

'Psychology is the solution'

Ian Florance talks to **Michal Kosinski** about business, technology and the dangers of an ignorance of modern psychology

I met Michal Kosinski when searching for someone to speak at a conference on the future of European psychological testing. The brief was to find someone who would challenge received opinions – and Michal certainly did that, as well as hinting at a CV that seems amazingly varied and busy for someone who says he's at the start of his career.

The interview was carried out over Skype, which is appropriate given Michal's involvement in the relationship of psychology and social networking. I asked him first about growing up in Poland.

'I needed something to help me in my business second-life'

'As kids we were vaguely aware of the 1989 change in Polish society, but it had a huge influence on our generation. Poland was a relatively poor country. We knew what the Western world had to offer – I listened to the Beatles and saw that people wore jeans, had nice houses and cars – but had little access to it. My parents were relatively well-off computer scientists. But the new reality after '89 favoured entrepreneurs, while trained professionals had a harder time. For city dwellers, at least, it

created an intensely competitive rat race, the like of which I've not seen anywhere else – not even in the USA. Whatever view you have of Polish people, according to OECD rankings they are in the top three hardest workers in the world. Many people work 12–14 hours a day and have three jobs.'

Michal said that given all of this, Polish parents imprinted on their children that you didn't waste time. 'Most of my peers worked really hard at school, had extra tuition, learned two or three foreign languages and rarely finished their homework before 10pm.'

I asked Michal whether he went to university straight away or started a job. 'I don't know anyone from my high school who didn't go to university. If

your parents were educated, it was unimaginable not to go. I started a maths and economics course. Maths is a lot of fun and basic arithmetic skills are really useful in everyday life but, at university level, it becomes a virtual subject.

In the long term

it becomes highly

applicable – in high-level finance for instance – but it takes years to get to that level. I'm very practical – I want



what I do to have a practical relevance. I needed something that would help me in my business second-life. That's why I moved to psychology after a few months.'

Michal describes reading a number of psychology books, including Robert Cialdini's works on influencing others, as a turning point. 'In society, psychologists are often seen as very impractical figures and psychology as an ivory tower subject. My experience was exactly the opposite. Go to five minutes of a psychology lecture, read the first few pages of a psychology text and you'll learn something that is applicable whatever you do – as a business person, a politician, a parent, a sports competitor.'

'I wanted to change the world'

'I can't really remember when I had my first computer but, by my second year at high school, I could find my way round one very easily. Remember that, in those days, computers weren't black boxes designed for everyone. You had to find out how they worked to make them work. In Poland, computers were expensive and people would put home-made versions together from different components. I started constructing computers for other people and getting paid for it. I could put five together in a week after school. I quickly figured out that if I employed school friends we could put together a lot more. We pretty soon got into computer repair. By the time I left high school I had a company providing an income higher than my parents.'

During the summer between school and university Michal discovered internet cafés. 'You could play online computer games in them, something domestic bandwidth didn't allow at that time. I figured that if I started an internet café I could combine business with pleasure. In the first week I discovered that running the place was much more interesting than playing the games.' Michal's café chain focused on games-playing teens: 'Adults came in for 10

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minutes to check mail; teens would pay for eight hours games playing.'

The psychology he was learning underpinned all this activity. 'On my course I specialised in business negotiations and online consumer behaviour. I researched online auctions, doing experiments on eBay to see if there was a 'sweet spot' of price and timing that would optimise purchases. This all fed into building online stores for clients, then optimising their effectiveness.'

I'm surprised that I'm not now reading about Michal's growing Polish technology empire instead of interviewing him as he completes a PhD while acting as Operations Director at the Psychometrics Centre, Cambridge University. 'Given everything I was doing it took seven years to finish my five-year master's course. And at that point I felt I hit a glass wall. At this time most of my friends were just starting their careers in the corporate world, hating their jobs but longing for benefits. I understood that a good salary and working hard are not the only things in life. I guess that moment tends to come later in their lives for most people – you can't allow yourself to think like that when you are paying back mortgage, raising kids, and so on. It might sound pompous, but I wanted to change the world, and it is not so easy to get to changing the world when you are running an IT company in Poland and you are not Mark Zuckerberg, so I decided to drop everything and restart on a different level. I applied for a PhD to Cambridge and Oxford. My current boss, Professor John Rust, director of the Cambridge University Psychometrics Centre took me on.'

'A wonderful combination of business and academic'

It's been a huge change for him. 'I was used to constant feeling of responsibility and urgency, working 12 hours a day and spending three hours on the phone, picking up a textbook in between business meetings. Cambridge offered a slower, less adrenaline-oriented life style. At the beginning I wasn't sure if I could live without the challenges of my entrepreneurial life. It turned out, however, that the Centre offers a wonderful combination of business and academic atmosphere. We are involved in a number of commercial and scientific projects – we develop tests used in recruitment, education, health monitoring, as well as collaborating with governments and companies, like Microsoft, in many projects. There's a full teaching programme and more than a

FEATURED JOB

Job Title: O.D. Consultant
Employer: To be confirmed...



Speaking to a Managing Partner who asks not to be named, from an organisation which must also remain shrouded in mystery, it occurs to me that I want this job for myself. Psychological reactance at work, perhaps, but the role is certainly a tempting one.

The recruiter is 'an intimate networking consultancy', seeking an organisational development consultant for their client: 'a significant, UK-wide service provider with a much admired brand'. On offer is 'the opportunity to shape the future orientation of a major blue chip organisation'.

As if that were not enough, there is also the potential to influence the consulting business itself: 'The ability to contribute with new OD business development opportunities with current and future clients could lead to a unique opportunity for the right individual with the appropriate ambition. I am looking to recruit a successor – eventually', says the confident and authoritative voice on the end of the phone.

Why can't we name you, I ask?

'Because then people I have met in the past will apply. There is nobody that I know of that I am in the least bit interested in for this role.' Fair enough. What kind of person are you after? 'Somebody that recognises the importance of other people, rather than their own ego. They will need credibility at CEO level, gravitas. We need someone with the courage of their own convictions. Sometimes, the only way an organisation will change is by challenging those who lead it – that can be scary.'

"our client is a UK-wide service provider with a much admired brand"

What about their psychological background? 'We're less interested in qualification, badges, than we are in attitude, curiosity and courage. We are definitely not after a form-filling, psychometric box ticker. The successful applicant will be able to work with a wide range of models to understand enabling and disabling behaviour in an organisation. You will be capable of caring for and challenging others through feedback. It is crucial that you can identify and challenge effective and ineffective patterns of behaviour and work with your own and others' emotional responses and vulnerabilities.'

The recruiter says that their consultants 'develop activity as it emerges, rather than following set programmes'. They are after someone who is 'self-employed, passionate and self aware, with significant experience of facilitating change. You will be able to wrestle with real-time conundrums and develop outline creative OD approaches to complex business needs, and communicate them in a straightforward, respectful and appealing way to all levels of an organisation.'

You can find this job on p.859, and with many others on www.psychapp.co.uk. The site provides a valuable resource to Society members and employers alike.

dozen students and interns undertake research and help out with our projects. You get time to think and discuss your ideas with your students and other researchers, but your thinking is constantly reality-checked when you present them to commercial customers or policy makers.'

'People tend to think of academia and academic careers in very specific way. You study for years being told what to do, become a junior lecturer, work your way up and after a very long time, with good

luck and the death of senior academics, you may become a professor. It's very much not like that here at the Centre. John Rust may not be the youngest professor in the department, but he's definitely the most open-minded one. He encourages fresh ideas and supports the researchers and students in whatever crazy projects they are willing to do. For instance, while many established academics have very limited understanding of things like Facebook or Twitter, we are actively researching them

thanks to the experience and enthusiasm of young researchers and students.'

The dangers of ignorance of modern psychology

During his presentation at the conference I mentioned, Michal introduced one of the Centre's projects, myPersonality.org, an online application that allows its users to take real personality and IQ tests and receive feedback in a variety of non-conventional environments. It gives a flavour of how Michal's work is

questioning some traditional thinking. So far, more than six million people have participated, and most of them gave their consent to use their scores and detailed profiles in academic research. This project is not only valuable for the participants, who can learn more about different aspects of their personality, but also provides unprecedented amounts of research data. And all of this with virtually no financial investment. I asked Michal if he thinks the internet is transforming psychology.

'The internet and services like e-mail,

Twitter, Wikipedia, and Wikileaks, empower individuals, even in the least democratic countries, by providing them with virtually unlimited access to each other and to information about other people. In more affluent societies, products, services, and ideas compete on a global scale, while consumers can easily switch between them, voting with a mouse click. You need psychology both to understand and to cater for this volatile and empowered population. Arab regimes are experiencing the dangers of ignorance in modern psychology as we speak.'

Revel in research, and reap the rewards

Matthew Price and Trevor Humby on the mutual benefits of giving undergraduates more opportunity to contribute to research

Research is an essential part of almost all careers in psychology. Yet despite this, undergraduate students do not have a direct opportunity to conduct their own hands-on research until their final-year research project (aside from group-based practicals in earlier years). So, can anything more be done to increase research skills at an earlier stage? Can students do more to seek these experiences? Are there other opportunities for doing research available?

Promoting good practice

To help develop core research skills, some university psychology departments now offer summer research internships for their students. For example, Cardiff University's School of Psychology (our home School) promotes the university-wide Cardiff Undergraduate Research Opportunity Programme (UROP). This programme exists with the aim of providing students with four to eight weeks of supervised research work during the summer vacation prior to starting their final year, to help them gain more research experience and boost their CV, whilst earning some money. Students are fully integrated into the research groups and get to see all aspects of life as a research scientist.

Feedback for the scheme has been very positive, and the majority of students would like to extend their experience if possible. In addition to the School funding 12–14 students per year, members of staff have been successful in obtaining external funding, permitting even more students to experience this valuable opportunity. Currently, funding for undergraduate

summer research is available from organisations such as Nuffield/BBSRC, the Wellcome Trust, and the British and European Psychological Societies.

Nearly 100 students have taken part in the school's research scheme since its inception in 2005, with a range of studies reflecting the full breadth of psychological research. Thus, projects as diverse as tests of optic flow parsing, the role of social emotions in trust and cooperation, and the role of imprinted genes on brain function using genetically modified mice have all been undertaken. The success of the scheme is also reflected in the fact that a large proportion of the students have gone on to do PhDs. Furthermore, two projects have resulted in publications (one in the journal *Nature!*).

Teresa Rees (Pro Vice Chancellor, Research at Cardiff University) spoke of how the Cardiff programme had exceeded her expectations. 'There is no doubt that both students and staff benefit from the scheme. The most rewarding aspect is the excitement for research generated in students being given an opportunity to be involved in real-life projects. Hopefully,

some will be sufficiently inspired to become researchers in the future.' Dr Candy Hassall, Head of Basic Careers at the Wellcome Trust agrees: 'There is no better way to gain insight into and be inspired by the scientific process than to be immersed in the laboratory experience... These awards enable students to put into practice

what they have learnt in their lectures and provide a glimpse of what a research career is like.'

Student benefits

By providing students the opportunity to see every stage of the research process from funding application through to report write-up, they are given an extra chance to practise and develop the skills needed for their final-year project and future careers and to think critically about the world of research. From our experience, the evidence suggests that our interns are more likely to be awarded a first for their project, with 60 per cent of summer students awarded 70 per cent or more (cf. 30–40 per cent of all students), and 40 per cent of our interns go on to achieve a first class degree.

Therefore, by giving students an additional chance to refine their research abilities with the summer internship experience, they are more likely

"These awards provide a glimpse of what a research career is like"

to have the skills required to carry out their final-year research project to a higher standard. This is obviously fruitful for staff and students alike.

Another significant benefit of a summer research internship is the chance to meet PhD students. PhD and other postgraduate students are often very separated from undergraduate students but are a potentially great source of knowledge and expertise. A summer research opportunity gives undergraduate students a chance to

'Also, as we increasingly interact with software and machines, such as games, search engines, iPads and, soon, personal robots, there's a strong need to plant in them a deeper understanding of users' needs, moods, desires, and so on. Psychology is the solution, and we now have a lot of collaborations going on with computer scientists and big software and hardware developing companies.'

And what does the future hold? For the first time in the interview there's a

long pause. 'I'm not really sure. If I'm honest, I'm really happy to be where I am.

I want to make it last as long as possible.'

"I'm really happy to be where I am. I want to make it last"

The importance of, and the relative lack of, links between UK companies and universities has long been documented. Michal

is an example who sees the two sectors feeding into each other. Psychology has impacted his own business activities, and commerce has proved a fertile subject for

psychological research. His fascination with technology has led him to view an area with a very long tradition – psychometrics – in a completely new light, and he believes that the same could apply in wider psychological areas. But as this section of *The Psychologist* is concerned with careers it's fascinating to hear his views that psychological knowledge is essential for a wide range of jobs, not to mention other aspects of life.

For more information on Michal and his work at the Psychometric Centre see www.psychometrics.cam.ac.uk



are a great way of doing that because they offer a hands-on experience of scientific research. Students get an invaluable opportunity to enhance their research skills as well as gaining an insight into life as a scientific researcher.'

While these resources are available there is not as much competition for them as might be expected which suggests that perhaps universities need to be more engaged with students about these opportunities and go to the next level to promote them further. It also suggests that students, keen on a research career, should perhaps be more

willing to think outside the box

and approach lecturers to help them win a bursary for research.

In sum, summer research as an undergraduate can be a rewarding and enriching experience. It is a chance for students to fully participate in the professional work of their university, and may help in deciding future career paths. With this in mind, perhaps what is required is better advertising of these types of opportunities to encourage more summer research schemes to more students – so that even more students can revel in research!

Matthew Price is a final-year undergraduate student, co-president of the Cardiff School of Psychology Society and took part in the UROP scheme.

Trevor Humby is a lecturer in Behavioural Genetics at the School of Psychology at Cardiff University and is co-ordinator of the school UROP scheme

interact closely with PhD students, learning from their experience, and for undergraduates considering a career in academic research, this contact may prove invaluable in highlighting an accessible career path upon graduation.

Staff benefits

An enthusiastic undergraduate student who is keen to learn has a lot to contribute to a research laboratory. Data collection is time-consuming, and so having an extra pair of hands in the lab is often highly appreciated! As well as this, two minds are better than one, and students may contribute a fresh approach to research. An example of this comes from a student whose suggestion of an extra condition for a study was later incorporated into the final design. 'Throughout my eight weeks I had a glimpse at the process behind constructing a study. As a result of my own reading and talking to the PhD student I suggested putting in

another condition, which became a part of the study. It was rewarding to know I contributed intellectually to the study itself.'

Having a summer research student comes at the cost of giving regular supervision, but surely this is a small price to pay?

A call to universities and students

With funding becoming increasingly limited, more and more universities would argue that they could not afford to run such a summer research scheme. However, many funding bodies acknowledge the importance and value of undergraduate research opportunities and provide research grants in recognition of this need. Why would they fund undergraduate research? A spokesperson for Nuffield's bursaries programme, Sara Botting, explains: 'One of the Nuffield Foundation's aims is to build research capacity both within science and social science. Our undergraduate bursaries