



Episode 84: The Power of Complementary Skills

*with Jeff Mackey-Murdock, Senior Manager,
Organizational Change Management with the City of Vancouver*

Jeff Mackey-Murdock brings a combination of skills to his role at the City of Vancouver. We talk about how powerful it is when folks add BI to their toolkits and leverage the complementary strengths of their various skills. Digging into BI specifically, Jeff shares the many opportunities and challenges for using BI in local government. He also tells us about some of the newer projects in the City of Vancouver's growing portfolio of BI case studies.

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 Jeff Mackey-Murdock.

Jeff is senior manager, organizational change management with City of Vancouver. We've been connecting and working with folks at the City of Vancouver for 7 to 8 years now, and I met Jeff in particular when he joined the Big Difference Advisory Board. We're really happy to have him on the board and contributing his enthusiasm and ideas. And today, I'm even happier to have him on the podcast to chat about BI at the city.

As a Vancouver resident, I'm very excited and enthusiastic about all the ways I can contribute to the challenges our great city faces. And as a BI enthusiast, I'm always thrilled when local government finds a way to apply the tools. So welcome to the podcast, Jeff.

JEFF MACKEY-MURDOCK, GUEST: Thanks so much, Kristin. I'm happy to be here. Looking forward to the chat today.

APPELT: Excellent, and maybe you can just start by telling us a little bit about yourself.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Sure. Like you mentioned, I work at the city, and our team, the organizational change management team, we're focused on large, across the city initiatives that would have impact the staff, positive or negative, and trying to make sure that we get the best version of those and that the talent that works at the city, their experience and the people touching and doing the work today, their expertise are valued and weighed and measured and considered so that we can get the best version of any given change or program.

APPELT: That sounds like such a worthwhile endeavor. I really like the way you phrased it.

So one of the questions we often asked to start off the podcast is around people's journey to BI, because it seems like we all get behavioural science and just behaviour on our radar in different ways. So how did behavioural science get onto your radar?

MACKEY-MURDOCH: Yeah, good question. In a previous life, I was, I spent the majority of my professional career in consulting, and we had a lot of public service clients and private clients, and both of them would have problems. Other private clients with consumer services or products and public agencies with efficacy of programs among citizens. But they were, through their eyes, doing everything correctly. They were going out and engaging with citizens and or engaging with their customers and asking them what they'd like to see and then reacting to that.

So that was when I think, and this is like, this is going to just shine a light on how old I am now, but that was probably about 20 years ago and it was where I was first kind of introduced to the concept of declared versus revealed preferences and starting to design engagement models and tests to tease out revealed preferences became a supremely effective way to avoid that challenge with service design in the public sector and in product and service design in the private sector.

And then from there, I just got curious and started asking a lot of questions and getting involved in going to training at MIT and just found it to be supremely valuable, and the overlaps between change management and behavioural science are considerable, and I think it makes change a more valuable service within an organization. So I've been in trying to embed them with each other ever since.

APPELT: That was amazing, and I love that you picked right up on the lingo with revealed and described preferences, and just for any listeners who may not be familiar with those terms, we say revealed preferences are your true preferences, the ones that you actually enact with your behaviour as opposed to preferences you might profess that then don't end up in your behaviour so similar-- the intention action gap would be an example of that.

So obviously I love BI and see its value across challenges, but I know it's sometimes hard for individuals and organizations to see the value in their specific contexts. Can you talk about what you see as the case for BI for the city of Vancouver?

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Yeah, absolutely. Just in general the city operates with imperfect information, and they have, you know, often altruistic desired outcomes and there isn't a disagreement on where we want to get to, but how to, um, structure programs and services or make changes, even internally to the level where you can effectively demonstrate the value of a product or service out of a given change. It can be difficult with varied stakeholder groups, varied citizens across the city, socioeconomic standings, all the infinite variables that come in.

And so being able to tap into the behavioural science toolkit to be able to understand what it is that drives people to participate in a service or gain benefits from it if they're unaware or become aware of it has proven to be very valuable, effective and cut down on costs for a lot of these initiatives where something might take nine months through the course of the nine months to a year for the course of public engagement, we can get it done in 3 to 6 months now when we effectively leverage the tools.

APPELT: Wow. That's really-- I like it. We've got a quantifiable metrics already.

MACKEY-MURDOCK Mhm, yeah. And I think one of the things for me when I first started working with government is if you're not in government and you think about government, you might be thinking more about very high level things. But when you break down what governments do, it's often trying to figure out ways to help coordinate all of the hundreds or thousands of citizens. So it's really, behaviour is really at the heart of it all.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: And, you know, even with our best efforts, we were still unable to predict how they're going to be. There's a current active program that just launched in the city of Vancouver as of yesterday with e-scooters now being installed in a shared module all across the city, I am keenly interested to see how that's going to go, how they're going to be used and all of the unintended potential uses that we weren't able to forecast or take into account.

APPELT: Yeah. I saw someone going by the scooter yesterday with a suitcase stacked in front of them and behind them, so I was pretty impressed that it's now replacing cabs.

Well, there certainly are lots of opportunities. At the same time, I know it can be a challenge to start integrating BI. So, what are some of the challenges for using the BI at the city?

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Yeah, they're not insignificant to be blunt, but I would say the largest underpinning of that is that there's an imperfect understanding of what BI is and what it can be. And largely people tend to see it as an academic endeavor-- something that's done, you know, in a studied or in a controlled environment and there's perhaps a false equivalency that we can't create that in a live organization that's, you know, constantly changing and have, you know, diverse citizens, diverse staff and everything to deal with.

Relatively speaking, it's also new, and so anything new just comes with a lack of full awareness of how it could be best utilized within the city. So that awareness gap is kind of a challenge, and the group that you need to gain the awareness and understand the benefits are at the executive level, and they tend to be resistant to training, and so getting them on board is something that, you know, to do it in the short term, very difficult. But to do it slowly over time as you can build up more and more success stories and case examples that are specific to the organization, that's not so tough, and that's kind of the approach that we're trying to take. We need the project number one to be how to make it easy, attractive, social, timely to use by and get people trained up. And then, there you go, is the projects.

APPELT: One of the things I really like that I've learned about from our past conversations is the way that the city's approaching BI from an HR perspective and how you're trying to slowly bring that skillset on board. So can you talk a little bit about how you're integrating the BI skills into the toolkit the city brings the city brings to challenges.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Yeah, so for my specific thing, which is the only area that I can really affect right now, we've encouraged training in behavioural insights, and we have the number of change specialists that have now taken it and are accredited and on the projects where they are, we've been able to demonstrate how those tools and techniques have added value and improved project outcomes and results. And so that gave us some license to get more training approved. And, you know, that's always the barrier, especially in a public service organization with a fairly svelte training budget, is to build it in there.

And the next stage of that, after we've got the existing team trained, is to add it as a competency to the role. And because we've seen value in the skills, it would be good if people applying for the role already had it. That might be a nice shortcut instead of having to develop or skill up existing staff. So we've started to do that.

My team at various levels, whether they're a change specialist, senior change manager or program manager like myself have increasingly currently desired, not mandatory, desired skill sets, and in the behavioural science framework that correlates to the kind of projects and work that they've been doing.

You could make a fair and reasonable argument that change management maybe isn't the ideal spot for it. Maybe could be in the continuous improvement or an excellence team, but there's significant overlap with change management as well. So, we've been happy to sort of steward this through and we're starting to see benefits from it.

APPELT: Yeah. One of the things I like that you mentioned, there are some of the other fields, and I actually think it's more of an "and" rather than an "or"-- I would not that BI I would be better in one or other, but BI often works well in lots of different places. And the more folks that have BI then I find it's the less you're working in like little silo and you're starting to get those cross connections and those fertile conversations where you start to catch opportunities you wouldn't otherwise catch. So BI in every position, that's my platform.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Yeah, certainly, and anything to do with projects or changes, it's just such a transferable and valuable skill set to bring in when you're looking to either design a new service or significantly change an existing service like that has, you know, a massive impact to your talent pool potentially a massive impact to your end client, customer, citizen. There's some really neat complementarities between a lot of these skills, we're finding as we have people come through our certificate program with different backgrounds, and we hear from them about how they are leveraging the BI with their existing toolkit. It just seems to be extremely complementary, where their approach enriches BI and BI enriches their other tools.

APPELT: Well, we talked a little generally about BI being used and in previous episodes, actually back in season one episode seven, we heard some early examples of how Vancouver is incorporated BI around license renewals for businesses and dogs. And then some past certificate students have helped the city with challenges related to parking. And for anyone curious, you can read about those projects and some of the working posters and working papers posted to the BI wiki. Can you tell us about some more recent examples of how the city is incorporating BI.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Yeah, absolutely. So there's quite a few where the skill sets being applied within as part of an overall program. So the city's taking a look at a couple of major initiatives. There's a permit improvement program ongoing throughout the city right now to help improve both the quality of the process as well as the timeliness of it on all ends and the usage, the quality of information asked for and then provided throughout. It can be a nebulous endeavor. And by applying some of those tools, very similar actually to the parking project that you alluded to earlier, we're able to get better information on initial applications for permits. And the planning and building team are able to work with proponents in a more streamlined fashion, and it's still early days, very much ongoing.

Another area where we've successfully used quite a few BI tools and techniques was with the implementation of the city's UNDRIP program. So, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, there was a fair amount of work used to develop the strategy. And when we look to implement it, it's massive. So how do you go about that? How do you set sequencing priorities and how do you do that in an environment across four different governments with very different operational realities and even further different operational realities within departments of the cities. So, by utilizing some of the BI tools around choice architecture and again, you know, revealed preferences, understand what those priorities were, we actually work in a collaborative way across all four government work forces to remove qualitative discussion out of it and just have them essentially priority rank through benefits, effort, target teaching, and it coordinates what they'd like to see.

And so using that, we were able to get like 9000 points of data across the program and then effectively present to the ultimate statutory decision makers that this is what the four organizations say we should be working on first, second, 17th kind of thing. And, you know, it's difficult to compare how that would have went had we gone it another way, but I firmly believe that following that methodology gave us an aggressive timeline to the point where now we have a five-year action plan, everyone's on board and collaborating across all four organizations. Now we actually have to go and do the work. But it was definitely a very effective tool to get us to where we are today.

APPELT: That's really amazing. I think coordinating among different groups is one of the trickiest parts of even just BI projects, so it's great to hear that BI was helpful in getting priorities ranked and being able to move forward on such an important project that I know everyone is really keen to move forward. What other BI opportunities are you excited about for the City of Vancouver?

MACKEY-MURDOCK: I'm excited to see the awareness grow so that it's not done by people that are advocates. Sort of, not under the radar is the wrong term, but it's not open or up front to all and understood so that we can now get to the point where it is. So I would like to see that act as a catalyst to evoke some curiosity across the various PMOs that we have in the organization so that they can say, well, how can we apply that to our portfolio of projects? And I'm hopeful that our library of success stories now is getting to that tipping point where we're going to see more inquiries about relevance and applicability. And then as we start to look more strategically, we should be able to expand pretty rapidly if we can hit that tipping point.

APPELT: Well, one thing we've kind of hinted around at is that you have a strong background and expertise in change management, and that seems to be a really productive interaction. So I'm curious to see if you want to speak a little bit more about that, because it's something I often get questions about are the opportunities at that intersection.

MACKEY-MURDOCK I actually came into change management through-- the majority of my work was in business transformation and just general process improvement. So my original training was in Lean or Six Sigma, and we ran into a number of just, you know, really sticky initiatives where we're following all the best practices and just not getting there and adding change management expertise under those programs was the missing link. And so as I got more and more involved in change management and started realizing the benefits of it, I got curious about what else could be added. So from an overall organizational wellness perspective, there are very complimentary groups around organizational design, change management, psychological safety, behavioural science, and all of those discrete skill sets when working together produced some pretty impressive results.

Now, our focus as organizational change management is primarily internally. So, I'm mostly concerned about impact to the talent pool of people that work for the city. But there's obvious transferability as we look at service design out to citizens and as we look at just general PM best practices and reducing staff wellness concerns, and just when we're going to design a new department or make any structure changes, all of those overlap. So I'm pretty excited because I think we're at the place now where those discrete areas and even the industry groups that are operating separately understand that there's a benefit to collaborating across and just more people, more smart people, to think differently, tends to always produce good results. So we're getting some traction with that. And I'm hoping that we'll be at the point where we will have like, more of a formal committee structure within the city going forward. And then from there, our ability to help is just amplified. We just need some license to be able to put the structure in place.

APPELT: Very cool. Yeah, I am almost, like, envisioning one of those supergroups when bands come together and it's all the amazing people in one band.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Yeah. It'd be a pretty nerdy band, but I think we can. We'll do fine.

APPELT: Yeah. Might not sell out arenas, but maybe we can make the arenas traffic flow work better or something.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Haha, yeah, that'd work.

APPELT: Well, I always like to ask if you have a message for folks who are new to BI, so our BI practitioners in training, whether in the certificate or other folks kind of learning the area.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Yeah, I'm a big fan of a broader base. I would say, you know, there are a lot of areas that you might not consider that would complement the BI skill set. Communications training, effective information delivery, statistics, psychological safety and wellness, training that goes into arbitration and conflict resolution, are all those complimentary soft skills that I think could make you potentially a more effective practitioner when taking on any BI initiative. And I'm just a big believer in that full stop. There's always something you can learn from another area, but those ones specifically and BI have a lot of complementary overlaps.

APPELT: Absolutely. Yeah. And I think that's something we've already seen nicely coming to play in our certificate. So I think definitely approach taking on the skill set is something that's enriching and adding to what you're already doing, rather than supplanting and vice versa. If you after BI pick up Lean or, like you said, psychological safety, any of these other skills look for the intersections and how they can really support each other and work together.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: And I would say your negotiating leverage becomes significantly increased, even within the Lean certification, I would have a fair amount of the team that were great at the analysis, at the technical details with the data, but they'd have difficulty facilitating a room, especially if it had executives in it. I think the person who tries to cultivate both of those skills winds up with that lightning in a bottle kind of skill set that is valuable regardless of what department you go into. So if you can do the data analysis and the technical work, but still be able to facilitate and communicate, you're cooking with gas at that point. So it's not necessarily easy to find, but it's definitely something that you should have your eye on.

APPELT: Coming from my background, we also were more on the technical side and then learning gradually over time about all the ways the various qualitative skill sets will bolster that quantitative skill sets. Huge opportunities there. So definitely.

Any last thoughts, questions I should have asked and didn't?

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Oh, tons of thoughts because just, you know, starting a discussion like this, I could easily use up a day. It's just so fun to do that, but no, this has been a great time. If you do get any questions, though, I'm absolutely happy to come back and see if we can dig into another area.

APPELT: Awesome. That's amazing. Well, thank you. I absolutely agree that we've just scratched the surface and we could be talking for the full day if we had the time, and I'm eager to see. It sounds like it's a really exciting time at the city. And definitely the DIBS team is around if you need support on any of those pieces, we'd love to chip in.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: You know, that's recorded. So I'm going to have to take you up on that, and there's evidence of it.

APPELT: Yeah, it's true, we have. Thanks for just being such a great advocate for BI. It's been great to have you with us today on the podcast and to have you as part of the community. So thank you so much, Jeff.

MACKEY-MURDOCK: Oh, thanks. Your advocacy has been a big reason why I've been able to drive this through the city. Thanks so much, Kirstin.

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