I was kind of by myself. I felt that it wasn't as motivational as I would have liked. I really enjoy working within a team and feeding off of other members of the team. And I feel like I really benefit from that as well, not only in terms of the quality of the work that's produced, you know, more heads are better than one for sure. But also, just in terms of my day-to-day enjoyment with life, which ultimately, it's what we all want, right?

And I would also say too and I know I kind of alluded to this earlier as well, but I really enjoy helping clients, kind of the service orientation. I think it's exciting meeting with clients when they're able to kind of talk about what the problems are that they're having. And sometimes they're not exactly sure, they know something's a problem, but they don't really know exactly what it is. It's like it requires a little bit of almost detective work sometimes to really get to the heart of “What is the crux of the issue here? What is the behavioural challenge that's underlying this problem? And how can we all work together to try to address this issue?”. I find it to be really exciting. For me, being a behavioral scientist is actually a dream role for me because it allows me to incorporate elements from academia that I love, with other aspects of being a practitioner, which I love as well, the more applied, service-oriented aspect of things. The dynamic nature. For me, it's a way to sort of merge the best of several worlds.

APPELT: That's wonderful, and I love that you use the metaphor of detective work as well, because I often use that when I'm explaining to people kind of what's involved. And I think it also is really nice in terms of something we've been talking about in the program, which is this idea that it is detective work and that means upfront that there is going to be some amount of iteration and figuring things out and realizing, you know, we are going down one path and "Oh, no, now that we have this new information, we need to go on another path". It's kind of like, you know, the classic red herring in a in a detective movie. And so sometimes there is a temptation to kind of like-- this is the problem, and kind of cease and freeze. Like we've got it. Let's go forward. But it is worthwhile to spend that time figuring out the problem and pivoting and then actually getting to what the real problem is or which of the real problems that can actually be tackled successfully with a project and that time is so valuably spent. I think that's a really valuable point.

And then I also liked your point about variety, because I find that too that it's just constantly being exposed to new ideas, new acronyms, new language. And it makes it a really rewarding pursuit to have that variety and meeting the different people and working together. So totally echo what you're saying. It's a wonderful dream role, but I'm sure there are some aspects that are tricky. What are some aspects of the role that you find tricky?

KOROMS: Well, how long do we have? No, just kidding. Yeah. I mean, certainly just like with any position, you know for sure there are many aspects that that can be tricky. And ironically, some of the aspects about the role that make it a dream role for me also make it tricky. It can be sort of a double-edged sword. Like, for example, the aspect of variety. Variety is great. But variety can also mean that it can be very demanding. If you feel that there are many balls in the air at the same time, you know, it can be hard to balance these kinds of competing priorities, many different projects on the go. It can be difficult.

I also find that it can be tricky if you feel that you need to sell science. I think to some degree, given that behavioral insights and behavioral science is still relatively nascent there, although, you know, people increasingly know about it, there's still a fair degree of advocacy and education work that those of us kind of in the trenches, so to speak, you know, sort of need to do on behalf of the discipline. Basically, advocating for the usefulness of an experimental approach. You know, why is it that we even need to do that when sometimes people might feel that you don't need to. Frankly, it's time consuming. It can be annoying. It has all sorts of downsides. If people don't fully understand the upsides of it, then it's a hard thing to sell. I think that that can be tricky.

Also, the disappointment that can come along with that of sometimes feeling that perhaps you didn't sell it well enough if people sort of aren't convinced of its usefulness of, you know, I know each project is different, some projects, some areas it's more useful for than others. But I think it can be sort of personally disappointing as well when if you really believe in the value of something, and you believe that an evidence-based approach is so essential and can bring so much rich value, it can be really disappointing if a client doesn't choose to go that route. So that's one thing. Another thing, which I would be remiss not to mention are logistics. Kirstin's laughing.

APPELT: Let the record state.

KORMOS: Let the record states, she concurs. In this case, I would say, you know, like the devil's in the details. The ability to randomize, having a mechanism to randomize, the ability to track individual level behaviour. Oh, my goodness. How many times is it like, "Oh, there's this great behaviour", but you can only get it at the aggregate level so that you can't really do anything with it. These logistics can be frustrating, can be a little bit overwhelming and can be downright confusing at times because oftentimes you don't know the answers to all

those questions. You're having to reach out, figure things out. You go down rabbit holes, sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't. It can be a logistical rollercoaster, I will say.

And so another thing that can be tricky too, I won't go on and on about this because it really it is a wonderful discipline, but another thing that can be tricky is that, you know, sometimes if we use a so-called kitchen sink approach for an intervention where, for example, we incorporate a bunch of nudges or behavioural insights into one intervention condition, sometimes we have to do that because, for example, we don't have the sample size or statistical power needed to have a bunch of separate interventions. And we basically want to try to like throw a bunch of things at the wall and see what sticks, so to speak. The problem is that we don't really know what's stuck. We can't be sure about the actual mechanism that produced the effect if one was found. I find the academic in me and the purist in me wants to be able to clearly isolate the effects of each nudge. But oftentimes sample size doesn't allow for that. And I find that that can be tricky because it sort of goes against my training for lack of a better term.

APPELT: Absolutely. Yeah, I think you've really hit the nails on the heads about a few of the things that can be frustrating, where there's these projects that seem ideal, like there's a clear behaviour, you could really make an impact, oh, but that data system is from 1970 but it was entered through binary and they don't record that. So that definitely hits for me as well. But I think that's also going back to your idea of creativity and diversity, like solving those puzzles, sometimes they're not solvable, but sometimes they are, and then it's really rewarding and then, you know, maybe it's something that group had not previously tracked and you were able to get them data that they hadn't previously had. There are some pros of the tricky parts as well.

KOROMS: Totally. Yeah, exactly. And sometimes I think also just highlighting the mechanisms that would need to be in place for such a project to move forward, even if you find that, you know, you hit a wall with a certain project, you might hit that wall right now. But maybe then the next time they update their system, they get rid of their binary approach and they you know, they modernize in such a way that would allow for future B.I. projects. I think, you know, to some degree, some of these tricky aspects, even if they might lead to sort of some immediate disappointment in terms of not being able to move forward, they can also increase the likelihood of that organization or group being able to do a BI project in the future, because now they have a better understanding of what is needed.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. A lot of times the no is just a not now, or not yet. And that sometimes whether it's a data tweak or reframing of the problem or resourcing, a lot of times it can become a yes in the future, which is nice. And I think you've alluded to this a bit when you're talking about the purist in you from your academic training, and you've talked a bit about your transition from the academic role to the practitioner role, but maybe you could elaborate a bit on how those two perspectives and skill sets, the academic and the practitioner, how they differ.

KORMOS: Academia and maybe some academics would disagree with me, and I certainly don't mean to, you know, I'm speaking in gross generalization terms here, so and this is all just from my own experience, but I think that academia can tend to have a slower pace just by virtue of the fact that there's a more of a specific focus on a smaller number of projects. At least this was my own experience, was that I found much of my days, I was devoting larger chunks of time to the same projects. Whereas, I think also, you know, academia, academia is more interested in identifying why something works, whereas practitioners are oftentimes more interested in demonstrating an effect, and the underlying mechanism is less important. The importance is to achieve whatever the behavioural goal is or behavioural outcome.

And yeah, I guess also, you know, I think being more of a practitioner, you have to be more mindful of the client's side of things. Certainly, there's more of a consultant kind of business type feel, whereas as an

academic, you're a little bit more of a free agent. You know, you have to answer to funding agencies, of course, and you still have to answer to your stakeholders, but you don't have that kind of business infused relationship as one does when they transition into a practitioner role. Which can present some challenges too in terms of how you navigate relationships and how you might feel about presenting null results, et cetera. These kinds of things, I would say too that one benefit is that as a practitioner, you tend to be a little bit like more dialed in to policy and program issues that are most timely for an organization because you're working directly with the organization. Whereas as an academic, sometimes I think it can be a struggle to ensure that your research is timely and relevant to the real world. Whereas, so as a practitioner, that's already kind of naturally built into your work because you're directly liaising with organizations. The benefit there is that, you know, that it's relevant to them because they're oftentimes the ones asking you for it. You're not having to chase relevance, relevance kind of finds you, which is nice. So, yeah, that's what I would say.

APPELT: I really like what you brought up. And one thing I wanted you to dig on a little bit is you mentioned that the pace is often slower in academia. I wonder, I think that's true, but also maybe it's different parts of the project at different paces in different places with one of the things I was thinking about is in academia, the approval process is often much more accelerated than in the practitioner work, where you might have to go through several rounds of approval, and there's more of a slow pace on that part of things. Is that your experience as well?

KORMOS: Yeah, I think, I mean, kind of yes and no. I think that that's a great point. And certainly, in academia, you know, once you've received your funding, once you've passed your ethics review, you know, those can be slow at the beginning to get those things sorted out. But then really, ultimately, you're kind of your own gatekeeper. You're answering largely to your self. Whereas as a practitioner, there is a lot more cooks in the kitchen. You know, you need various levels of approval that as an academic, you have more autonomy. You don't really need to seek approval from others as much and to seek support from others once you have your funding, of course. But my own personal experience has been that it can be very difficult as a practitioner getting approval from the government from the privacy perspective, in terms of completing a PIA, privacy impact assessment and going through that. So, yeah, I think that that's sort of a consideration.

APPELT: Yeah. Absolutely. I think that covers some of the tricky aspects and thinking about the different experiences. What do you see as the advantages of having practitioners and academics work together, whether it's people who are in those roles or people with those backgrounds having both those backgrounds or skill sets together on a project?

KORMOS: Mm hmm. Yeah. That's a great question. Oh, well, I think there's a myriad of advantages. I think it can help to ensure that, like I mentioned earlier, that the research is truly relevant to current behavioural policy challenges, which is great. Oftentimes it can actually, I think, make it easier to obtain access to data because oftentimes practitioners have access to data sets that sometimes academics don't have. My own personal experience in academia was that oftentimes I was having to pay panel companies to access data, whereas within government, sometimes there is more ready access to data. Of course, I mean, in some past consulting work too, we also paid panel companies. So that's not necessarily true all the time.

I mean, really, I think it can also help to ensure that the research is taking into account the most recent academic findings, the most current insights and knowledge from the behavioural and social sciences, which is great, and academics can assist, too, with more complex data analysis if there are some skills that are required that the practitioner themselves doesn't possess.

APPELT: Absolutely. Are there tips you have for helping the two different perspectives and backgrounds align better?

KORMOS: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think really, just like in any aspect of life, you know, just having open lines of communication, I think is super important. Establishing kind of perspectives and expectations right out of the gate can sort of help to better understand each person's limitations and perspectives in terms of where they're coming from. For example, like academics might be more focused on the purity of a design. So, for instance, having a pure control group and isolating a specific nudge in each condition, whereas the practitioners, you know, for reasons related to feasibility or what have you, like, it may or may not actually be feasible to have a pure control group. And that can be a very uncomfortable thing, I think, for an academic, because it just feels wrong.

I think sort of having open lines of communication and having a good rapport can go a long way in terms of helping to navigate some of those sort of, I don't know if it's ideological sort of differences or perspectives that that could perhaps throw some cold water on a project and create some conflict, if not addressed. Yeah, I think also just really being comfortable with compromise is an important thing. Sometimes, you know, maybe sometimes you can't have the control group that you want to have, but maybe it can kind of be a quasi-control group and maybe you can work with that, you know, so just kind of rolling with the punches where you have to recognize that each party might not get everything that they ideally would like to get out of a project. I think sometimes real-world BI projects, some of the difficulty is that sometimes they might not be as like exciting from an academic perspective, maybe sometimes not as publishable.

You know, if there's not a pure control group, if the nudges are all incorporated together, maybe sometimes that might decrease the likelihood of the paper being published. So that can be difficult from the academic perspective, too. So just trying to compromise, trying to be flexible, recognizing sort of what each party is hoping to get out of the project. And yeah, projects can be unpredictable. Sort of rolling with the punches and trying to all, you know, be kind to each other through the process and understand each other's perspectives.

APPELT: Yeah. The inimitable wisdom of Dr. Henry about being calm, being kind applies beyond COVID. Yeah, I think that's really good points about how there is different perspectives coming to the table. Compromise and being ready to roll together through the punches is a really good message. You also worked on kind of both the client side and the consulting side for projects. Do you find those same messages apply or do you think that's a different set of compromises or any thoughts on that divide, the client versus consultant divide?

KORMOS: I guess it's you know, it's difficult because when, I'm just speaking from my experience also when I when I was at the Ministry of Agriculture, working on a BI project, working closely with BIG and, you know, I think being on the client side in that instance, it's sort of like that was what I was kind of eating and breathing was, you know, was that particular project. I was all fully entrenched in all the details of that project, and I think it's really easy for clients to lose sight of the fact that the consultants might actually have like many different projects on the go at the same time. And when you're the client, it's easy to think that, like, your project is their primary project, you know, but now that I have had some time on the other side, too, I realized, well, there's a lot of different projects on the go. So, yeah, just kind of being-- I think it's important for clients to be mindful and respectful of that as well.

APPELT: That's great. And I think that's a really good point. And it can also sometimes be the flip where a project is consuming the consultant's time, but the client has multiple priorities. I think that's just a good takeaway is that, remember, there are the different experiences. And so being mindful of that is really helpful.

KORMOS: That's a really good point. And actually, I should also say, I mean, in thinking back to before, prior to my work with government, where I was doing more of sort of external consulting, I sometimes found that there was a challenge where clients sort of wanted as much from me as they could get, you know, as much of my time, they wanted as many analyses as they could possibly get. Sometimes, even if those analysis weren't

totally needed, they weren't really sure, they just wanted lots of them. I think it can be challenging from the consultant's side too trying to manage expectations and, you know, ensure that everyone's happy with the with the end result.

APPELT: Yeah, I think we could have a whole side conversation about scope creep. This has been really good, but I do want to be mindful of the time. Do you have any last messages for our BI practitioners in training?

KORMOS: Yeah, I guess that I would just say, you know, that they're entering a very exciting and rapidly changing field. I think it's a really exciting time for them to be entering this area. Certainly, since I've started, the area of BI has just expanded so quickly worldwide and within Canada. So, you know, I mean, I'm, of course, terribly biased, but I feel like they've decided to enter just a really fascinating area, just full of potential to really help improve the world around us. So, yeah, that would be it. I would say all the best with their certificate. I wish them the best.

APPELT: Yeah. And as someone who's equally, if not more biased, I agree heartily with the exciting field with lots of potential. Well, thank you for joining us today. It's been a lot of fun and I feel like we could go on for ages. But I will bring us to a conclusion and I hope our listeners have enjoyed the time travels, the side chats about everything. Thank you for joining us today.

KORMOS: My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

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