

Jarrold Calabria, Director at the Behavioural Architects - Transcript

Denise: Alright, today I'm talking to Jarrold Calabria. He's a Director at the Behavioural Architects following his study of technology at UNSW. Hi, Jarrold.

Jarrold: Hi, Denise.

Denise: Hi nice to meet you, thank you for talking to me.

Jarrold: Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it and looking forward to having a chat today.

Denise: OK, great. Well I'd love to know what you do so let's get right into it. As a Director at the Behavioural Architects, what do you actually do?

Jarrold: Yeah, it's a very good question and I'm not, as the name suggests, I'm not an architect, I'll clear that up initially. What I do and what the Behavioural Architects is essentially a research, an insights, and a strategy consultancy. And so, I spend a lot of my time understanding problems, conducting consultancy for clients, and particularly with the focus around behavioural science and behavioral economics.

Denise: What kind of clients do you work with?

Jarrold: Yeah, it's actually really mixed and really varied. We do both private and public sector, and it can be really thinking from finance clients, so banks, all the way to kind of new snacks like chocolates and even really complex behavioural challenges for humans, such as how do you get people to perform more energy efficient behaviours?

Denise: Oh, like what? What kind of behaviours are you hoping that people will perform more efficiently?

Jarrold: It could be anything like whether they just connect their home to solar panels, for instance, even making small changes around the home to upgrade appliances. Yeah, so it can be kind of this smallest little behaviour that we're after from people.

Denise: It sounds like you're doing a lot of different things. Very strategic things, sort of a strategy level job, so I'm curious to know what you actually do on a normal day. What's a typical day look like for you in this kind of job?

Jarrold: Yeah, so typical day I kind of work mostly probably with a team of four or five people and kind of day to day what we're doing as part of that is we might be conducting some research, so we might be speaking to customers out in the real world, understanding kind of what they're doing, what they're buying, what they're thinking about. So that market kind of interviews with customers. Then we'll spend some time actually analysing what we've found, coming up with hypothesis. And really then from that points about developing a strategy. How do we kind of overcome a problem that we've identified or how do we encourage a particular behaviour we want?

Denise: That sounds really fun. Is it enjoyable?

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Jarrold: Yeah, it really is. I think that's the one thing I really enjoy about my work, is it's complex and it's challenging at times, but as a result it's really rewarding when you can kind of get to the end of the challenge and feel like come up with a solution.

Denise: Yeah, so listening to you describe your job, it sounds to me like you're using a lot of your research skills initially in the talking to people figuring out what's going on, what's happening, why is it happening. And then you're using a lot of your other, maybe softer skills that you learn psychology in the consideration of what the solution is. Is that a fair assessment?

Jarrold: Yeah, it really is a fair assessment I think. Because our agency focuses a lot on behavioural science, and I think first of all understanding why people do the things they do. And that's where psychology comes in. A lot is kind of, 'let's understand what people are doing and why,' and then off the back of that, it's applying it to say, 'ok, well, how can we shift it in the direction we want to see,' or 'how can we encourage the behaviour we want to see?'

Denise: So, I'm sure you can't give lots of details about all your clients, but could you give me sort of an example case study of the kind of problem someone might have and this sort of solution that you guys would work on?

Jarrold: Yeah, definitely, so I'll give an example that probably a lot of people have seen in their day-to-day commutes around Sydney. So, if you've ever seen at the train stations the arrows going up, kind of one side of the stairs, and the arrows going down the other, that was one of the projects that we worked on. And essentially it was, how do we kind of reduce congestion and increase people flow throughout train stations. So, that was that was kind of the challenge we were set. And it was research skills actually being in station, understanding what people do. Why do they block the stairs? Why do they go on the wrong side, because it's always a norm. And from that developing a kind of a strategy. And as you can see some kind of interventions to try and prevent that.

Denise: I need to ask Jarrold, because I've asked this question before. Why do people block the stairs? What's going on?

Jarrold: I think it's as simple as, and we can probably all relate to this, the idea that we're typically minds on something else. We're either heads in our phones or we're worried about are we gonna make a meeting or are we gonna get to work on time. And so really it just comes to a kind of fault of inattention. We're just we're not paying attention to our surroundings or how we might be impacting others.

Denise: So therefore, the arrows visually capture attention and say keep moving, get out of the way.

Jarrold: Exactly because the kind of assumption, I think sometimes can be oh we'll just put a sign there for people to read. Just keep left and they'll do that, but of course we know that people don't want to work hard to actually decipher what our sign says, or they may not even be paying attention. So, the idea of those stair decals is really, you can't miss it but it takes very little effort for you actually to notice what do you want me to do.

Denise: That's a good example of what you do. So, do you need to have studied psychology in order to have this sort of job that you have?

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Jarrold: Yeah, that's a good question. I would say, not necessarily, but it certainly helps. In kind of the team that we work in, there's there really is a mix. We've got people that come from a psychology background, but equally there are people that come from an advertising or a marketing background as well. So, it is a real mix, but certainly I think having that psychology backing really puts you in good stead in terms of not only the research and the analysis techniques, but really just understanding human behaviour as well.

Denise: Yeah, is there something that that you often think back to from your psychology study in this job? Is there a really obvious link for you, something that's really helpful for this kind of work?

Jarrold: Yeah, definitely. I actually I remember doing a module, I think it must spend in 3rd year. I think back in 3rd year we actually did a module which was all about cognitive biases and how people are biased in decision making and that was really something that kind of sparked it for me in terms of really, I think, acknowledging how irrational sometimes our decisions can be when we think we're totally logical, rational decisions. So, it was kind of that moment back in my course that kind of really sparked this, 'wow, we do some strange things, I want to understand why we do them and try and solve or fix for them.'

Denise: I think that's great. I'm also interested in that, and I think it helps also to reduce any kind of judgment around decision making you know, when we understand that there are biases we all have. I for example have sometimes fallen prey to the optimism bias. Do you have a preferred bias?

Jarrold: Uh, for mine I really love kind of loss aversion and the fact that we just hate giving up something that we've already got. I just find it's so irrational sometimes, but just that that I don't know that unyielding kind of, we just don't want to give up the things that we've got because we feel that lost so much more.

Denise: Yeah, losses loom larger, right? Yeah, so did you know that this was the sort of job you wanted when you decided to study psychology?

Jarrold: No, absolutely not. I was very much in the camp of I came into psychology thinking I wanted to do clinical psychology and that that was the original plan. Then I probably got a year into my degree and I decided in actual fact that I think I want to do clinical psychology. I just thought I don't think it's something I'm gonna enjoy day today. And then at that point, to be honest, I think that was the real benefit of psychology is once I decided I didn't wanna do that, I didn't feel pigeonholed into. So, for me in terms of kind of where I've ended up now at the start, if I look back at my degree at the start, I had no idea I'd end up where I am now in terms of the kind of field and the type of work I do. But it just so happened that I think psychology equips you really, really well with that skill set that when you get out into the world and you get that job, you're actually really well click equipped in terms of critical thinking, understanding why people do things and you know how to apply them.

Denise: I think that you know where you are now, looking back, it's easy to see how you got here, right? But when you're a student, it's really hard to see all of the possible options. There's so many more, other than clinical psychology. In fact, many, many more, but you don't know what they are. So, how did you

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actually go from, you know, being after your first year in psych thinking, 'actually, maybe I don't want to be a clinical psychologist' to getting into this job. How did you find out about it?

Jarrold: Yeah, so I actually kind of during when I was doing my Honours. I thought, oh, you know what I want to get some experience. So, I went out to essentially a careers fair and thought, OK, I'll have a look at what's around them what's available for a psychologist. And I had a rough idea in terms of well, look, I think I'd enjoy something in the consulting space. But in actual fact I got an internship at a research agency, so we're just conducting a lot of, I suppose market researcher as such, kind of understanding why are people buying things, what are they doing it for. And at the time it was kind of, it was a neat fit because I already had some research skills from psychology. And it was a relatively good match. So actually yeah, I initially started with the kind of traditional market research job and then off the back of that, that was where I really tried to increase the amount of psychology or the amount of kind of previous learnings I've got.

Denise: And how did you find out about a company like this? A consulting company that's really looking at behaviour and changing people's behaviour? How did you find this?

Jarrold: It was, it was actually a relatively kind of stroke of luck kind of thing because I was originally yeah, I was at that previous job just doing traditional kind of research as such, and I was actually considering going back to study. In all honesty, I had decided actually I really love graphic design, I'll go study that. I think I was within kind of weeks or days of actually signing up to a graphic design course and then lo and behold, just someone who I knew kind of on my LinkedIn network said, oh, there's a kind of three-month contract going at this place, mix of consulting but a bit of psychology thrown in might be of interest. And at that point I thought last three months it's kind of worth a shot. Why not? And I think it's 4 1/2 years later, I'm still here.

Denise: Yeah, oh, that's great. So, I think that consulting work is often something that people who studied psychology consider doing. I know I have as well. How would you describe the kind of work you have as a consultant? Sort of pros and cons. You know, what are the things that are great about working for consultancy and maybe what are some of the things that some people wouldn't like as much.

Jarrold: Yeah, definitely. I think probably first and foremost the big pro and probably the thing that attracted me most was... and it was probably a frustration I had during Honours, obviously, you're operating at a very kind of theoretical level and the thing that I really kind of wanted was to see it kind of executed in the real world. I want to see the practical application, which is not always possible. Yeah, you're running those studies, and so for me, that's one of the big pros is not only do you get to run the research and provide strategic recommendations, but then you actually get to see it played out in the real world, and whether it's on a kind of a giant billboard or whether it's in a train station on the staircase, you actually get to see the kind of the fruits of your work then and there. So that's one of the things I really love, and I suppose the second thing is the relationship you develop with your clients as well in terms of you're seen as that trusted advisor. Because you've got the psychology background, you've got the understanding of human behaviour. So, if you enjoy having that kind of trusted advisor role and really developing that relationship out, I think it often appeals to a lot of people who enjoy that type of work. And on the other hand, in terms of what it what people might not enjoy as much, and I

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think there's a few things. You do spend I think a lot of time just sitting with problems and thinking and and at times it can actually be a difficult or frustrating process. It's nice once you work through the kind of, the hurt almost in terms of the challenge, but there is a lot of time spent just trying to work through problems and constantly problem solving. And I think probably the other thing too is in terms of what might not be so good from a consultant point of view is you change what you're looking at very frequently and you have to kind of jump from one hour we're talking about chocolate now we're talking about cars, or a bank. And so if you're the type of person that loves to kind of really get into a challenge and focus on that for weeks at an end. You have to be able to jump really quickly from one challenge to another and just drop it at that moment. So yeah, it's probably difficult for anyone that really likes to just sit and kind of just think on a problem for a long period of time.

Denise: Yeah, do you have any advice for somebody who's thinking about maybe doing the kind of work that you're doing?

Jarrold: Yeah, I think for me couple of things. One is get as much experience in a business as you can be even if it is internship. So, I just think it really puts people in a lot of good stead and sets them apart when it comes to that kind of interview stage if you can demonstrate I've been there, I've done that, I've shown it. And I, I think the second thing, and I've found this as pretty much everyone I've been through a psychology course with, is just have a natural curiosity to kind of want to know about why do people do things? If I don't understand it, I want to find out more. I really kind of value that in people when they've got that natural curiosity and just that drive to want to know why and how.

Denise: Absolutely. I think that most people who choose to study psychology, probably half that drive right? I mean, that's really at the base the question we all have when we decide to do it, is what's happening? Why are people doing what people are doing?

Jarrold: Yeah, exactly I really do. I think it tends to attract those type of people that just have that natural curiosity. Hey, I do really weird things or make strange choices that don't seem logical. What's the basis for it?

Denise: Yeah, I get the sense that, you know, where you are today isn't as planned. You know you didn't think that you'd be having this job doing this work. If you could today turn around and see your past self, your past undergraduate psych student self, and give that version of you some advice from where you are today. What might you say to past Jarrold?

Jarrold: Yeah, it's a really good question. I think for me looking back it would probably be not to place so much pressure on what the outcome will be in terms of what's the job you're gonna land into. I often found that kind of coming from school into university, there was this big focus on again what job are you going to end up with off the back of this, and I think at times it can be a lot of comparison to between students or friends or that kind of thing about what are you doing? What are you doing? But for me, I think in what I found, I ended up in something that I'd never originally planned and it wasn't through any kind of formulated plan or kind of anything on my part, it just happened to play out that way. So, for me, it's about putting less pressure on where you're gonna end up and more on really immersing yourself as

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you go through the degree on what can you learn and what are the skills you can take up, because that is essentially what's going to be really valuable when you end up taking that job out of university.

Denise: Yeah, I think that's good advice. I've talked to so many people about what they do and almost everybody who's doing something they really love never really expected to get there. They didn't think that's what they would end up doing. There's always a surprise factor with careers. And so that mix of preparing yourself and planning and making smart choices to go in the direction that you want to go in, but also understanding that you might not get to exactly the thing you have in mind because something better might come along... That's the goal, but it's not always easy when you're, you know, maybe in your first degree and a bit stressed. Do you have any tips on how? How could a student who's young and looking ahead at jobs and feeling the pressure of the outcome, how could they actually try and let go of the need to focus on the outcome? Because it's quite easy to do that now, but at the time when you're feeling all of that pressure in the comparison with other students, how do you do it?

Jarrold: Yeah, totally. It's such it is such a difficult thing because I think you've got all these kind of external pressures. Whether it be peers, whether it be parents, whether it be just kind of the outside world, and I mean I often found it was just really helpful to kind of forget for a moment, and it's difficult to do, but forget for a moment about those external kind of sources of influence that might in your ear or that kind of thing, and just take a moment to reflect inwards. Say hey, what are the things that I really love about this degree and what are the things that I find really fascinating or that make me want to attend the lecture or tutorial and get me really excited? And then try and find opportunities to do more and more of that. I've always been a kind of big believer in find the things that you really enjoy and then build a career around just trying to do that more often. Because I think eventually you get to a point where you say actually I really enjoy what I'm doing because it's topics or it's the types of things that I love.

Denise: Yeah, I totally agree. I think that if you follow something that you're genuinely interested in and you care about, it's never going to steer you wrong, right? It's always gonna be somehow still on the right path. You know when I asked you that question about how could students feel less pressure thinking about where they're going to go after school? It's actually a good question for a behavioural architect. How could you change the behaviour of the university culture to help students calm down and understand that eventually will get somewhere that's interesting. They will have jobs in the future, even if they don't know what the companies are yet?

Jarrold: Yeah, yeah, it is. It's a really good challenge and look, I think the first thing I will do is, yes, of course, degrees are the ultimate goal at the end, but I think the joy and the kind of the pure benefit of university as well is much more the life experience that you get along it, in terms of the people you'll interact with, the new experiences that you'll have. It really is. It's a time of kind of a lot of learning and learning very quickly over the space of kind of three or four years. So, for me, if I was to solve that challenge as a behavioural architect, I'd really be looking at yeah, absolutely degrees and coursework is part of it, but how can we enrich the student experience around it so that it's not just a case of a pass or a fail on a test, it's more about what were the practical skills or the life experience that I picked up along the way as well as the degree.

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Denise: Do you have some practical skills that really stand out for you from studying psych that you use a lot?

Jarrold: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think first of all, probably one of those skills is, I think, beginning with hypotheses. In a lot of the work we do, we kind of before we might even talk to a customer before we even develop a strategy, part of the job is immerse ourselves and kind of what's already known and let's develop a set or a series of hypotheses, which was absolutely the kind of process you go through in psychology, whether you're writing a thesis or that kind of thing. But I feel it's a really valuable way to go into any kind of challenge, because at least then you feel someone informed and you've got some things that your stress testing essentially and look if the hypothesis, and if you can't validate them necessarily, that's fine, but it's a really good starting point. And so I think, yeah, certainly that's that approach, and I think probably the other really practical skill was actually really just around kind of public speaking and presenting as well. I think that was the nice thing as part of psychology is, there was always plenty of opportunity to practice presentation to be talking in public forums to be presenting results, or to be discussing even in a group assignment. And I, I think. That's a critical skill if I look for me personally, that's really kind of put me in good stead when I've ended up in this job.

Denise: Yeah, I'm sure there's a lot of teamwork in your job. A lot of collaboration and brainstorming.

Jarrold: Yeah, absolutely. Kind of in my job, it lives or dies by how well you kind of operate within a team. And I think, too, acknowledgement that to be a good team member, you don't have to have excellent skills in every single facet. It's about identifying what are your strengths and then what are the strengths of the person sitting across the table from you. And let's each play to our strengths rather than try and do absolutely everything.

Denise: Absolutely yeah. Alright, well Jarrold, thank you so much for talking to me today about your job. It sounds fascinating. I would love to hear more about what you're doing to change the behaviour of people, but I think that's all we have time for today. So, thank you so much for chatting.

Jarrold: Thanks, so much Denise. Lovely chatting.