



Researcher:

**Dr. Louis Williams –
Postdoctoral Researcher
(KTP Associate) in
Behavioural Insights
at the University of
Reading**

Business:

Dynamic Planner

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The project idea

Louis had recently completed his PhD in Psychology at The University of Reading and was working as a Teaching Fellow at Goldsmith University in London. He liked his job very much but he was starting to realise that no new challenges would have come his way in the following year, and he was a bit worried this might have hampered his career progression. Therefore, he started to look for new job opportunities. One night he came across an interesting offer on jobs.ac.uk. The University of Reading's ICMA centre (finance department), working closely with the Knowledge Transfer Centre (<https://www.reading.ac.uk/ktc/>) was looking for a behavioural insights analyst to conduct a 2-year research project on behavioural economics with Dynamic Planner, one of their corporate partners, which develops and sells software to financial advisory companies to help them manage the risk profile of their clients.

Several factors made this opportunity attractive. Louis had never worked for or with a business before, but during his PhD he had engaged in several multi-disciplinary projects and he had enjoyed applying his knowledge for different purposes and collaborating with people with various areas of expertise. Such projects also appeared to have a greater impact than his PhD research, given that he could see the results of his work being used outside of academia. He was therefore intrigued by having a job that was not a traditional research position but that would enable him to have some direct impact. Additionally, he felt that his profile could be a good fit, given that The University of Reading and Dynamic Planner were looking for someone with an understanding of psychology and/or behavioural economics and some experience of project management and working on multi-disciplinary projects. Finally, he thought it would be good to develop some industry experience, while still having the opportunity to work on a project that would lead to publications, so that the door to academia would remain open.

The collaboration between The University of Reading and Dynamic Planner had already been ongoing for quite some time thanks to Prof. Chris Brooks, who had worked with the company on the development of an improved attitude to risk questionnaire and who still sat on Dynamic Planner's Investment Committee. ▶

Together, Prof. Brooks and Dynamic Planner had realised that even if the questionnaire that they had created represented a helpful support for financial advisors (i.e. Dynamic Planner clients), they needed to understand more about the factors driving the investment resilience of individual investors during periods of market volatility, in order to provide an even better service. They felt that for Dynamic Planner's clients it would have been increasingly important, given the level of uncertainty in most financial markets, to assess not only the risk tolerance of the investors they were advising, but also their personality traits that were impacting their financial decisions. This realisation, combined with the lack of academic literature on investment resilience, prompted Prof. Brooks and Dynamic Planner to create a project for a behavioural insights analyst and to look for opportunities to hire one with the necessary academic expertise combined with the soft skills and project management skills needed to work in a business environment.

The Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) grants offered by Innovate UK to sustain collaborations between businesses and academics finalised at improving business practices or products seemed like the perfect opportunity. When they won the KTP funding, which required a PhD or postdoctoral researcher to be based at the company for the two years of the grant, they advertised nationally and following the standard University recruitment and selection process, agreed that Louis was the best candidate for the project. They therefore hired him as the KTP Associate.

Now Louis has a two year contract with The University of Reading and Dynamic Planner. Like all KTP Associates, his position is a somewhat unusual, as he is officially employed by The University of Reading but works most of the time at Dynamic Planner. This means his main place of work is there, and he has to be present during their official working hours (8:30am-5pm) and has the holiday allowance of Dynamic Planner rather than of the University. Only once a week, mostly when he has meetings with his academic supervisor, does he work from the University, where he also has a desk.

At the beginning, Louis found it a bit strange to adapt to the standardised working patterns required by a business but he very soon started to enjoy his work, since it enables him to experience a new environment and way of working while still leveraging his academic skills and subject knowledge. At present, Louis is creating a new questionnaire – and related support material - that will complement the existing one and will allow Dynamic Planner and its clients to understand not only the investors' risk tolerance but also their different personality traits and how they might relate to the investor's resilience. This is expected to enable financial

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advisors to better assist their clients when market fluctuations make them lose money, because they will be better able to predict what kind of emotional response those losses might trigger.

As part of these projects, Louis is conducting a literature review and analysing the existing database of Dynamic Planner on investors' experience and choices in the face of money losses. These projects have a clear relevance for Dynamic Planner and can provide it with a competitive advantage over rival firms, which have also started to look into emotions and personality traits as ways to improve their services. Meanwhile, they will also benefit Louis and The University of Reading by enabling them to conduct analysis that could lead to academic publications in behavioural economics, financial, and psychology journals. Since the connection between resilience in relation to investment decisions and risk tolerance is still widely unexplored, it is not clear from the existing literature what factors are driving decisions during periods of market volatility. Therefore, this project will be able to add to this literature as well as improving Dynamic Planner's software.

Thanks to his psychology background, there are several projects that Louis could work on that would benefit Dynamic Planner and one of the main challenges in his role has been to decide what to prioritise in order to have concrete results in the two years of the KTP funding. This challenge, however, could turn into a benefit at a later date as Dynamic Planner might choose to offer Louis a position beyond the KTP-driven timeframe. While Louis is still not sure whether he would like to continue working for a business or focus again on his academic career only, he is very positive about the experience so far and probably keen to remain at Dynamic Planner if the opportunity will present itself. He has been impressed by the value that a business role can provide to an early career researcher in terms of training, development of new skills, and data, and he likes to have the extra motivation of seeing the direct impact of his work.

Key benefits & challenges

The main benefit of an industrial role, according to Louis, is the unique possibility to experience two worlds at the same time, something that he found very useful to be able to better understand both. While he misses the opportunity to work whenever it felt best and most productive for him, he is positively impressed by how much collaboration and team-spirit exists in businesses. This is due to all members having the same goal and therefore regularly engaging with colleagues in order to reach it.

Working at Dynamic Planner made Louis aware that in his PhD he would frequently be on his own, talking to peers in breaks but never going into much detail and never paying very strong attention, from a professional point of view, to their work. On the contrary, in a business everyone needs to know as well as possible what is going on in other departments because their success depends on working well with all the company's parts and functions. Louis has found this social experience very motivating. He believes it is very rewarding to see people interested, coming to ask questions, and to talk to different functions and clients in order to learn more about them.

On the flip side the direct comparison between academia and industry has made Louis appreciate the speed at which he could take decisions about his own project when he was doing his PhD. The fact that many different people have a stake in a business project implies that it is harder to create something that works for all and that progress in the project can be slowed down. Moreover, the more people become involved or interested in a project, the greater number of factors that must be taken into consideration. This means that there are more steps compared to academia for decision making. While this is sometimes a bit daunting, it also provides the opportunity to learn more and to understand more things within a broader spectrum because people are very willing to discuss what they do and their own projects.

Louis has also enjoyed deeply the opportunity to see the immediate impact of his work. Every month, Dynamic Planner updates their software. This is fascinating for someone in psychology, and the possibility to see "live" what can be improved keeps him motivated and enables him to do an increasingly better job. Thanks to this process, he learned that he likes to use skills from psychology to support business and product improvements even beyond his remit. In the first few weeks of work, he could already give advice on some

reports that Dynamic Planner were designing, and ever since, he has kept seeing small projects in which his input could be valuable. That is a great feeling and it is also providing him with plenty of ideas for future projects that he could develop if he continues working with Dynamic Planner.

Other advantages of the role have been the relatively easy access to necessary data and a significant improvement of his knowledge of finance that is already proving helpful in personal financial decisions. Additionally, in order to conduct his projects at Dynamic Planner, Louis has had to familiarise himself with the use of the statistics software, R, and to complete an introductory Python course. Therefore, he has been improving his programming skills, which has been a goal of his for several years. Finally, the training budget that was included in the KTP fund supporting his post is being pivotal for Louis to develop his management and programming skills and his understanding of behavioural finance. He is attending new courses on these topics at the university and has completed the first of two 5-day residentials on leadership. As a bonus, the training courses he is doing can enable him to receive a recognised qualification in management. This is a useful opportunity whether staying in a similar position as a behavioural insights analyst or moving back to academia.

The main challenge encountered so far has been to adjust to a fixed work schedule and to manage his time helping with smaller projects that are not entirely related to his KTP role. While Louis thinks that two years is a reasonable timeframe to complete what he was hired to do and to have the necessary analysis that could lead to publications, he has no doubts that he needs to maintain focus on his current project if he wants to make progress and deliver what he should. Sometimes, this is especially hard since he would have a personal and professional interest in some of the side projects that come his way and he finds it very tough not to get too excited and to say no. However, a balance is required for the ultimate success of the project and the possibility to keep his position as a behavioural insights analyst with Dynamic Planner after the 2-year period. Time will surely be a factor when it will come to combining the write up of academic papers with the delivery of business outputs and outcomes. What is reassuring for Louis is that in his contract it is very clear that the main outcome of his work must be the one relevant for Dynamic Planner and this looks achievable in two years.

Advice for other researchers

Based on his experience in an industrial role so far, Louis would have four key pieces of advice for PhDs and Early Career Researchers who are considering or might end up considering similar opportunities.

The first is to explore opportunities that relate to the experiences that you have gained as a PhD student, remembering they can be leveraged both in and outside academia. If you are uncertain about a career in academia, then in addition to seeking positions that give you a greater taste of academic life, you need to be flexible and work towards finding opportunities that may not appear to be so relevant to your PhD or seen as a natural progression from attaining a doctorate. The type of opportunity Louis currently has may be unusual, but this should not stop you from building connections between academic and non-academic departments.

Therefore, the second piece of advice would be to always try to build a personal network, starting from when working on a PhD. Networks are fundamental to obtain information, to learn about new opportunities and to find jobs. Within The University of Reading, Louis is one of three recent Psychology PhD graduates who are now working on psychology-based projects with the ICMA centre. It is important not only to build networks within your department but also across your university and other research fields. Louis had the opportunity

to be involved in multi-disciplinary projects with Art history, Business, Graphic communication, Food economics and Meteorology departments before completing his PhD, and believes this experience was very important for the position he has today.

The third suggestion is to make sure that you understand the goals, requirements and views of both sides of the project, aka the business and the university, and, once you do, to take ownership of the project. Both within academic and non-academic settings, it is important to demonstrate your capabilities of leading a project just as you did during your PhD.

Finally, Louis has learned that it is very important to always have a long-term view in mind, rather than remaining too focused on the details and timeframe of a specific project. Only by thinking about the longer term it is possible to make the most of every role and of the opportunities attached to it. For example, working with a business early on in an academic career, if considered in the grand scheme of things, could not only be an interesting project on its own but also a collaboration full of future potential. Indeed, it could lead to further collaborations, additional funds to carry out research, valuable connections that could make your profile attractive for other universities and departments, or a permanent non-academic role that you enjoy.

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