Episode 100: Calling DIBS Hits 100

with Kirstin Appelt, Research Director of UBC Decision Insights for Business & Society (UBC-DIBS).

To celebrate our 100th episode, host Kirstin Appelt reflects on her top takeaways so far: (1) There are multiple roads to BI and the field is richer for it. (2) BI is everywhere, which means there's no shortage of opportunities for doing the work of BI! (3) BI has a strong foundation and it's constantly evolving and improving. (4) BI is a kind, passionate community where everyone from newbies to long-time experts are generous with their time and knowledge.

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 Calling DIBS.

It's our hundredth episode, so it's a perfect time to reflect on the podcast. I'll share a little bit of history about the pod, and will reflect on some of what we've learned over five seasons and 100 episodes. We always ask about our guests' journeys, so I also want to tell a little bit about the Calling DIBS journey.

The Calling DIBS podcast started in peak pandemic times back in August 2020. The UBC DIBS faculty, we were counting down the days until the launch of our Advanced Professional Certificate in Behavioural Insights. As we were putting the finishing touches on the curriculum, we were struck by two ideas.

First, it was important to us that our students learn from a variety of perspectives, including voices within academia and from across other sectors. Of course, this idea contrasted against the cold, hard facts that any given program can only have a small number of instructors.

Another idea we were struck with was that there's no true textbook for applied behavioural science. There are textbooks on psychology, statistics, consumer behaviour, etc. and there are a number of popular science books on behavioural insights, like the great Nudge and Thinking Fast and Slow, among others. But there's no textbook that covers the full world of applied behavioural science, all the different examples of how it's applied, the full process from scope to scale.

Fortunately, we realized that a podcast could help us solve both of these issues. It could expose students to additional voices beyond our handful of faculty instructors, and it could do deep dives into specific topics that would supplement course readings.

So we hurriedly taped some episodes that were planned to be used exclusively by students in the certificate program as supplementary materials. That first year, we were ambitious and recorded 26 episodes, and they really complemented the curriculum. We focused on specific phases of the BI project lifecycle, like scoping, exploratory research, and scaling. And we talked to real people using the BI in different applied settings. We talked to people in local, provincial and federal government. We talked to people in Crown corporations and

other parts of the public sector. We talked to people in the private sector and folks with roles that were internal or external consulting roles.

At the end of the season, our first cohort of program graduates and folks outside the program asked if we might make the episodes public because they found some value in them. As someone who shies away from public speaking, it was a bit nervy for me, but for the good of the BI community, I braved it. Despite various technical difficulties along the way, which my team can attest to, we figured out how to share the podcast publicly via the wiki and the major streaming platforms, and the podcast grew.

We expanded our focus and covered a wide range of topics including introductory BI concepts, new behavioural science research, emerging debates around hot topics, tips for conducting BI projects, intersections between behavioural science and other disciplines, different ways BI is being used beyond standard randomized controlled trials, careers and community in the BI space, and a variety of examples of how BI is being applied to tackle challenges like the climate crisis and public health.

We've now talked to 82 different guests. They include our program faculty, alumni from the five cohorts of the Advanced Professional Certificate we've had to date, behavioural science researchers from UBC and universities around the world, practitioners from BI units across Canada and beyond, and numerous folks who have managed to weave BI into their work, in their day jobs, or in their life outside of work.

Now, as we reflect on five seasons, it's amazing to see that we've had 100 episodes and over 11,000 listens. This is all thanks to our amazing guests, our student and staff assistants, and our listeners.

So what have we learned? I have well over 100 takeaways from 100 episodes, but I'm not going to bore you with every single takeaway. I'll condense them down to my top four takeaways.

But before I dive into my takeaways, I'd just like to take a moment to say what a pleasure this podcast is. I really didn't anticipate loving it so much, but our guests make it truly enjoyable and I've loved every single conversation along the way. Here's a little bit about what I've learned.

My first takeaway is that there are multiple roads to BI. That one's probably not very surprising to longtime listeners who know that I say this quite often, but everyone's journey to BI is truly unique. There are so many pathways into the work of applied behavioural science. It's a really open, welcoming field, and it has a large umbrella. And I find that this makes the field so much richer because everyone brings their disciplinary background or backgrounds, whether they're from the more obvious paths like psychology, marketing, economics and public policy degrees, or they started on more twisting paths with original degrees in fields like engineering, arts, or technology.

Everyone also brings multiple applied tools to the table like change management, stakeholder engagement, communication, Lean, design, etc. Some folks bring crucial insider experience from having worked on specific challenges within or with specific organizations, and sometimes that experience extends decades. Some folks bring their lived experiences from having faced challenges as decision makers or having lived in certain contexts.

When we combine all these different perspectives, tools, knowledges, skills, expertise, experience, ways of knowing and being, then we understand the problems we're tackling so much better and we have more tools at our disposal, which means we can design behaviourally informed solutions that better address the forces that people face when they're making decisions, so this is only upside.

Another point about these twisting journeys folks have is that twists and turns are the norm. We talk about social norms and behavioural science, and we're happy to say that in this case, having a twisting, turning journey is the norm. And it's what makes our careers so interesting. So don't be afraid to follow your interests. Don't be afraid to embrace those turns and evolutions along the way. They make our stories interesting and they make the behavioural science field much richer.

Another takeaway is that the BI is everywhere. Our program alumni often say the more you know about BI, the more you see it everywhere. You see examples of it done well, like the brightly painted curbs that show where parking is prohibited to either side of a fire hydrant, or when you get that pre-meeting reminder from your calendar software and you show up on time to a meeting you would have otherwise forgotten.

You also see examples of BI done poorly, whether that's been intentionally done or not. Those confusing signs that you have to read multiple times to figure out just which waste bin your container should go in, or that service you didn't sign up for, but somehow you were automatically subscribed, and you can't for the life of you, figure out how to unsubscribe.

You also start to see opportunities for BI in your life and in your work. That email, you're writing, that could more clearly spell out the call to action, that website you're in charge of that could require fewer clicks to navigate, or that form your organization uses that could have plainer language and maybe pre-populate some fields.

In this podcast, we've explored examples like these and other examples of BI being used across sectors *(episodes 8 with Christine Kormos, 50 with Heather Devine, 76 with Meera Paleja)*. In the transcript for the episode, we'll tag these bullets with specific episode numbers for folks who are curious to learn more about specific examples.

Over the years we've talked about how BI is being used in academia. We've talked with researchers who are conducting research to understand, for example, the power of influence *(episode 61 with Vanessa Bohns)* and the possibility of spillover from individual change to systems change *(episode 63 with Jiaying Zhao).*

We've talked with folks using BI in government toward pro-social goals like understanding public opinion *(episodes 86 with Brent Novikoff),* reducing human wildlife conflict *(episode 85 with Alan Shapiro),* improving public health *(episodes 78 & 79 with Lindsay Miles-Pickup),* and increasing compliance with regulations *(episode 7 with Tobin Postma).*

We've talked with folks in different parts of the public sector who are trying to improve public safety *(episodes 18 with Kaylyn Kretschmer, 27 and 89 with Rachel Yang, 43 with Kerri Buschel)* and financial security *(episode 74 with Brett Cloutier).*

We've talked with folks in the nonprofit sector who are supporting communities and tackling humanitarian challenges *(episode 71 with Brianne Kirkpatrick and Ansley Dawson, 73 with Britt Titus),* and we've learned about how sometimes the BI approach needs to be adjusted in these settings.

We've also talked with folks in the private sector who are using the BI to change behaviour ethically *(episodes 14 with Lisa Zaval, 60 with Whitney Queisser).*

And maybe most importantly, we've talked about how BI is often done in partnership within and between organizations across sectors, and we've talked about how these partnerships can make projects stronger *(episodes 22 with Michael Buttazzoni, 39 with Maria Giammarco, 77 with Ammaarah Martinus).*

It's also worth noting that it's not always easy or straightforward to introduce BI into an organization. We've heard from our guests that sometimes quite a bit of groundwork needs to be laid due to factors like lack of awareness, resistance to change, difficulty collaborating across units, difficulty accessing data, or having data be collected in the first place, resistance to experimentation *(episodes 55 with Sharilyn Wardrop, 66 with Daile MacDonald, 67 with Jennifer Parisi).* There can be a number of factors. But we've also heard from our guests that successful, relevant examples and internal BI champions can make all the difference.

Another takeaway for me is that BI is evolving. BI has a firm foundation with its roots in the behavioural decision sciences.

There's a strong base of knowledge about human behaviour and how to change behaviour *(episode 44 with Dale Griffin).*

Behavioural science also has a strong methodology that builds upon the scientific method. It scopes problems to understand the context *(episodes 1 with Sasha Tregebov, 2 with Heather Devine, 6 with Julian House, 29 with Alexis Gordon, 42 with Mikayla Ford).*

It researches these problems through methods, including surveys, interviews, literature reviews, and baseline data analysis *(episodes 3 with Kerri Buschel, 4 with Mikayla Ford, 5 with Isabelle Andresen, 19 with Jeremy Douglas, 70 with Stina Grant).*

With an understanding of the problem, it starts to design behaviourally informed solutions *(episodes 12 with Kate White)* and rigorously test these solutions through designs like randomized controlled trials *(episode 56 with Vince Hopkins).*

It analyzes the results and converts them into evidence-based recommendations for next steps *(episodes 17 with Piyush Tantia, 20 with Sasha Tregebov, 53 & 54 with Cecilia Sluga).*

And it communicates these stories through the channels, formats, pathways that make sense for the audiences they're hoping to reach *(episodes 13 with Sarah Smythe, 21 with Heather Devine, 33 with Sharilynn Wardrop).*

And it builds ethics, a consideration of ethics, a review of ethical guidelines into every step *(episode 59 with Shannon McDonaugh).*

So BI has a great foundation, but it's also evolving and improving because it's not perfect by any stretch. We continue to learn more about human behaviour, like episodes where we've talked about how happiness can inspire climate action *(episodes 97 with Jade Rake and Jiaying Zhao),* or just how much context can matter *(episodes 69 with Stephanie Mertens, 75 with Jordyn Hrenyk, 90 & 91 with Dilip Soman and Bing Feng).*

As a field, we're learning how to better design research in complicated real-world settings where feasibility is often quite constrained *(episode 57 with Emily Cardon & Stephanie Wilcoxen).*

We're learning better practices to analyze data and catch data fraud *(episode 64 with Dave Hardisty).*

We're learning how to combine BI with other disciplines *(episode 25 with Adam King, 30 with Lindsay Miles-Pickup, 34 with Cassandra Bernard),* whether those are newer tools like data science *(episode 72 with Craig Hutton)* and change management *(episode 68 with Yarnel Bender, 84 with Jeff Mackey-Murdock)* and user

experience *(episodes 46 with Stephanie Kuhn)*, or older tools like communications *(episode 45 with Amalia Colussi)*.

We're seeing intersections with social marketing *(episode 87 with Shellee Ritzman),* and project management *(episode 49 with Dana Hubackova)* and planning, *(episode 96 with Holly Caggiano)*, and design *(episodes 47 with Melinda Deines, 62 with Brittany Burrows, 88 with Kerstin Behrens-Bolt)*, and all of these are strengthening our toolkit.

We're learning how to leverage multiple methods, expanding from quantitative methods to include various qualitative methods along the path from scoping to scaling *(episodes 82 & 83 with Rhiannon Mosher, episode 93 with Jeremy Gretton)*.

And we're making room for new tools like digital innovation and artificial intelligence *(episode 92 with Paloma Bellatin)*. We're also expanding beyond using BI as a way to improve existing programs, policies, and products, to integrating BI into policy and practice upstream *(episode 17 with Monica Soliman, 28 with Carl Jensen, 48 with Anna Burrowes)*.

We're learning how to make behavioural science stronger by making it equitable, diverse, and inclusive, considering how to make it an anti-racist *(episode 98 with Crystal Hall)* and Indigenized *(episodes 26, 41, and 80 with Stephanie Papik; and episode 58 with Emily Salmon)* practice.

As we learn, we're applying what we learned to more and more challenges. The ones we focused on most for this podcast are public health *(episodes 36 with Tak Ishikawa, 81 with Meghan Martin)*, the climate crisis *(episodes 10 with David Hardisty, 15 with Jiaying Zhao, 40 with Andrea MacNeill, 51 with Marika Smith, 99 with Adrian Camilleri)*, and EDI *(episodes 31 with Greg Lockwood, 37 and 38 with Sylvia Apostolidis)*.

We're also seeing folks use those BI knowledge and skills in a variety of roles *(episode 52 with Rhiannon Mosher)* to do everything from designing better forms, to helping people learn, to reducing sludge, to generally supporting people to make the right decisions for themselves, whether those people are employees and colleagues, citizens and residents, clients, or anyone interfacing with a decision environment *(episodes 9 with Dilip Soman, 95 with Eva Koromilas)*.

I've really found that it's amazing to see so many folks working in or with BI. Everyone is really passionate about working towards a brighter future and the role of behavioural science in that brighter future. It really makes me optimistic that even though we're currently faced with numerous challenges, that will continue to learn together and make meaningful impact against these various challenges.

So one of my favorite takeaways has just been the opportunity to learn from so many different folks, which brings me to my last takeaway, which is that BI is a community, and what a wonderful community it is. People in this space are truly passionate about their work, but also paying it forward, sharing their knowledge, supporting one another along their journey *(episodes 23 with Rishad Habib, 24 with Maja Niksic and Jaclyn Lefkowitz, and 32 with Ekin Ok)*.

So, this brings me to the question that we ask every guest at the end of every episode, which is whether they have a message for our BI practitioners in training and other folks new to the field.

We've heard some wonderful advice that is useful for everyone, from newcomers to long timers. And so I've condensed it down with the help of one of my student assistants and AI, to the top five tips from the BI community.

The first one is to start small and iterate. So begin with small, manageable projects so you can test and learn before tackling something big. This is of course also what we do within BI projects. We learn, we test, we learn more. Iteration is really key to successful BI work. It's how we change behaviour within a project. It's also how we do projects. Learn, learn, learn.

Next piece of advice from the community is to prioritize context. We've mentioned this a few times already, but I want to pull on this idea here some more. Learn about the specific context in which behaviour occurs. Work with the population who's impacted to understand how they see the problem, what problems they think they're facing, what factors are at play for them. What are their restraining and driving forces, what goals do they have, etc.

Learn how this context is similar and different to other contexts. Remember that human behaviour is complicated and what works in one context may work similarly, differently, or not at all, and in other contexts. So, we can't just plug and play BI solutions without testing.

Another great piece of advice from the community is to engage in collaborative and inclusive practices. Collaborate across disciplines. Combine tools and methods. Work with communities who are impacted. BI is stronger and works better when it's inclusive, so find and create community wherever you work in this space.

Our community also told us that it's important to never stop learning. Approach BI with humility. Recognize that human behaviour is extremely complex, and the limitations of our knowledge mean that it's important that we remain open to new insights and perspectives. The field is evolving and so should we all. So it's important to stay curious and keep learning about behaviour, about the methods, about the work, etc.

And the final pearls of wisdom which I think is perfect ending note is whatever you do, just start. It's always a good time to factor human behaviour into the work that you do. Our field will be better for having you on the team. So, whether you're starting your hundredth BI project, your first BI project, or you're just coming along for the ride, we're happy to have you on the team and we're glad you're with us.

On that note of being on the team, I want to thank my team. A huge thank you to our 82 guests who've been so generous with their time and wisdom. We're truly fortunate to be able to learn from your knowledge, your skills, your projects, everything you do. You all have been the heart of this podcast.

I also am supported each year by 1 or 2 student assistants. Over the years they've helped edit episodes. They fixed closed captions, they've created transcripts, and done so much more. So thank you to Rishad Habib, Isabella Jaramillo, Parnian Ashrafi, Kashish Khatri, Ethan Lee, and Olin Becker.

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Lastly, of course, I want to thank each of you for listening to this and any other episode of Calling DIBS. We've got some great episodes planned for next year, so stay tuned and keep nudging for good. Thanks for listening.