



YB+YS SEASON 1, EPISODE 3: Data + Science Panel Discussion
With Kirsten Lee Hill, PhD, Founder, & CEO
Janelle Zacherl, PhD, Freelance Digital Strategist

0:55 Megan Ingram (MI): As a data nerd, I'm very excited about this week's data and science panel featuring two unconventional PhDs who've chosen a consulting career, but started in science. We explore what drove them to pursue their professional path, the lessons learned and what makes data and science so closely related. Let me first introduce PhD, Kirsten Lee Hill, who has worked with 150 plus entrepreneurs and socially conscious organizations and is a big advocate for community driven change. Welcome Kirsten.

1:23 Kirsten Lee Hill (KH): Hi, thanks so much for having me.

1:24 MI: Yeah, it's great to have you on the show. To kick things off, we obviously love stories and I definitely want to hear more about your journey from PhD to consulting. So what attracted you to that path?

1:37 KH: Yeah, honestly, I was never that interested in the traditional PhD path. Like the whole reason I went into my PhD was because I was working in the public volunteering. I was a student in college, volunteering in public schools and data was so powerful, right? We were making so many decisions about whether to open schools or closed schools and hold kids back all based on data. And it would just seem so strange to me. Like it really wasn't incorporating people's stories. And I was like, oh, this sucks. I want to get a PhD because then I'll understand how this all works. And maybe we can do it differently. My intention honestly, was always to get in, get out with the knowledge I needed and go a different path. And I ended up in consulting because when I was looking for companies that I felt shared my values and aligned with what I wanted to do, there was just no one. So I was like, I guess I will make my own company.

2:36 MI: Yeah. I can definitely relate. I actually started off in accounting, finance and then triggered into the marketing side of things, but it was the same idea. I was like, Oh, data's so cool. It's fun. But you don't do anything with it. It's like, blah, as opposed to, I wanted to do something with the data. Like so what, like, you know, so what does it mean? What are we trying to find out? What are we going to explore? And I think that's, what's so interesting and compelling about using data and science.

3:04 KH: Totally. I completely agree.

3:07 MI: What learnings from your scientific career apply the most to the path you've chosen with consulting?

3:13 KH: I've learned a lot more in the industry path, especially in the more social science fields is that there's just this, resistance to more rigorous research. Like there's this perception that it's so expensive and it's so time consuming and they can't possibly be relevant now. And I've honestly found that every research tool I learned, every approach to designing a study or designing a survey or data collection is so relevant now. I think to me, it's just a size difference, like running a study through a university is typically on a much larger scale than when I'm working with an entrepreneur, but it's the same tools and it's the same systems and structures that are in place. And to me, those all transfer over pretty seamlessly, right? Like you can make a plan to collect good data. Whether or not you're in a university, right? It's just, you wouldn't do it on the same scale or for as much money or spend as much time as you would. But I feel like the tools really transfer over perfectly. Learning critical thinking and almost even just learning the lingo so that when people - intentionally or unintentionally try to intimidate people with data. And I think knowing what people are saying when they're throwing P values and regressions and all this stuff to be like, right. Like, okay. I actually know what that means. And you're being ridiculous right now.

4:45 MI: Cool. Yeah. And on the digital research side. It can get very in the details, like where you're going back to true, research and methodology principles.

4:59 KH: One hundred percent. I mean, you can get so hung up on things that it's like, oh, for like something to be publishable, like good research. Like you have to hit all these little stats, whereas things can be super meaningful and not like, quote unquote, statistically significant, you know. But it's kind of like you have to go through all of that training or have experience in the field to have the confidence and be like, okay, Hey, this is wrong. We don't have to do it this way.

5:26 MI: And you totally have moments like that where it's like, okay, we've got to pull it back here and kind of find a different way. Cause it's not working obviously.

5:34 KH: One hundred percent.

5:37 MI: And you just hit on it. A lot of similarities between data and science. What, in your opinion, makes them closely related?

5:45 KH: Yeah, to me, I mean, science is what gets us data, right? Like the whole approach of inquiry. And you're asking questions and I just tell people, data is just information, right? The whole scientific process is you have a question or hypothesis you want to find out and then you would go on and get information to see if it's true or not true. And so to me they are so interconnected and just sources of information. And I think science is perceived as this very hard and just like this very factual thing. But science is really just about asking questions and applying a process to answering them. And to me, data is what you get to do that. So I just feel like they completely go hand in hand.

6:35 MI: Yeah. And especially when you get onto the statistics side of it, because they're so correlated and routed in the same principles.

6:44 KH: One hundred percent.

6:48 MI: What do you enjoy the most about working in consulting right now?

6:53 KH: I think it's really fun to be able to work on a lot of different things at once. I'm a Sagittarius. I don't know if it's a Sagittarius thing or how I was raised, but I love working with lots of different people and lots of different projects. And I find that really exciting. And the nature of consulting is. That's what you do, right? You have your hands in a lot of different pots and are working on a bunch of different projects. It's for people on pre COVID, there was more travel. And just to me, it's a very exciting, no, two days in the same, it's always a different challenge and different people. And I really, really enjoy that.

7:32 MI: Yeah, to me, that's always what I like about agency and consulting life. It's never the same. Every challenge is different, clients change, and there are always days where you're ready to string your hair out. But there are other days where it's great to walk in and have a new problem to solve. Like I work better. I get the most out of myself when I'm in those types of environments.

7:55 KH: One hundred percent.

7:57 MI: Conversely, what has been your biggest challenge in your consulting career and how have you overcome it?

8:03 KH: I think to me, when you choose to become a consultant, you're embracing this inherent instability that comes with being your own consultant. Like yeah, you don't, at least in my experience, like you might have guaranteed income for the duration of a project, which could vary. But it's not like, for the rest of my life, or for many, many years, I know what I'll be doing, or I have that job security. And I think that that's something, honestly, when I first started my consulting company in 2016, after six months, I paused it and took a normal job because of the income. It was too stressful. I was taking on all this credit card debt on low months. And I just was, I don't know how to deal with this. And I took a normal job. And I lasted in that job for like four months. I mean, I basically wanted to quit the first day in, but it really taught me that even though I don't like the instability of consulting or like how it feels more like taking a risk. I don't like being in a normal job much, much more. It's like, okay. Like there's pains either way. And to me, I would much rather have the pain of the ebbs and flows and, oh my gosh, I'm going to have to be like constantly pitching for projects and bringing in new clients as opposed to sitting in an office and being like, I kind of hate what I'm doing right now.

9:28 MI: I also feel there's that motivation too when it's your thing, where you created it, where you want to get up in the morning, or you get excited about certain things. And you get more passionate about wanting to see it through. And I've worked in jobs and roles where I was working a gazillion hours, but you know, it wasn't fun work. It was grueling work or you didn't get excited about it. It makes those days really hard.

9:54 KH: Yeah. A hundred percent, especially. I mean, to your point when you're not excited about it or when you don't see the point, right? It's yeah. We're just working in spreadsheets all day and thinking, why am I, what is this even going to do? Is this making a better world, me sitting in Excel for like six hours, eight hours a day? I don't feel like it is.

10:14 MI: Yeah. And I think one of the great things too, that COVID, and this whole thing over the last year, this roller coaster ride we've been on, it's taught us is people are more passionate, are more willing to take that leap. Because maybe they got put into a situation where they had time to think about it or they're really, they didn't have any other options. So they just dove head first. And I think you're seeing a lot of creativity and passion pursuing projects out of all this mess.

10:42 KH: One hundred percent. And I think it's been interesting too to see the pains of working at home for people. Right? Because to me it's so normal. Like I work for myself. I work from home all the time

and to a lot of people they totally jumped in. They're like, I don't understand how, like you get up every day and you just work in your home. And I'm like, I guess I forget that that's strange. Right? The people who are so used to having this other routine or someone checking in on them and like, no, it's just me. You just kind of self-direct yourself.

11:11 MI: Yeah. Were you a work from home 100% before COVID?

11:16 KH: Basically, you know, I would travel sometimes to do training or if we were doing really important decision meetings and people wanting to be in person, then I could fly somewhere. I had a couple of local clients walk over to their office, but for the most part, pretty virtual.

11:33 MI: Yeah. I mean, I was similar, but one of the things I have found as a hard transition was being "at home at home", whereas you can't go into a coffee shop, you can't go into a public place. You've got to be at home all day. And that meant mentally I had to try to get my productivity at a high level and it was hard because I like being in different environments frequently.

11:58 KH: Yeah. Or even just the option to leave your house. Right. It's just kind of like, okay, like you're here. This is the only place you will be.

12:05 MI: Totally. Totally. What's next for you? What's ahead for this year?

12:13 KH: Yeah. Great question. Oh, my gosh. It's just been such a wild 12 months. Honestly, this year, I'm trying to transition to doing much more training and education around research. In the past, I've done a lot of actually doing the research for people and taking on really big projects from beginning to end, like doing the research design, doing the instrument design, doing data collection, doing the analysis. And I've found a few things. One is, I think that's a skillset people should actually learn how to do. I think people are very quick to outsource it and I find it's more empowering for organizations to have that in house. It's like, you don't want to have to call someone every time you want to use your data or figure out the answer to a question. You should be able to do that by yourself. So I've been trying to transition more into training people around that, by doing mentoring and coaching around. How do you decide what key metrics you want to look at? Okay. What type of information do you use to answer that so that then people can take that information and run with it? I think what's nice about it from my perspective. It's obviously much less time intensive. It also allows me to work with a bunch more people at once and really drive home the importance for people to understand, especially in the data science field, where things are so mysterious. Sometimes I think people should learn and understand all these pieces and be able to use that. So I always work on a couple big projects. I'm working on a national study right now with the Gates Foundation. I like to keep those bigger, like more quote unquote, traditional research projects. I love to do a couple of those every year. Cause I think that to me, it's like keeping your skills sharp, and it's just like working on a whole different scale as opposed to when you're working with a really small startup. So I always envisioned being able to do that, but I'd also love to be able to expand and do much more educational things for people who are just getting started.

14:23 MI: Are you seeing a lot of interest in the measurement side of that? Like people wanting to know what KPIs or metrics or how to basically after all the things are done, how did we do, what does this mean?

14:39 KH: I feel like it ebbs and flows. And to me right now, the federal government just released a bunch of new grant proposals. And so I feel like lots of people are interested now because in order to get money, you have to show that you have a plan for tracking whether or not your idea or your organization is working. And that to me is typically the impetus. There are some people who are data

geeks and they want the information. They want to know it. But a lot of people to me, the impetus is I want money from somewhere because I think I have a really great idea and to get the money, they would like me to do research or I need to do an evaluation. And so then they start thinking about how to do it. And that's honestly why I really love to get involved because I feel like if you don't have someone on your team advocating for you, you can end up submitting all these proposals where you're just doing what other people tell you to do, right? They're like, we want to see data on this and you could be thinking that doesn't have anything to do with my idea and how it works, but I guess I'll measure it because that's how I get the \$1 million in funding. Whereas to me, I think it's fun to really push back against those and be like, okay. But actually I want to measure this thing and I want to do it this way. Is that okay? It's a fun, fun negotiation to have.

15:56 MI: I've run into similar things with startups. Usually it's because the investors want to know, right? It should be because they want to understand their business better. You know, I want to be informed and I want insights, but oftentimes it's whoever gave you the money, they need to show what's this doing? Where are we going from here?

16:15 KH: And I think especially with the clients I work with in the education space, we get a lot of investors and philanthropic organizations where basically investors want to know, are test scores getting better. Is this getting better? And this is where I feel like people really get caught because changing test scores is like a huge thing that your organization might have nothing to do with. Maybe you're trying to get students to be more mindful or collaborate more, or all these other things. And so for them, I feel like you really need to have a handle on what data is relevant to your idea, and to be able to present that as an alternative so that you're not spending all this time and money tracking things that you don't care about or that aren't even relevant.

17:01 MI: Totally. Where can people find you?

17:03 KH: Yeah. I have a website, it's www.kirstenleehill.com. About the easiest place to find me. I'm also on Instagram. I should be on LinkedIn, I kick myself all the time. Cause I feel like LinkedIn is so much more traditional, like where the researchers hang out, but I love Instagram. I love the visual appeal of Instagram.

17:27 MI: I'm the same way. I love Instagram. People ask me all the time. What's my favorite channel? I would tell them Instagram and it's great. I could spend hours even over TikTok and some people are starting to get on the TikTok bandwagon that way. I feel like I could get lost on Instagram for hours.

17:42 KH: I totally agree. I wish more people who are my ideal clients or partners would be on Instagram. But even though they're not, it's so fun for me, I'm going to be there anyway.

17:52 MI: I tell people when they're going into video, go on Instagram before you go into YouTube, because YouTube, you need a bigger library of content. And it's easier to start on Instagram because now they have so many options with Stories, Reels, and IGTV. I think it's an easier path entry and if you're just starting out, then you can migrate into some of these more complicated videos.

18:16 KH: I completely agree. It's such a fun platform.

18:21 MI: Yeah. Great. Well, it was so great having you on the show today, so glad that you could join us.

18:26 KH: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me.

18:29 MI: No problem. Next on the data and science panel, I'm thrilled to introduce Janelle Zacherl who has a PhD, is an Ingram Digital Outlaw, and is passionate about working with healthcare brands. Great to have you on the show today, Janelle.

18:41 Janelle Zacherl (JZ): Thanks so much for having me, Megan. It's good to be here.

18:46 MI: Yeah. So to kick things off, you know, we obviously love stories, so I'd love to hear more about your journey from PhD to digital marketing.

18:55 JZ: Okay. Well, I've always been passionate about science and data. So I went to grad school for genetics. I mean, there's nothing that's much more data-driven than the field of genetics. I worked in a lab after college for five years, mostly because I went into industry as opposed to academia because I needed the money and the insurance was better. The benefits are all really good. And I was there for about five years, and I got bored of doing the same thing every day. It was very data-driven, but it was also very repetitive and I wanted a little bit more freedom in my home life. So I started researching jobs where you could work from home and have a PhD, and that's all I put into the Indeed search bar was "PhD remote work." And I came across a digital marketing agency that specifically catered to healthcare brands and life science companies. And I applied and immediately got that job. And what we did was manage accounts for these brands. And the gimmick of the agency was your account manager will have a PhD. So we did really well with the healthcare and life science brands that way. I was there for about eight months and then COVID kicked in and I was kind of the last one in, first one out because they had to downsize during COVID. So I was off for a few months and then found Ingram Digital.

20:21 MI: Well, their loss is our gain, so thrilled to have you.

20:29 JZ: Thanks.

20:29 MI: What do you think specifically attracted you to that path? Looking backward now.

20:35 JZ: I didn't know anything about digital marketing at the time. And part of the reason I applied for that job specifically was they wanted people with PhDs and they would teach you the digital marketing side. So I thought it was worth it just to try something new and work from home, which was a big perk of it. And as soon as I started working with the people, like freelancers and people who work from home, agencies just have a different, they have different priorities. So I just really enjoyed that kind of atmosphere and working with people who weren't so... who worried more about the person rather than just a deadline or getting the job done all the time. Of course, we still have to get the job done, but people are much more flexible and understanding and care about you as a person in the freelance community. It feels like more than, you know, big industry.

21:26 MI: Another benefit that I often love too is putting more attention and focus on actually getting the job done as opposed to just clocking in somewhere in the office. And being able to be a freelancer and work in a remote workspace where you can be flexible, you can get the work done, however you want, whether it's morning or night, but at the end of the day, it's about what the value it is that you're contributing.

21:53 JZ: For sure.

21:54 MI: So I think that's absolutely great. What learnings from your scientific career apply the most to the path you've chosen with digital marketing?

22:03 JZ: I mean, data tells a story in both science and marketing. I think the data is a little more open to interpretation in marketing, which is something I'm not used to, but you can spin data sets a lot of different ways for marketing. Whereas with science, it's pretty straightforward. There's a little bit of manipulation, but not as much as in marketing. You can tell a lot of different stories with data in marketing.

22:30 MI: Yeah, which is one of my favorite things. I think that's what makes data-driven marketing so compelling, but it is also finding that right story. And I do think there are still a lot of great scientific principles in how you analyze the data and you find outliers or you find similarities in the data that really make the two comparable and parallel in certain ways.

22:56 JZ: I think you can also find a lot of trends. Like maybe even things you weren't necessarily expecting to see in marketing and science both. It just depends on setting up the experiment in the right way.

23:08 MI: Yeah, that's a great point. Conversely, on the other side of things, what is your biggest challenge in your digital marketing career?

23:18 JZ: I think I'm taking it on pretty well because I am more of a people person than most scientists, but in that five years in the lab, I barely had to talk to anyone outside of my colleagues directly. Talking with clients and conversing with clients and making sure you politely use your expertise to push them in the right directions is just a path I'm not used to. I've always been in the lab talking to, yelling at the instruments, not yelling at clients obviously.

23:54 MI: We often say that introverts sometimes have a hard time being in front of clients. Have you found certain ways that have worked for you that have helped you to overcome feeling more comfortable in those situations?

24:06 JZ: Yes, I think the biggest one for me is just imitating people who are used to it. And you can tell by listening to someone talk to clients, whether or not they're used to doing it. So I just, I found that I find people that I respect the way they do that, and then I just try to, okay. Think of that phrase, like "I'll follow up with that" or just things to get around potential ways that you could look bad or ways to get around things and not sound like you're not doing a good job or, you know, just keeping the path smooth.

24:45 MI: Yeah, no, totally. To me there obviously are a lot of similarities between data and science. And so we just talked about a few. What, in your opinion, makes them so closely related?

24:58 JZ: Definitely the data and the experimentation, two things that run very closely together. And the data leads to new experiments, which is the same in science and in marketing. You let the data carve your path to the most successful outcome.

25:16 MI: Yeah, one hundred percent agree. And that's why I'm a big believer from data point to observation to insight, because that way you let the data collect and then. And then the story, the correlation, the trend will appear. And that will kind of point you to the direction in which you should go. And especially when you're talking about the marketing side of things.

25:43 JZ: And I like that both, maybe the story doesn't go exactly where you think it's going to go. So it's interesting to see what new things come up and what trends emerge, maybe that you weren't expecting.

25:56 MI: Yeah. So to that end, what do you enjoy the most about working in digital marketing? Or maybe what trend gets you really excited for what's ahead this year?

26:06 JZ: Something I'm very excited about being relatively new to the marketing world is working with a bigger variety of clients. I'm starting to work with American Veterans Center, which is something I don't have a lot of experience in. I was strictly on life science clients. So I think it will be fun to work with a broad variety of clients just to get my foot in the door of other things I might be interested in besides science. I mean, who knows? We could have restaurants, we could have fashion brands. We could have all kinds of things, real estate. So I'm excited to not do the same thing every day.

26:47 MI: To me, that's the benefit of agency and freelance life, right? It's being on different clients, having different challenges, no day being the same.

26:56 JZ: For sure.

26:56 MI: And really not, you know, that's what makes agency so exciting is really having a different industry, a different issue, a different problem that you're going to solve and figuring out, okay, how do we solve it?

27:09 JZ: For sure. Yeah. I'm excited about it.

27:15 MI: Great. Well, obviously so glad to have you on your team. And I personally can tell you that only good things are ahead for you. Where do people find you?

27:23 JZ: I'm at blondebiologist27 on Instagram. Janelle Zacherl on LinkedIn and @JJZach27 on Twitter.

27:35 MI: Awesome. Well, definitely follow her. And we are so glad to have you on the show today. Glad you could come on.

27:42 JZ: Thanks so much. Thank you for having me on your science edition of your podcast.