

## **Sasha Tregebov – Boosting Trust and Inclusivity with Behavioral Insights**

Host: Maggie John

### **Overview:**

Sasha Tregebov explains how applying insights from behavioural science can improve the design and delivery of policies, programs and services. As the Director of BIT Canada, Tregebov works to bring a more human-centred and evidence-driven approach to supporting job seekers, workers, and employers. Tregebov explains how “choice architecture” and the “Law of Least Effort” impact the choices and decisions we make. To avoid bias and mitigate risk, organizations should examine the choice architecture of their processes for such things as hiring, promotions, and budgeting.

### **Highlights from our conversation include:**

1. Tregebov believes it's essential for organizations to identify and remove all “frictions” that could inhibit uptake of new technologies, as well as programs and services.
2. Organizations need to incorporate user uptake as a core element of program design, rather than leaving it out of the design process.

### **MAGGIE:**

We are back. Magnet Network Live.

I am your host, Maggie John, and I'm now joined by Sasha Tregebov.

He leads BIT Canada, which uses behavioral science to address public policy challenges.

His work focuses on applying insights from psychology and economics to help governments and organizations create more effective and inclusive policies.

Welcome, Sasha.

**SASHA:**

Thank you so much.

**MAGGIE:**

So tell me, what was your biggest, I've been asking everybody, what's your biggest takeaway from the sessions that you've attended so far?

**SASHA:**

So I was able to catch a couple of really great sessions yesterday, and I think the one that I've been thinking about most was about trust and about how to kind of reverse declines in trust that Canadians feel towards service organizations, other institutions.

So still percolating on that one.

**MAGGIE:**

Yeah, we heard somebody else talk about that, how that is. It has stirred a lot of conversation about what does trust look like in technology, especially with AI as well.

So let's talk about behavioral science. How can behavioral science help organizations create more inclusive work environments that support diversity and equity?

**SASHA:**

Behavioral science is, as you mentioned in the intro, all about those factors, often those hidden or non-conscious factors that influence our behavior and our decision making, in particular the way that our context, the systems we live and work in, the environment, our physical environment, our social environment, how those kind of subtly influence our behavior without even us knowing about it.

And those non-conscious factors are particularly prominent and important in determining the level of inclusivity of an organization.

So the extent to which employees feel like they belong at work, how inclusive hiring, promotion, pay processes are.

So just maybe to give you a couple of examples to take that out of the theoretical and into the kind of practical, you know, people who identify with or belong to groups that have been historically excluded from power, they're unsurprisingly a lot less likely to speak up in group meetings.

And especially if they're speaking up to maybe throw a dissenting point of view into the mix, maybe kind of challenge some assumptions.

And so if our organization is really focusing our decision-making structures on those big group meetings and we're expecting to kind of get that feedback and make better decisions through that forum, maybe that's not actually the most inclusive way.

Maybe we should have opportunities before the meeting, after the meeting, for people to provide their feedback, their challenges, their ideas in kind of channels in which they may feel a little bit more comfortable.

And maybe if I could just give you one more example, I really want to kind of point listeners to the work of some really phenomenal behavioral scientists who work kind of at the intersection of behavioral science, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

People like Iris Bonet, people like Dr. Sonia Kang, who's just up the street at the University of Toronto, Dr. Joyce He. And Joyce and Sonia did this really cool study that looked at competitions for promotions in large employers.

And this employer was basically having people that were eligible for a promotion nominate themselves if they wanted that promotion.

And so they would have to go through a step, you know, let HR know, hey, I'm interested in this thing, will you consider me? Let me know what I need to do.

And what they found is that men were much more likely than women.

**MAGGIE:**

Not a huge shock. Not a surprise, Sasha.

**SASHA:**

So what they did is this employer was open. They were worried about this and they were open to changing their approach.

And so instead, what they did is by default, all eligible employees were opted into that competition.

Now, of course, you could say, hey, I'm not interested in being promoted. I like my current role. You could opt out. And that gender gap completely disappeared.

Interesting.

Sorry, I know I'm rambling a little bit.

I think the kind of thank you. I think so. But I'm biased.

So I think the idea is there's this notion in behavioral science of choice architecture. Again, that context in which we're making choices. What's the default? When do I need to put my hand up? How is input being solicited?

Employers can use behavioral science by thinking about the choice architecture of how they make decisions, of how they hire, of how they promote, of how they allocate budgets and on and on and on.

**MAGGIE:**

You talked about the gender gap and the gender difference. I wonder what that looks like when we boil it down to ethnicity as well.

**SASHA:**

Yeah.

You know, it's, I think, perhaps intuitive and I think probably even fair to make inferences.

The reality is, and we've actually been doing some work with ESDC to try to, Employment and Social Development Canada, to try to correct this, but the vast majority of the literature focuses on gender-based discrimination and differences.

And we have not learned nearly enough about racial and ethnic discrimination and how that plays out.

Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities. I mean, there are so many dimensions in which people experience exclusion in the labor market and in their work.

And unfortunately, the research is much kind of stronger. And we've actually, my colleague, Brianne Kirkpatrick, worked with Dr. Sonia Kang and published through Employment and Social Development Canada, this great public free resource that sort of goes through all the evidence on what really works for each of those groups and where are the gaps in our knowledge.

So folks can look up Employment and Social Development Canada, Behavioral Insights, Equity. You'll see that report right away. It's really great.

**MAGGIE:**

Well, what strategies can employers then adopt to better use behavioral insights to prepare their workforce for technological shifts and automation?

**SASHA:**

Yeah, it's a great question. I think there's something there.

It's an area where there hasn't been like a huge amount of research, I would say.

But one of the things about human beings is that we are incredibly efficient.

One of the founders of behavioral science, Daniel Kahneman, an absolutely kind of wonderful thinker, scholar, what have you.

He talks about the law of least effort.

That if there are multiple ways to achieve a goal, human beings will always seem to coalesce around the one that requires the least effort because we're kind of evolved to be efficient.

But what that means is any little bits of friction, an extra step in a process, some complex language that doesn't totally make sense to us.

A reminder to do something that comes three days before we have to do it instead of two hours, we just kind of tune all of that out. And we use it as an excuse to not do the thing. Wow. Right.

But non-consciously, we're not aware of this. We're not like, oh, if it wasn't for this friction, I would definitely take this new AI tool to increase my workflow efficiency or whatever.

So what that means is that friction or sludge, which refers to kind of unnecessary frictions, that's really the enemy.

And so if you're hoping or encouraging your workforce to adopt new tools, new technologies in their work, you have to be rigorous in identifying every piece of friction in that journey for them to use that tool and do everything you can to take that friction out.

I mean, like it's kind of like obvious, but it's also kind of amazing. Like, you know, back when we were getting set up as an organization, we did like the simplest project you could ever imagine. We were working for the UK tax authority and they were trying to get people to..they had created these online forms for you to pay your taxes.

And they were trying to get people to use those online forms because it saved everybody a lot of time and hassle or whatever. And they were sending people a letter saying, hey, this is now online. Go here and you can access this form. And the letter would take you to like a landing page.

And the first link on that landing page was to the form. And we were like, you know, you've kind of created an extra step. Why don't you in the letter send the URL directly to the form?

So we're saving people like three seconds of time. Like you would think it would be completely irrelevant, right?

And yet we see a statistically significant, I think it was 22% relative increase in how many people use the form within 28 business days or whatever the kind of standard was.

So I just really cannot overstate when you're looking at those kind of transactional behavior change things, really friction is the place to start.

**MAGGIE:**

So for an employer listening to this, thinking, you know, we're bringing in AI or whatever new technology into our team environment. It's really problem solving, thinking it through what is that extra step that might bring somebody back, might, you know, or just bring somebody, what's the word I'm looking for?

Not want somebody to engage in this new technology and kind of erase that. Think ahead for the employee that's going to have to adapt to this new technology.

**SASHA:**

Perfectly said. Perfectly said. Like, are we expecting people to read a six-page intro? Or can you distill it down to four bullets? Yeah. Right? Are you expecting people to log on to one thing and then another thing and create an account?

Or can it be one step? Like these little things are actually going to have a huge influence on adoption of, for example, like generative AI to improve certain marketing or outreach communications or, you know, whatever the use case might be.

**MAGGIE:**

Or even I'm thinking, Sasha, like video versus, like a video instructional versus reading a six-page manual.

**SASHA:**

Or give them the option. Right. Right. Yeah. It's thinking ahead. Perfect example.

**MAGGIE:**

So how can behavioral insights be applied to support SMEs in navigating the challenges of adapting to a rapidly changing economy?

**SASHA:**

So I think it's a bit of a tougher question to answer. I think part of it is around thinking through the employee layer, right? So exactly what we just talked about, right? If you adopting these technologies is fundamentally a function of your employees kind of accepting that change, maybe even pursuing or leading that change within your organization, I think what we just spoke on is totally relevant. Right.

So a lot of the work that I do is on, as you mentioned, public policy and kind of like government programs. And so, you know, I imagine there are already or there are being contemplated like government programs, advisory programs, grant programs, financing programs that aim to help SMEs adopt these technologies.

And what I would say is think about uptake actually as a core kind of element of the design of your program. Don't design a great program and then figure out how you're going to engage small businesses. Yeah.

Because you know what small businesses don't spend all day doing? Thinking about government...programs.

They're thinking about their customers, their employees, their market, just making it through. Right. Right. Get it to the end of the day. And so, you know, you've got to have a really, really good strategy for how are they going to learn about this program? Why are they going to spend time out of their incredibly busy day away from their core responsibilities to engage with this program?

So, again, things like sludge, but also things like network effect.

Are you relying on government being the one communicating this program? Are they on the government channels? Do they care what government thinks? Is that the audience that they...is that the messenger that resonates with them?



Or do you take a more network, peer-driven approach? You know, personally, I think that's going to be way more effective from a behavior change standpoint, because, you know, one of the hidden factors that influence our decision making is these messenger effects. often I don't think about the substance of the message.

I actually think about who's communicating to me. How did you get the message? Exactly. If they're like me, if I trust them, if I like them, if I recognize myself in them,

I'm going to be so hugely inclined to go with what they say, to believe in what they say, even if it doesn't make nearly as much sense as what some other messenger who I don't have that.

**MAGGIE:**

Goes back to trust, what we talked about at the very beginning.

Absolutely. Yeah. Thanks so much, Sasha.

**SASHA:**

Thank you.

**MAGGIE:**

That was Sasha Tregebov. He is the Director of Behavioral Insights at BIT Canada.