

Infectious Disease Surveillance: As Science-to-Business Perspective

Q&A with Yasmeeen Al-Fahoum, Public Sector Partnerships Lead at BlueDot Inc.

BY SARAH SHAWKY

BIOGRAPHY

Yasmeeen Al-Fahoum completed her Honours Bachelor of Science degree with a specialization in Neuroscience at the University of Toronto. Before pivoting into the business world, Yasmeeen conducted research at Toronto Western Hospital, where she studied the use of gene therapy as a potential treatment for Parkinson's Disease. During her undergrad, Yasmeeen gained significant start-up experience as a Business Development Representative at iMerciv Inc., a company that develops smart wearable products for the visually impaired. Today, Yasmeeen is a Public Sector Partnerships Lead at BlueDot Inc., a Toronto-based digital health firm that has developed a first-of-its-kind global early warning technology for tracking over 150 infectious diseases in 65 languages. BlueDot has developed risk assessment and infectious disease surveillance platforms that empower public health agencies, businesses, and hospitals to anticipate and respond to emerging threats on a global scale. At BlueDot, Yasmeeen is responsible for building consultative relationships with leaders in the public health sector.



Yasmeeen Al-Fahoum

What led you to pursue a career at BlueDot Inc.? How has this work been during the COVID-19 pandemic?

I first heard about BlueDot through the news just last year, as the company was one of the first in the world to identify the emerging risk and spread of COVID-19. As it turns out, BlueDot successfully predicted eight out of ten cities as the next outbreak locations. Naturally, I became intrigued by the company's mission, and inspired by the CEO, Dr. Kamran Khan – a practicing infectious disease physician and Professor of Medicine with the Di-

vision of Infectious Diseases at the University of Toronto. BlueDot's mission of safeguarding and protecting the global population really resonated with me, so I applied and was hired as their Public Sector Partnerships Lead. As BlueDot is a very forward-thinking company - in terms of building risk assessment platforms to alert end users of infectious disease risk – we have had to maintain high adaptability in order to stay relevant across the pandemic curve. For instance, after successfully detecting the spread of COVID-19, our product team was great at rapidly generating both a variant and vaccine tracker.

How did your university education prepare you for your current position?

My experience at the University of Toronto truly taught me how to work well under pressure. In resonance with the Yerkes-Dobson law, there exists an empirical relationship between pressure and performance, and I have essentially learned how to hover around the optimal level. In other words, I have learned how to use pressure and stress to my own benefit to excel on the job. My current role is majorly client-facing – frequently with C-level executives - so, I am

required to be very quick, efficient, and dynamic, while handling the associated pressure. Additionally, my research experience during my university career trained me to be highly meticulous – and this is a skill that now helps me perform thorough research on prospective clients and identify any challenges or gaps in the process. As a business development representative, it is important to keep clients interested by presenting the company relative to their needs, so my research skills have definitely remained applicable.

What does your average workday look like?

Typically, my days are meeting-oriented. I often start my workdays early to accommodate for time differences when there are calls with international clients. A large portion of my day is allocated to prospecting the right government officials and identifying the key representatives whom I should be contacting regarding new partnerships. I spend time interacting with these individuals via email and phone and learning about clients' organizational structure and their existing tools prior to initial meetings. For these meetings, it is really a balance between understanding the client's current software, identifying weaknesses, and building credibility, trust, as well as a need for BlueDot's platforms. After establishing this need, we figure out whether they can integrate it, and whether they have a budget – the whole process is really a problem-solving experience.

Additionally, I collaborate with the product team to be aware of product updates and releases to relay back to the client. There exists this “symbiotic” relationship where we tailor our products to their needs. What advice would you provide science students who are interested in pursuing a similar career path? Particularly for those who are interested in business development, but don't necessarily have “business” experience? To gain exposure I would highly advise students to look out for their university-affiliated business development centre, such as the University of Toronto's Centre for Entrepreneurship. This is basically a home to entrepreneurship and business education, co-curricular programs, and venture incubation. They typically offer related innovation and entrepreneurship-based courses, and while I was at the University, I took one that offered me an internship with an affiliated start-up – and that was iMerciv Inc; this was how I transitioned from the sciences into start-up culture. Here, I became exposed to the fast-paced climate associated with working in a small company, where I had the opportunity to wear many different hats.

“Leveraging your university's partnerships and affiliations to gain real-world experience and build your resume can really help you shape what you pursue later on!”