

Doron Lavan, Director at the Nous Group - Transcript

Denise: Alright, today I'm talking to Doron Lavan. Doron has had several jobs in psychology, first as a clinical psychologist, then he co-founded a social enterprise called Fruit2Work, and now he's Director at a consulting organization called the Nous Group. He did his Bachelor Science Psychology at UNSW, followed by his Honours at the University of Melbourne and then his Master Clinical Psych at La Trobe. Hello, Doron, thank you for being here.

Doron: Hi, thanks for having me.

Denise: Let's get right to it. Can we go one by one through your jobs and start with clinical psychologist? What was it like working as that?

Doron: Yeah, sure, so I was a clinical psychologist in prison system in Victoria. I've always had an interest in trauma and how that affects mental health more broadly so that was a really great place to work. I had a really supportive team, and what was good about that position was you were able to work with clients consistently and as opposed to the community where often they can't afford or can't access services. It was quite challenging and interesting environment to be in, but really there was a lot of room to do good work. And surprisingly a lot of people in prison were quite receptive to it. So yeah, that was quite an enjoyable and fulfilling role to have.

Denise: Absolutely. And how long did you do that before you decided to stop?

Doron: I did that for about two years, One of my roles in the prison was to speak with prisoners before they were released to discuss what they had set up for them on the outside and to see what they can do about making sure their lives are set up in a way that they can avoid relapsing. Drug and alcohol was the one of the big focuses of our therapy. And so, one of the obvious things to talk about there was employment. So, I would always ask people, 'okay, well, are you going to have a job, are you looking for a job when you get out?' And they would like looked at me as if I was from a really different planet. They would say 'who's going to employ us and we've got parole appointments to go to and how are we meant to get a job?' And it was clear that employment, if you have a criminal record, or you've been in prison is really very difficult. But it is very key also for people's re-integration into the community. Employment gives you not only money, but it gives you a social network. It gives you meaning, it also fills your day. And so, particularly if you're recovered from drug and alcohol addiction, employment's really important. So, I decided rather than staying in the prison, working with clients in that environment, I'd prefer to work in the real world setting and try to deal with some of the more systemic issues, like employment for people with a criminal record. So, I partnered with a friend of mine, Ariel Hersh, and we set up

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Fruit2Work, which is a business, still running, which hires former offenders to deliver fruit boxes to companies.

Denise: That's great! So, what then took you from all of that kind of work as a psychologist and founding a social enterprise into consulting? How did you make that transition?

Doron: One of the key things which I got initially as an undergrad at UNSW, but then throughout all my career, was problem solving and critical thinking and trying to take lots of different information and work out what's going on, developing solutions, and then trying to implement those solutions, which is usually the hardest part. And so that's what it's like as psychologist, but that's on a one on one level, where we're trying to understand what's going on for people, what could work and then the hard slog of trying to implement it. The same was true for Fruit2Work, but that was more, 'well, what are some of the core causes, the reasons why people are relapsing and reoffending?' And so that was the same approach, to working on that problem. We developed a solution which was Fruit2Work and then trying to implement it Fruit2Work is great and has, you know, quite a few employees now, but it's still a small business, and I wanted to be able to see if I could work in a place where you could work on problems at more of the whole of system level. So government policy, government settings etc. and that's why I made the move to Nous, which is a management consulting firm that works a lot with government on these bigger problems. And so if psychology is working with one person, and Fruit2Work, a bit broader than that, then my current role now is even broader. And there's pros and cons with each.

Denise: Could you actually help compare the pros and cons? Because it is really helpful to talk to someone who has worked as a clinical psychologist as well as someone who's worked in the corporate world, like you do now. What are the pros and cons of these kinds of jobs?

Doron: Yeah, so as a psychologist, you really work with somebody one-on-one and you can see the difference you're making. It feels very real and you can meet with somebody one week and then they come back the next week and they can describe for you in detail something that's happened, and the difference that it's made. I mean, we're talking obviously about changes that could be incredibly small and slow, but when you're in that setting, you realize what a big difference even small changes make. So, you kind of ride the wins and the losses of your clients and you feel very intimately connected. Fruit2Work's probably in the middle because when you give people work you can also see the big difference that makes on those individuals but its addressing more of the core causes. But at the whole system level, which is where I'm working now, it can sometimes feel a bit more removed. So, you know

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we can just design a program that might affect tens of thousands of people, but I'll never speak to those tens of thousands of people. You've got to trust that then it's delivered. The pros of management consulting are you feel like you can influence a lot more people, but you don't feel that influence in an immediate way, whereas as a psychologist you're working with far fewer people but it feels like a much more intimate connection and you can almost see the difference up close. So yeah, it's kind of that tension between deep and small, or broad but feeling a little bit more disconnected from it.

Denise: Absolutely. I can obviously imagine how studying psychology was helping you in your previous work as a clinical psychologist, but how does psychology help you with your current work in the consultancy area?

Doron: The process and methodology are actually very similar. So, when I'm doing a project with the client, the first third of the project is usually what we call our 'diagnosis' and we'll diagnose the problem. The client will come to us with the problem and we'll spend the first set of a project really trying to work out well, 'what's going on here?' Getting all the information and trying to work out what the problem is and why it's there, and what are all the pieces. We'll spend that middle third developing a solution. And then the final third is really more geared towards how they can implement it. And just to be really clear, all throughout we're working very closely with the client, so the same as with psychology. It's not like as a psychologist a client can come to me and I can develop a plan for them and give it to them. It has to be done together and you have to motivate them and tap into what motivates them already. Same with as consultants. We can't come in and say 'here's your problem, here's your solution.' We have to work really closely with the clients to support them rather than do for them, just as with psychology. Sometimes we'll think there's a good solution, but if a client doesn't like it, doesn't want it, or isn't ready for it, we just have to say, 'okay, it's your work, we're not going to get anywhere if we try to impose solutions on you, we're here to support you.' So, there's a lot of the process that's very similar. The relationship between you and the client is similar in that sense that you're there to support them, not to do for them. A lot of critical thinking, a lot of problem solving, and both are pretty messy. People's lives are not clear. People come and they say 'I've got this problem, or this thing is not working for me,' but there's many, many factors that contribute to why and how. And it's the same in the consulting space where we're talking about sometimes state or federal level systems. There's a lot at play. Sometimes the work of untangling that is quite similar as well, or, the process of doing it anyway.

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Denise: Yeah, thank you. So, what kind of person do you think would really love doing the work that you've done? What kind of person would love working as a clinical psychologist? What kind of person would love working in a consultancy agency?

Doron: So, management consulting at the moment is definitely good for people who like to do different things often. So, a typical project runs for three to four months and then you're off and away. You're doing something completely different. I'm somebody who likes to do something for a few months and then do something else, so this is perfect for me. Quite high intensity and fast paced. And there's a bit of a mix. I'll be facilitating workshops, I'll be doing client interviews, or I'll be working on a report at my computer. In clinical psych there's less variety and it's a bit slower but you're developing a much more in-depth relationship with people. So, you're seeing someone week in, week out. It could be over months, or in some cases years. You definitely can develop an in-depth relationship with somebody that you wouldn't be able to in other environments. So, somebody who likes doing something different every few months in a high-paced environment will definitely like the consulting side. Somebody who really likes that in-depth person-to-person relationship over a long period of time would love being a psychologist.

Denise: Doron, when you started studying psychology, what was your intention with your studies or with your career?

Doron: I did have thoughts of clinical psych, but I was actually really interested in research as well. So, in my undergrad, I managed to tee up some research assistant roles at UNSW in a few different labs, which I really loved and really enjoyed. And then when I wanted to move to Melbourne. I did my Honours through the Florey Neuroscience Institute there. So really, quite a research heavy focus, and I was really interested in research because I'm interested in learning new things. But at the end of my Honours degree, I just thought, you know, the research pace is quite slow and the thought of doing a four-year PhD... I just wasn't sure I would make it to the end of it. And I'm somebody who likes to do different things all the time, as I've already mentioned. So that's when I thought about switching from the research into clinical, and my thought was if there was a particular area of clinical practice I really enjoyed, I could always focus on that and do a PhD in that area later. But as it turns out, I never did and probably never will.

Denise: I know that a consultancy like Nous must work with a lot of different kinds of clients. What's the kind of work that you end up doing? Who are you working with?

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Doron: I really draw on my experiences as a psychologist and my training, so I do most of my work in health, mental health and human services. So, the connection to mental health is obvious. My training and experience in mental health and the mental health system is very valuable, but even in human services, I've done a lot of work with homelessness, family violence and other areas. And having worked with clients who have experienced those things, I have some understanding of the client perspective and their experience going through the system which is really valuable. Same as health. I haven't worked in hospitals, but I did placements as psychologists there, so I'm familiar with the setting and the health environment in general. So, having that psych background has been really useful for my work now as a consultant working in those industries. Definitely.

Denise: Awesome, thank you Doron. Do you have any advice you could give to a current psychology student? Let's say an undergrad who's looking ahead and trying to decide what sort of Masters they may or may not want to do, and what sort of career they may or may not want to do.

Doron: If you had asked me in undergrad about social enterprise, I wouldn't have known that it existed. I couldn't have told you I wanted to start a company for former offenders, and I definitely didn't know what management consulting was. I still sometimes find it hard to fully explain what we do to be honest., Where I've ended up in my career was not planned this way at all. First, what I did was just think about what I wanted to do next. It's probably not intentional, but for some reason I wasn't thinking too far ahead. Not because of some deep philosophical reason, but I was just very focused on the next step, and that turned out to be really useful. I think my advice would be think about what you want to do now and don't worry too much about whether you want to do that forever or not, or what you want to do next. You're setting yourself up for the next thing because opportunities pop up that you never thought of. Like I said, I never thought I would start a business or a social enterprise, or would go into consulting. So, that would be my first piece of advice, really think short term. Think about the next couple of years, what you want to do. And then, in terms of Masters or further training in general, I did the Clinical Masters because you need that to practise as a psychologist. So, if you want to be a clinical psych, then definitely do the Masters and then you can practise. But a Masters degree is a big commitment. It's a lot of time. I'm still paying off my HECS debt, it's a lot of money. So, my advice would also be if you think you're interested in something, try and find a way to have a taste of it. Find a way you can work in that for a little bit, and then if you still really enjoy it and you want to do further study to become more expert in it, then great. But rather than investing upfront in another two years of study

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and then you may or may not still be interested in that work, it may or may not be what you thought it was, see if you can find a way to try it out for a while first. Yeah, so those would be 2 pieces of advice.

Denise: Thank you Doron. I think that's really helpful advice. And thank you for talking with me today. It's been really, really interesting.

Doron: No worries, my pleasure.