

BUILDING A SOCIAL SCIENCE-LED USER RESEARCH PRACTICE IN A DIGITAL HEALTH COMPANY

IN CONVERSATION WITH ROSIE WEBSTER



Rosie Webster is currently Science Lead for [Zinc](#)'s venture builder programme. She has a PhD and an MSc in health psychology. Prior to Zinc, Rosie was Lead User Researcher at [Babylon Health](#) where she established the foundations of an effective Behavioural Science practice. We interviewed Rosie for the [Response-ability.tech](#) podcast. What follows is an edited version of our interview.

BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF AN EFFECTIVE BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE PRACTICE AT BABYLON HEALTH

As a company, Babylon wanted to focus on prevention. They're an online health care company, but were keen to think about how to support people to be more healthy. I came into Babylon as a lead user researcher, but my goal was to bring in the behavioural science stuff. The role that I came in on wasn't even a patient-facing team so I had to work to get into the right places.

I initially showed value through delivering training to other teams: giving them the tools they needed to bring behavioural science into their work, and getting them excited about it.

Because I came in at a lead level, I got the opportunity to work on some cross-company strategy projects, which gave me exposure to senior leadership. That got me away from the standard usability testing that we might tend to do when we're embedded in product teams, and it was a chance for get me the respect that I needed for people to be able to think oh, yeah, Rosie knows what she's talking about, which is always a great start.

I've always been a really strong believer in democratisation, both on the research and the social sciences side. It's important not to be precious about thinking only I can do my job because that's not the case much of the time. This enabled product managers and designers to do the tactical usability testing stuff so that I could go and do other things.

Enabling people to use behavioural science gets

them excited about it. If they just come to me and I do it for them, they're, oh great, that's useful. But when they actually do it themselves, that's when people think, oh, yeah, this works, this is interesting, and they can feel a lot more ownership over it.

I then worked on projects for others. So once I'd done some cross-company strategy projects, I moved to a centralised role focusing primarily on the behavioural science stuff, acting as an internal consultant. I worked with various teams supporting them on their projects, helping them to think about how they design various things, the solutions in

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the product journey, and how they might measure impact. For example, I worked with the team who do a lot of our proactive communications about how we can inform the messaging around inviting people for smear tests, for example, or Covid vaccinations.

Broadly speaking it was about getting people excited, getting people interested in talking about behavioural science stuff. So it's as much marketing as it is anything else. I had a great manager, and a great Head of Experience Design, who were

both very invested in this kind of work and saw the importance of it.

Before I left Babylon, that's essentially what I spent a lot of my time doing: having the right conversations with people, working out who to speak to, who to sit down with.

I got the opportunity to present a weekly company stand up, to really pitch it and market it and sell it as, look, this is something that can really transform what we're doing, but also doing that in a very accessible way, bringing in accessible, simple frameworks, that people can pick up and run with and think, oh, yeah that makes common sense to me. That can really help.

I was really lucky to have the support from the whole experience design team. They acted as advocates for me across the business at all levels. I was working with service designers, product designers, content designers, and the other researchers, of course, who were spread across the organisation. They encouraged people to talk to me. They could be in places that I wasn't in.

I find that design teams are a really good place to start with getting engagement for science in a business because they share the mindset of starting with the problem and doing what's best for the user, having impact. They're good place to get buy-in.

Overall it's about getting that respect, getting engagement from senior leaders, starting to show value, offering people a way to get the outcomes and

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answers that they need, offering them an opportunity to have an impact which tended to excite people.

SELLING BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE IN AN ORGANISATION

How to sell behavioural science in a company: inspire people and get them excited about it, and show impact early on.

In terms of getting people excited about it, people stories can be really, really persuasive. Gathering

data, particularly qualitative data, and getting people engaged by showing videos or audio, or just telling people stories. Use those stories to illustrate the challenges of changing behaviour and how difficult it is.

Because many people assume, oh, we just need to give people the information and then they'll change. I wish that was true, but it's not. So use those stories to demonstrate the challenges and bring in some of the theory to help explain why.

Everyone I've worked with in tech has been very knowledge-hungry, really interested and curious. You



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can use that when you start to tell those stories and explain, this is how we can think about behaviour, and based on this example, this is what we know from the science and how we can think about behaviour. That can be really engaging for people.

Demonstrate how you can deliver impact and how you can help the company be more effective, bringing case studies, whether it's other companies or the academic literature to say, look if we bring in this specific thing, if we bring in the theory, the science, then it could make us this much more effective at what we're trying to do.

Just set up some experiments and start running some stuff. It only has to be initial and scrappy, you're not looking for enormous studies, often, unfortunately, not even with statistical significance. But if you can get something off the ground to try something and show that it works, and have that proof of concept, that can be really engaging for people. In my experience, the higher-ups tend to be persuaded by numbers and impact, and the sooner

you can start to get and show that, the better.

WHAT VALUE DO SOCIAL SCIENTISTS BRING TO THE DESIGN OF TECHNOLOGY?

Behavioural sciences, and social science in general, gives you an additional layer over existing design processes. Design teams, user researchers are already thinking about things in terms of discovery, defining the problem, ideating solutions, testing them, things like that.

Behavioural sciences supercharges that. It increases your chances of building the right thing and building it right. But more importantly, it helps you to stand on the shoulders of giants.

In my experience in user research teams, we would normally just do that by always collecting primary data, but we need to bring in what other people have found. So looking at the evidence, at the academic literature, to see what other people have discovered. That really helps you to know what

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to build especially if you start with quite a knotty problem, for example, improving health outcomes in people with diabetes. Or if you know that a lot of other companies products, apps, and services have all tried to do it and are struggling.

Bringing the literature, together with your own knowledge and research, can really help you. What's the insight that's going to give us impact and subsequently hopefully make us the money, right? It gives you more information, through theories and frameworks for understanding behaviour, to be able to do that.

Often we can find things in research. But we can supercharge that by showing that we've seen from the literature that these things are related in these ways, and that's how we could think about it and conceptualise it. And then what the solution should look like, bringing in the evidence to understand what works.

So in behavioural science we have a concept called behaviour change techniques and there's lots of evidence for various different ones to say, if you want to improve knowledge, you should use these ones, if you want to improve motivation, we should use these ones and that can be really, really valuable once you're narrowing down the solution, to think, okay, what is going to be the most effective. And then once you've done that, it's about those evaluation methodologies, so you can measure, learn and apply a more scientific stance, particularly at the early stages.

You don't often get time to sit and think deeply about people and the problem space because you're pushing to move so fast in product development environments. The science can give you an extra layer without adding on time, if that makes sense. And once we get that deeper understanding, we can find those true motivations in the things that are really going to have an impact.

Because if you don't put just a little bit of extra time in up front, then you risk building something land, doesn't land, it doesn't work, it doesn't actually have the impact that you intended it to. That's an enormous amount of waste of time and money, especially if you're relying on software developers to build that. Their time is expensive. Why would you waste that essentially, when you could just put it in that little bit of extra time to make sure that you're going in the right direction.

The people who are in the business of human behaviour, which tends to be a lot of businesses, should be thinking about bringing in social scientists. But only if you're open to being problem-led.

If you already know what you want to build, then it's not necessarily going to be the most effective use of your time or their time or the money that it will cost you to hire them to bring them in.

If you're interested in achieving impactful outcomes and you're open to building something to achieve that, then bring in social scientists. They will really, really help you, and give you a much better chance of having an impact.

And for people who want to bring in behavioural science particularly into their work, there's tons of stuff out there. Everyone's got a book and a framework, but the secret is that they're all the same underneath. They're all just different iterations of the scientific method. That's not saying any of them are bad, just that they've all got different angle. The

two main resources that I recommend to people who are looking to bring behavioural science into their work are Amy Bucher's book, [Engaged](#), and Stephen Wendel's book, [Designing for Behaviour Change](#).

TRUST THE RESEARCH AND THE DATA

Research in general is underestimated, like design. I've been based in design teams for the past few years. People think that they decide what to build and then they just get researchers and designers to tweak it make it slightly better. That isn't where our power is. Our power is in understanding the problem, understanding what the right thing is to build. Being truly user-centred takes, first of all, a lot of bravery and kind of trusting the process.

But also setting aside your ego and trusting the research and the data, and that applies across research and social sciences to trust that the researchers, your scientists, your designers, your product people will build the right thing that will be really impactful.

I'd also say it means being open to accepting when your prized idea, your baby, doesn't work. Part of the social sciences and behavioural science is



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about evaluation and measuring impact. Sometimes we measure impact and we find out that, actually, it's not doing anything so we should scrap it. And often people might not necessarily be open to that because they can get quite protective over their own ideas.

It's about working with people who want to have and measure impact. So not just vanity metrics, like daily active users, and things like that, but people who actually care about things and companies that are also very focused on research.

From what I've seen in the tech world most people just don't know what social science is. They might equate it to academic research, and think that

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it could be really slow. I believe it does the opposite. I always say it gives us the evidence, the theories, and the frameworks for us to get the answers that we need more quickly but it hasn't got that perception yet.

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