

## Gabrielle Kaplan, UX Researcher - Transcript

**Denise:** Alright, with me today we have Gabriel Kaplan. She is a user experience researcher at Atlassian and she did her Bachelor of Psychology and honors with UNSW a few years ago, and is now nearing completion of her Masters of Interactive Design, sorry, it's Masters of *Interaction* Design. I don't even know what that is so we're definitely going to talk about it. Alright, hello Gabriel, thanks for being here.

**Gabrielle:** Thank you yeah, happy to be here.

**Denise:** So, let's start with your psychology studies, and I definitely want to get to your Masters because as I said, I didn't even know that was a Masters that you could do. But what initially took you into psychology when you started? Why did you choose to study it?

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, no, that's a good question and I think at the time I didn't know what I wanted to study at all, so I think I was definitely just looking at what was out there, and what was really appealing about psychology was that I could learn about the human mind, and I'm particularly interested in all things cognition. So, how we reason how we make decisions, how we process information was really intriguing to me. And yeah, I think because I wasn't really aware what I wanted to I thought I may as well study something that I'm really interested in and kind of take it from there and see what happens.

**Denise:** And so it did take you all the way to your Honours, and through that, and when you were going through it, I know you were interested in it, were you... I feel like a typical psychology student would normally be thinking about Clinical Psychology as the next step after Honours. Was that you, or did you already know you wanted this different Masters path?

**Gabrielle:** No, so I was, I didn't know what I wanted and that was the whole thing. I definitely agree that kind of all my friends, everyone who had spoken to had studied psychology would often go down that typical clinical psych kind of pathway or even forensic or organizational as well. But I was never really sure, so I think in the back of my mind I was thinking that's one option. Perhaps I could go into clinical, but I was never sure the whole time if that's definitely what I wanted to do. But I think at the time I didn't even know what all the options were, so I was just kind of going with it and probably only in my third or fourth year of psychology, did I kind of come to think about the UX industry and this kind of a space compared to clinical. And I think once I started looking further into that and doing some internships and getting some, you know, speaking to people in this space and understanding more about it was when I kind of shifted a little bit. But honestly, until that point I just I didn't really know everything was an option.

**Denise:** Which was the first piece of that shift for you? Was it learning about another course of study like the Masters you're in? Was it the internship that you did? What was it that actually, looking back, was the turning point for you to go down the path you're in now?

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, looking back, it probably was the internship and just kind of starting to learn about the space because I was definitely considering clinical, but I just was so unsure of it. But when I found out more about this space and had actual experience, you know doing user research and things like that, I just got really excited about it because I realized that I could kind of apply all of my psychology skills and all of my research skills in this really cool space and work for, you know almost any company you can kind of, you know, everyone needs a UX researcher. Yeah, so yeah, I think once I just learned more

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about this space, I just got really excited and that was probably the turning point. And yeah, early in my Honours year in fourth year was when I did my first kind of UX internship, which is at a start-up company and I just get loved it.

**Denise:** Amazing Gabriel. Not a lot of Honours students also have the capacity to do an internship at the same time. So, good work.

**Gabrielle:** It was pretty hectic. But I must caveat that it was, you know, it was a short internship in one of my semester breaks and you know it wasn't doing it the whole year but it was enough to kind of get me excited and learn a bit about the space.

**Denise:** OK, so that opened your mind up to user experience work, so let's chat about that a little bit. How would you describe how you're using psychology as a user experience researcher and maybe give a little context with your company. I don't know if everyone is familiar with what Atlassian does.

**Gabrielle:** Sure, so yeah. So, starting with where I'm working, so I'm working at Atlassian, which is a software company. So essentially, we do research for our in-house software, so I don't know if you use tools like JIRA, Confluence, Trello. Yeah, those are Atlassian software, so most of them are kind of targeted towards tech teams doing project management type of work, but it's really for any and all teams at the moment. So, some of our products are also for, you know, just everyday businesses and things like that. So yeah, long story short, it's a software company. And in terms of the work that I'm doing, so I'm actually in the Research and Insights team, so there's quite a few of us now, which is really awesome. And for context, I think at least half of my team studied psychology because I do really, really think it's directly relevant. Thinking about why, um, there's a few reasons. I think the obvious reason is understanding human behaviour, and I think as any researcher in any space, I think it's so important to be able to, you know, develop empathy, be able to, you know, interview someone, but understand what they're saying and the context around why they may be saying what they're saying and things like that. And then obviously applying all those, you know everything you learn in psychology about our cognitive biases and anything that might apply to understanding why someone is saying what they're saying and providing more context to that. So, I think that's a really nice crossover between the work that I do and what I studied in psychology. But also, more practically speaking, this is this is another reason that I think is really, really important is honestly applying a research skills. So, I think just having done my Honours thesis and learning how to recruit participants, and run a study, and learn how to design studies appropriately, understand the right research methods, analysis methods, methods, and being able to write that up, and communicate that to other people is exactly what I do at work. So I think like, practically speaking, that's the biggest thing that I got out of the psychology degree was research methods and understanding how to communicate. How to, you know, generate findings and then communicate them back to other people.

**Denise:** Yes, I think that's really interesting point Gabrielle, because I think people who haven't studied psychology probably would already know that when you study it, you learn about empathy, you learn about cognitive biases and all of these things, and human behaviour, but actually so much of what the field is actually just research training.

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**Gabrielle:** Yeah, 100%. It's super helpful and super applicable. So yeah, that was one of the things that I liked the most about it was that I could use these research skills and apply it in a cool industry and do really fun work using these skills.

**Denise:** It seems like UX is a really growing field. Am I right about that? I just keep hearing about it more often lately.

**Gabrielle:** 100%, I think 40 years or so ago, it was tiny and that was when it was still developing as a proper kind of field. And now, I know even when I was doing my Honours not very long ago at all, I didn't really know about it and it wasn't really advertised for psychology graduates. But now I see heaps of jobs available and personally speaking from my team at work, so many people who I work with, are psychology graduates. So, yeah, I think it's definitely growing and I think it's yeah, it's an awesome opportunity for psych grads.

**Denise:** So, do you need to have an Honors in order to do this kind of work? Do you need to have a Masters in order to do this kind of work?

**Gabrielle:** So, it's not like going into Clinical Psychology where you need to, you know, do the appropriate years and be supervised or anything like that. There would just be job opportunities. They'll often ask for experience and relevant studies. So often having a psychology degree is definitely enough. Not doing Honours should still be fine. It definitely helps just because, as I said, you learn so much about research skills and running a study. It definitely helps, and I know in interviews that I've done before I've definitely been able to draw out stuff from my Honours year and be able to talk to that. But if you know if you've just done a three-year psychology undergrad and you're interested, and you can get some experience doing internships or anything like that, then that will be enough. It just helps to break in, but I think you don't actually need more than a psychology degree.

**Denise:** Yeah, so you're choosing to continue studying though, because it's helpful to you and I would love to hear a little bit about what you do in a Masters of Interaction Design, and how you heard about what is it?

**Gabrielle:** All good questions and I had the exact same questions not very long ago because it wasn't something that was always on my mind. I really heard about it and then just signed off and did it. So, I actually heard about it from someone I was working with at the first internship I did, and she'd gone back to study this Masters degree at UTS specifically, and was really excited about it. And when she told me that it was an option I was like, OK, cool, I'd love to kind of have some actual academic background to this UX space. As I said, you don't need it, but I was really excited about that idea. So that's how I found out about it, and I looked at a few different unis as well. But yeah, just settled on this one and in terms of what I actually do.... OK, so to break it down, it's research and design. So, it's definitely a combination of the two. Obviously, myself wanting to specialize in research, that's what I focus on, and I'm, you know, doing my research thesis and kind of specializing on the research side. But it's definitely everything together. The key part of it, which I think brings all of my subjects together, is that it's all about human-centred design, so making sure that you know the person or the user, whoever is using whatever the technology is, that they're at the centre of what you're designing for. So, you're not doing

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it to align with business goals. You're not doing it to align with, you know, making money or being profitable. You're doing it so that it's making it the easiest and best experience for whoever is using that technology, which is something that I think is awesome. So yeah, so it's a lot of on the research side, kind of research methods. It's very heavily qualitative, which is definitely a huge change up from what we're used to do in psychology, which is lots of statistics and things like that. But even at work, I do lots of mixed methods studies which will be qual and quantitative together.

**Denise:** Can you give an example? When you're saying, you know you're researching how to make something really easy, functional, maybe even enjoyable for the user, or the person. What's an example of some of the research you might do to help make that happen?

**Gabrielle:** Sure, so one of the projects I started with when I started my summer internship at Atlassian, and was I think it's a nice example because it was mixed methods and it was quite a high-level study, so it's called a top-tasks methodology. So, we just look at simply speaking, what are the most important tasks to a certain group of users? So, we were looking at IT teams, and we're looking at for these people, what's most important. And then from that, we can do things like create new features that can facilitate them you know doing these top tasks, or change things that we have to better suit what their most important tasks are for, you know people to complete their day to day activities. So, we started off qualitative. Then we did one-on-one interviews with our, you know, target users, who are people working in teams to understand their context of who they are, the types of teams that they work in. But most importantly what they do in their day-to-day job in terms of their top tasks. And we extracted that data, we also used existing kind of interviews that had already been run to try understand what was most important, we had this huge Excel spreadsheet where we extracted all of the data and we kind of coded it together. We used a method called Thematic Analysis, which is when you kind of group together similar codes and you kind of continuously iterate on these groups until you have common themes that come up. And then we got to a point where we had this list of I think there were 30 or so tasks, and that's when we turned it into the quantitative side of things and we tried to quantify what was most important by sending out a survey to, I think, 1000 or so potential users. And we kind of sent them this list that we developed from our qualitative research, and they kind of have to rank what was most important to them. And then by the end of that study we had this awesome kind of really comprehensive, these insights into what's most important in terms of from the bottom up, coming straight from users in that qualitative respect, but then also, once we've used that information, quantifying what is most important, you know from 1000 people, which is more of that, you know larger sample sizes. So that was an awesome experience for me, like understanding how we can combine the two. Yeah, but then I've also got smaller projects which are a lot simpler. There'll be stuff like usability testing. So that would be simply if we have, you know, let's say a Navigation Pane that's causing some friction in in one of our products, we'll just go to users and will, you know, will do an online interview and we'll just give them common tasks to complete, you know in that Navigation Pane or whatever it is in the software, and just call out anything that comes up along the way and pull out what are some common issues that people are having in this Navigation Pane and relaying that back to the designers so that they can kind of iterate on that and improve it.

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**Denise:** Yeah, that sounds really good. It sounds really interesting and like you're having a lot of different things day-to-day. Different things to think about, and different people to talk to.

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, it's definitely very project based, so I'll be doing, like those two projects are two examples of things I've done. They're completely different and you just work with so many different people depending on what the project is and at different levels. So, it keeps things interesting, for sure.

**Denise:** What's your favourite thing about working as a UX researcher?

**Gabrielle:** I think it's similar kind of what I was saying before that I can apply my research skills in this industry context. So I think, I've always just personally loved researching and understanding people and understanding how people reason. And I think being able to apply that at, you know, in a cool industry where you know I'm just working this nine-to-five job and it's just a really lovely set up with really lovely people and I can apply these skills that I have from psychology is really nice for me. I think it was something that I weighed up when I was deciding whether I wanted to do clinical psychology or go into industry, doing something like this, and maybe you know, maybe I'll still go back and forth, and maybe that's still an option, but yeah, at you know at that time I made this decision. And yeah, haven't looked back.

**Denise:** So, so you didn't expect to be where you are today. So, it's likely that you can't really expect where you'll be in the future. But do you have any ideas what you might do next? Do you want to continue in this for a while?

**Gabrielle:** I think I do, so I'm obviously just getting started. You know, I finish my masters, which will be in January next year, which is exciting but come so yeah, so definitely want to just kind of work on the actual research craft and actually just specialize in research and really make sure that I've got all the experience that I need and just really go more in depth in the research side. Something that could be cool for the future and something that I really like about this space is that I hope to, because I'll have these UX research skills, I'd love to be able to work for organizations that, you know, I really want to support. So, for example, having studied psychology, I'd love to work in the mental health space. Whether it's for government or for an NGO, I think would be really exciting to be able to use these skills in an area that I'm really passionate about. So, that's something that is was particularly appealing about UX research, is that everyone needs a UX researcher, so you really can work for such a broad spectrum of organisations and do this one job. So yeah, so probably just focusing on research, but also maybe in a few years' time you know working for the organization in mental health.

**Denise:** You mentioned before I started recording, Gabrielle, that your thesis at the moment is actually blending your UX research and some mental health space sort of context. Are you happy to talk about that and share that a little bit?

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, of course. So yeah, exactly that. Essentially, for my Master of Interaction design, my thesis is super broad, so you know I had my supervisor and he essentially said you can choose your topic. So, I thought I would take the opportunity to go out and actually try find someone in industry and an organization that I'd really want to help, particularly in the mental health space, just because that was something I was passionate about having studied psychology for my undergrad. And just you know,

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a friend happened to work with our local health districts under NSW Health. So, I was able to actually do a project for them which is really exciting because it means I can actually try, you know, not just do a thesis but also try help and give this thesis and hand this off to them. So essentially, I'm in the process of doing it now, but it's a qualitative interview study looking at the experiences of young people who are navigating the mental health system. So obviously I, I think as a lot of us would know, having studied psychology, the actual policy involved in the actual current service network is incredibly complicated and I think for young people it's a really complicated kind of journey to navigate, particularly if you're, you know, living with a lived experience of mental illness, it's particularly hard, you're at your most vulnerable. So, what this study is trying to achieve is to look at it from the perspective of young people, and this is that human-centred lens of looking at, you know, just interviewing young people who are experiencing this, I'm just looking at what are these major kind of issues along the way from their perspective so that we can look at themes that are coming up that are common between the people that I'm interviewing and try think of the think of solutions and feed that back to New South Wales Health to try make change. So, it's a really exciting project. Yeah, and I yeah I really like how it's kind of combining my psychology undergrad and then my current Masters.

**Denise:** Yeah, it sounds perfect for you but also really valuable beyond you know beyond your thesis and project.

**Gabrielle:** I hope so.

**Denise:** Yeah, I'd like to ask another question about your Masters because I think you know this is moving into a different area for psychology than a lot of people would expect, or know is possible for them if they're if they're in their, you know, Bachelors or Honours and looking ahead. What kind of person would really enjoy and really thrive in that kind of field, the Masters of Instruction Design. Who was that designed for? Who is going to be happy there?

**Gabrielle:** I think lots of people, but I think honestly, anyone who's interested in how people reason in human cognition and kind of developing empathy and people who like interacting with people every day. Because obviously running interviews and qualitative research like that is really fun and you're meeting all these new people and trying to understand and empathize with them, so I think that's something that if you're the kind of person who likes that, it's a really nice space to be in. And also if I don't know if you're not set on one thing, I think it's a nice, you know, as I said, it's really nice to be able to apply what you've learnt in any industry, so I think if you're someone who's looking to work in a particular space that might be outside of Clinical Psychology or whatever that might be and apply what they've learned to that space, it's really nice. So if you have if, even if you do want to work in the mental health space, it's something that you can still apply these skills to.

**Denise:** Yeah, that question was genuinely for me. Because I am very interested in a lot of what you're saying about your job and the kind of work you're doing and I didn't even know about that Masters existing, so it was really helpful. Thank you, Gabrielle.

**Gabrielle:** Right? I don't know either. I'm just so happy that we can do this because I think why don't more psychology graduates know about it?

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**Denise:** Well, I think we have still a pretty limited view of its psychology, right? Yeah, whenever I tell people I'm studying psychology, they automatically assume that means I want to be a Clinical Psychologist and then I explain to them that's like saying someone who went to law school is definitely going to be a trial lawyer. You know, in in big criminal trials. It's just one way to do the job.

**Gabrielle:** I couldn't agree more. I couldn't agree more and I know a lot of my friends at the moment who I did Honours without going through similar things of oh wait, what do I want to do? Some of them are incredibly happy and they've gone down clinical, forensic, organizational roots and they're absolutely loving it. But some of them are like, oh, I want to explore other opportunities or whatever that may be. Yeah, it's comforting to hear how kind of broad it is, what you can do with a psychology degree, because I think that was something that gave me some anxiety as an undergraduate student. Thinking what if I don't fit into if clinical psychology isn't perfect for me, what do I do? But it's just really confident to know that there are other opportunities out there.

**Denise:** So many. Sso many. More than the two of us know, definitely. I'd just like to ask you a question based on what you just said. So, you said you felt quite a bit of anxiety as a student, thinking what if I don't do clinical psych or I do it and I hate it's not me and it's not what I'm supposed to be doing. What else is there? If you could today, who you are today, if you could turn around and give yourself a piece of advice, you know a piece of advice to that version of you when you were in school, and a bit anxious about what was going to come next. What advice would you give yourself?

**Gabrielle:** I would say slow down. It's going to be OK and you have your whole undergrad to explore what you're going to do. Honestly, don't rush into thinking that you need to like tick this box or do one specific pathway because that happens to be what everyone else is doing. Keep an open mind and just continue exploring opportunities and speaking to anyone about what they do and just reaching out to everyone to kind of find out what's out there. I think that's a huge comforting thing and I think just not boxing yourself into one thing and the other is really awesome because you just don't know where you're gonna end up. Yeah, and just remember that there are kind of other opportunities out there that you might not even know about right now, but might just come up in conversation in the future. Yeah, that would be it.

**Denise:** I think that's great advice. I think that some people will find it easier to follow that advice than others because seeking information and making connections isn't always that easy to do, right, especially when you're studying or if you're feeling stressed. From your story, something that I picked up on was when you did the internship in your Honours year. So, how did you even find that internship? How did you get on to that? Because I think something like that, that kind of a job experience is really valuable when you're not yet sure what kind of job you might want. How did you find your internship?

**Gabrielle:** So that one I was really lucky. I actually knew someone who was working there. So, I got really lucky with the connection and I was able to have that internship, which I think helped me get future jobs and internships because I had my foot in the door. So, I think I was quite fortunate in that way that I had that that initial connection. But something else that I was doing at the time, which to this day I'm really happy that I did and continue doing, was reaching out to everyone and anyone who would listen who was in the UX space. I went through a phase when I was just so unsure what I wanted to do and I was

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getting all excited about the idea of UX that I would literally just hit up people on LinkedIn and try get a coffee date with them, whether it was virtual or in-person. I'd go to meetups, which is actually something I definitely recommend. I went to some really cool meetups. This was back before COVID, so it was actually in person and you could kind of speak to everyone and get to know what types of jobs they have and connect with them in that way. That was really interesting for me and I still do. That's still good at meetups and things like that and conferences. I went as a student volunteer to a conference I think was two years ago now on digital accessibility, which I didn't even know anything about at the time. And I found it so, so interesting and just being there, particularly as a student volunteer A, you get to attend the conference for free as a student volunteer, which is awesome and B you get to meet every single person in this space and you're actually interacting with them because you're a volunteer. You might be, you know, moving them to their seat or chatting to them at lunchtime, anything like that. It's just such an awesome way to meet people who are in this space. And then you know, you can add them on LinkedIn after and keep in touch with them and then they'll probably be happy to you know, do a coffee sometime in the future. And you never know, they might have a job opportunity. So, that was definitely something I did quite a lot when I was trying to get into the industry was just speak to anyone.

**Denise:** Nice. I think those are really good networking tips for people. Gabriel, thank you for sharing that.

**Gabrielle:** Awesome.

**Denise:** Yeah alright, well thank you so much for talking with me. This has been eye opening for me. I learned about a Masters degree I didn't know of before I talked to you, I'm even more excited to learn more about the UX space, so this has been really helpful. Thank you so much for being here and chatting with me.

**Gabrielle:** Awesome, thanks for having me.