

Belinda Xie, Behavioural Economics Advisor - Transcript

Denise: Today I'm talking to Belinda Xie. She is an Advisor on the Behavioral Economics team for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Hello, Belinda.

Belinda: Hello, hi Denise, how are you?

Denise: Hi, good thank you. Thank you for doing this with us. Can we start right away talking about your job? So, you are an advisor on the behavioral economics team for an important government office? What is that like? What do you do?

Belinda: Yeah, so it's sort of a mixture of research and government policy, so our main goal is to just improve government services and government policies that they work best for human people because a lot of the time, policymaking sort of has an idealized view of how humans act and how humans think. But we know that a lot of things can be really difficult for busy people who have competing interests. So, we try and understand exactly how policies are working for people already, and maybe ways that we can improve it based on what we know about how people act in real life.

Denise: Can you give an example of the sorts of things that you would be working on?

Belinda: Yeah, sure. So, one project that we recently wrapped up was looking at how to encourage more high-achieving Australians to become teachers because we know that at the moment Australian students, when they get assessed and compared to the rest of the world, we're sort of decreasing compared to other countries and also over time. And part of that is that we don't have enough really smart, really engaged people going into teaching at the moment. Teaching isn't a very attractive choice. So, we conducted a survey and an experiment to see what sort of perceptions people have about teaching and what sort of changes we can make to make teaching more attractive? And so obviously, we can start by brainstorming with some ideas about what we think the problem is, but then you know, we actually go and ask people and find out what the barriers are and what incentives would be the nicest. And then we can use that to provide advice to the policymakers in the Department of Education to make some changes and try and improve that process.

Denise: So, it sounds like a lot of her role is really research, is that right?

Belinda: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, which is a big part of what attracted me to it in the first place. There is a big emphasis in the department about evidence-based policymaking and so to get that evidence you do need to conduct research.

Denise: So, what's something that's very exciting to you about the job that you have?

Belinda: Ooh, I love that I get to work on important topics that really do impact their everyday lives of Australians. And so we've also done quite a bit of COVID work, which is really interesting, but also you can see how you know the hours that you spend every day do you have direct impacts on what's happening to the health and wellbeing of people around you. So, I really enjoy that aspect. Yeah, the topics that we work on a really interesting and exciting thing.

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Denise: So, you're an advisor on the behavioral economics team. I'm guessing there are other people with different kinds of backgrounds than you. I know you have a PhD in cognition, is that typical for the people on the team?

Belinda: Yeah, that's a great question. There aren't many people who have a PhD in cognition, but there are quite a few people with a psychology background generally. So, we have quite a lot of people who have PhDs in social psychology, degrees from like organizational psychology, even some people with a clinical psychology background. And I think what sort of ties us all together is this experience of research and like a real emphasis on understanding how humans act. But we also have people who are from psychology backgrounds, just people with other sorts of research background so quite a few people have come from consultancy and jobs in the past. And then we also have some people who are really experts at the sort of data analysis and statistics side as well.

Denise: So how does your background in psychology help you to do this role?

Belinda: Yeah, so I think there's sort of two main ways that my psychology background has helped me. The first would be, you know, just my undergrad degree learning about all the different kind of psychology and all the theories of psychology. You know, theories of health psychology, social psychology, cognitive psychology, that's all really useful background information for me. You know, when we first approach a problem to try and think about what the relevant human factors might be, and so I think that sort of information in my head is really useful. But then also doing honors and then doing a research degree, my PhD is super useful in understanding the mechanics of how research works and the technical aspects that are involved in trying to find the best evidence you can.

Denise: And when you, when you studied psychology and you went down the Honours, Masters, PhD pathway, is this the kind of job that you envisioned for yourself?

Belinda: I don't think. So, when I first I was psychology I think it's super common for people to think that they'll become clinical psychologists, and that is what I wanted to do. But then as I progressed in my studies, I realized, A, it's really competitive and I'm probably not going to have the grades good enough for it and B, actually, you know, I think I wanted to be a clinical site to help people and there are lots of other ways you can help people, and especially with the psychology. And so, I did my Honours year and that was sort of the first time that I got hands-on experience doing research and I just loved it. I just found it so fun and rewarding. Very challenging but very rewarding. And so that sort of pushed me along the path of doing more research work.

Denise: How did you choose to go into a PhD in Cognition specifically?

Belinda: Ooh, good question. I think it was my experience in my undergrad degree. The Cognitive Psych unit really stuck out to me. Uhm, I found it quite difficult, like I found the content quite challenging, but I was also super impressed with how the experiments were designed in cognition and I was really interested in how the questions about, you know exactly how our brain processes information, how they're really specific, and well thought out. So, I thought that there would be a lot for me to learn and also sort of what we learn in cognition you can apply to a lot of different areas of human thought.

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Denise: At what point in your studies did you realize that you didn't want to do a clinical psych, that you were more interested in cognition, you were more interested in getting eventually the kind of role that you have now? How did you change that mindset? What changed it for you?

Belinda: Yeah, I think it was in my third year of my undergrad degree. So, the last year before Honours. And it was this class really focused on clinical psychology, and that's when I really learned about how complex it is and the challenges facing the field. Uh, and for me, it just helped me realize that I wasn't committed enough to the cause I guess to want to tackle those challenges. And so, then we also started thinking about Honours and learning about a research degree, and my interest just sort of pivoted that way and away from clinical.

Denise: And how did you find the job that you have now?

Belinda: It's very boring answer, I just saw it on Seek, and I applied like any other job you would apply for. But I had heard of the team before because one of the professors that I worked with when I was doing my PhD, he served as an academic advisor to the team, so they have a little academic advisory panel. About five or six people. Because you know once you go into researching government, you're sort of removed from academia, so you know we rely on advisors he was one of those advisors. So, I knew about the work they were doing and I was interested in it from that.

Denise: And was this your first job after your PhD?

Belinda: Yes, it was. I was actually still doing my PhD when I started.

Denise: Amazing! Would you say that you need to have a PhD in something related to psychology or human behaviour in order to get the job that you have?

Belinda: No, no, I don't think so. It can be helpful, but there are certainly plenty of people on the team who don't have the PhD and the experiences they've gotten elsewhere, you know, in the workforce or studying other degrees is really valuable too.

Denise: So, I'd like to hear a little bit more about what it. If you could, could you describe what you might do on a typical day in your job?

Belinda: Umm yes, so this morning when I first logged on, I opened up a report that we've been writing. So, usually we work on a project we like to finish it off by writing a report and then publishing it so the public can see. So, the first thing I did was to work on this report that we've been drafting. You know, we've got some feedback from other people in the team and from another department in government, so we're just, you know, working on, incorporating that feedback. Sort of similar thing you would do at uni. So, I did that for quite a bit and then had a few meetings. We have a team meeting every day, so I'm in a smaller team of about six people within the bigger behavioural economics team, so we have a meeting every day to just check in on what everyone else is doing to see if anyone needs help with what they're working on. And then there was another meeting where we were talking about some upcoming work. So, broadly, it's about vaccines and booster shots, and so we just had a little discussion about what we might think of the gaps are in that area, what sort of information we might need. That was more of a brainstorming meeting. So, I guess those two examples sort of reflect the end point and the

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start point of projects. And then there's often a lot of work in between which might involve like contacting other providers to help you out with research or actually you know, writing up the survey or designing an experiment and analyzing the results as well. Actually, that's usually a bigger part of my day.

Denise: What would you say is one of the things about your job that is uniquely interesting?

Belinda: You mean compared to other jobs or...?

Denise: What's special about it?

Belinda: Oh, I think what's quite unique from my perspective of my understanding of other jobs, there's this mix between government and research. I think, you know, I when I was doing my PhD, I was involved in a couple of different areas of research and one of them was in climate change psychology. And you know, I gave talks to the community, I wrote articles about that research, really linked it to you know policies or what was really happening at a higher level in society. But now, I think that I'm in this job, the links are a bit clearer and I'm understanding more of how the interaction between research and government actually plays out. Which is a big part of why I wanted this job, to learn more about that.

Denise: That's exciting. So, what kinds of roles do you think you might be looking to do in the future? What's a typical direction from this point?

Belinda: Oh, good question. The department that I'm in, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, I think it's quite well known for people being out there for a short stint of time and then going to other departments in government. For me, I'm not sure to be honest, where I where I want to go next. I think I do want to stay in this for a bit longer and gain some more understanding of how evidence works in policy. And then maybe if I can use that, use those skills and that knowledge, maybe in a specific area of policy that I'm really passionate about, like climate change, then that might be ideal for me.

Denise: Do you have any advice that you would give to students who are thinking about doing a PhD and maybe thinking about doing it in something like Cognition?

Belinda: I think the PhD was very challenging and sometimes I felt like I didn't know where I was going, but it's a really awesome period of time which I don't think I will get again, where you sort of have three or four years to look at what interests you, and to decide what skills you want to develop. So, I think it's really good in that respect, to give you quite a bit of freedom and autonomy, which I don't think you'll get in many other jobs. Uhm, maybe a word of caution that I would that I would give is I went into the PhD thinking I would stay in universities after that, that I would have an academic career, yeah? But I didn't quite anticipate how tough it is. Uhm, how it's also very competitive, and I think there is a big focus on getting published and presenting a lot which in the end I thought wasn't worth it for me. So, I think on the one hand it can be really great opportunity to learn and grow and explore what interests you, but at the same time it's good to have an understanding of what career paths are plausible after that or likely, given how many other people are doing PhDs, too.

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Denise: And do you have any advice to someone who might be thinking about using their psychology studies to go and do something like advising to the government or research into behavioural economics?

Belinda: Umm, I would say definitely appreciate how much you do know. I was a bit nervous that I didn't know enough about government and policy, but the psychology degree really equips you with a lot of knowledge and skills that are really useful.

Denise: So, what specific skills or knowledge do you think you got from your psychology degree that you are finding very useful in your job now?

Belinda: I think the first skill that comes to mind is the ability to read and critically synthesize what you're reading. So, you know I wrote a lot of essays during my degree where you have to read different journal articles to answer the question that's been given to you, and in my job now often we do get asked a question and again I have to read lots of different articles or even news articles from around the world to try and understand what's happening. And the skill that I learned throughout my degree of you know, either critically reviewing an article in depth or those skimming lots of different articles to see what the general consensus in the literature is, these are skills I use a lot in my current job. I'm finding them really helpful.

Denise: OK, great, thank you so much. Is there something else that you would like to say that I haven't asked about? Something you think that you know psychology students, prospective or current, might benefit from hearing?

Belinda: I think. Yeah, something I would suggest to people who are considering psychology or studying psychology to consider is to try and explore the different areas that psychology can take you during your degree as much as you can. So, for example, when I was doing my undergrad I was a student volunteer at the Department of Corrective Services in WA. So, they were conducting programs to help prisoners when they returned to the community and they were evaluating how well these programs are working. So, I got some experience in that sort of area of psychology. And I also did a bit of work working with kids with disabilities and kids on the autism spectrum. So that's very a very different path that psychology can take you down. So, it's good to just sort of be exposed and to figure out what works for and what you're interested in. And that can help you topick the thing that's best for you.

Denise: Awesome, Belinda. Thank you so much for talking with me today. This has been fabulous.

Belinda: No problem, thank you for having me.