

Market Hunt S02 Episode 07 Mapping Canada's Social services. Guest Dr. Alina Turner, HelpSeeker. Cameo Bill Tam, Digital Supercluster.

[begin intro music]

Thierry Harris: Covid-19 has brought to light some of the inequalities Canadians are facing. The pandemic has exposed major issues of mental health, food insecurity, domestic abuse and homelessness to name but a few. Governing bodies are reeling attempting to provide services to those who need it the most.

Technological solutions using machine learning and artificial intelligence are being used to attempt to [map out what services are currently out there](#) and diagnose what is happening in order to help social service providers and their funders tackle these issues:

Alina Turner: There was no script on what the social needs were going to be out of this, it was in some ways unprecedented. We were taking a look at our data and saw an immediate spike in food insecurity issues. We were seeing these trends. We were seeing rent instability as well as obviously mental health as we can expect.

We knew that the pandemic was going to have a specific, unique impact on the social needs of Canadians.

Thierry Harris narration:

On this second episode of Market Hunt's AI series, we meet a Certified B AI corporation with a social mandate to provide digital solutions for complex social issues. We are going to learn about how they are attempting to produce a map of Canada's social services to allow decision makers to make better funding decisions to support vulnerable populations. We'll examine a case study for the implementation of these systems in Lethbridge Alberta and understand how challenging it can be to implement changes in social services to provide care for those who need it the most. Stay tuned.

[intro song music]

Nick Quain: Entrepreneurship is hard, you need to have support there.

Andrew Casey: We fundamentally have to learn how to live our lives differently. We can't keep going the way we have.

Thierry Harris: Do you think we can we ever get to that point where AI that's going to us explain baby talk, or cat talk and dog talk. Is that ever going to happen ?

Rune Kongshaug: I fall in love, easily.

Thierry Harris: True. We're coming up with some pretty interesting ideas here.

Andrew Casey: We've solved everything,

Thierry Harris: [chuckles] We've solved it all.

[End intro song]

[Begin promo music]

Narrator: And now a message from our sponsor, **IE-KnowledgeHub**.

*IE-KnowledgeHub is a website dedicated to promoting learning and exchanges on international entrepreneurship. **Watch Video Case Studies**, listen to **podcasts** and much more!*

If you are an education professional looking for course content, an academic researcher seeking research material, or someone interested in business innovation check out le-KnowledgeHub.

le-KnowledgeHub focuses on innovation ecosystems and firms who commercialize their technologies in international markets.

Let's listen in to a Video Case Study featuring [Produktif](#).

Rune Kongshaug: *What led me to Produktif was a series of epiphanies I would say. Starting out in New York city I launched myself into real estate purchasing undervalued real estate and transformed it into residential housing. I had this idea of creating an urban oasis. I started looking at the urban fabric as sort of a desert of sorts. Lifeless. And I have always seen a link between, poverty reduction, revitalization, urban upgrading as very much linked to design.*

Narrator: *That's Rune Kongshaug, Founder of Produktif. Produktif is a design firm developing sustainable technologies and re-imagining the ways we live in urban areas. In the late 2000s Kongshaug purchased a carriage home in Montreal's Point-St-Charles neighbourhood. He wanted to test out his ideas in a real life setting.*

Rune Kongshaug: *I had to start somewhere, so I started with a credible size prototype: the Maison Produktif House or for short MPH is an ecological housing complex that has a community and neighbourhood impact. Now when you are talking about a ecosystemic building, you know a building that claims to operate like an ecosystem. You are putting the bar even higher.*

Narrator: *Kongshaug's original idea was to demonstrate that green living could also be affordable. He had wished to build housing with prefabricated sustainable materials. However, the 2008 financial crisis left him scrambling as bank lending dried up and suppliers started facing serious difficulties.*

Rune Kongshaug: *This project was initially intended for using modular prefab solutions. The supplier I had in mind went bankrupt. I decided to pursue with*

conventional construction. The construction industry is sort of where the car industry was at the T4 level.

Narrator: *We'll hear more about Kongshaug's challenges on sustainable building at the end of the program. You can also checkout the Produktif video case study for free by visiting [IE hyphen knowledgehub.ca](https://ie.hyphen.knowledgehub.ca). And now, back to the show.*

[music transition]

Thierry Harris: [Canada's Digital supercluster](#), a government sponsored program to support the innovation economy, helps companies reach new heights by promoting a collaborative innovation process. The organization puts companies together to build on their respective strengths in order to help foster innovative solutions to tackle complex problems and develop market opportunities.

On this episode of Market Hunt we are going to learn about [Helpseeker, a Certified B corporation](#) based in Western Canada. Helpseeker was able to take advantage of the supercluster's network to help tackle inequalities stemming from the COVID pandemic. Helpseeker describes itself as a lean, growth-minded tech company with a social purpose. It's co-founder [Dr. Alina Turner](#) has devoted her life's work to enhancing the quality and accessibility of social services in Canada.

[Bill Tam, the Digital SuperCluster's COO](#) and co-founder elaborates on the Supercluster's funding of Helpseeker's COVID related project:

[music transition]

Bill Tam: Dr. Alina Turner, as the co-founder CEO and for her, this has been a lifelong pursuit. I think what COVID brought out was an understanding that the population writ large was not uniformly affected. There were portions of the population that were more adversely affected than others and I think we saw the breakages in the social system.

For their company, and what we funded was basically an intelligence capability to really be able to predict where we're going to see greater incidences of social breakdowns. Those that would be most prone neighborhoods and areas where people would be more prone to fall between the cracks. I think that's insight, which has largely been the domain of trying to invest in [predictive analytics](#) across a lot of different domains.

What's not new about what's being applied is predictive analytics technology has been around for a while, but the application of this into their domain is new. She's working with a company called AltaML which is based in Alberta in Edmonton, which has perfected a lot of machine learning capabilities to ingest the information that's necessary to lead the insights into where likely the cases are going to be.

As you mentioned, I think, Dr. Turner and the folks at HelpSeeker hope to extend this capability into thousands of municipalities across the country into the US and other parts of the world with an attempt to help support municipal governments and authorities with really being able to take proactive stance on how they can support the more vulnerable aspects of the population.

[music transition]

Thierry Harris: Tam describes the process through which Helpseeker applied to the [Digital Supercluster's Covid-19 related funding](#).

[music transition]

Bill Tam: What happened was, HelpSeeker put in an initial idea and concept, as with most projects that we've invested in, we help them to forge the collaborations, introduce them to additional companies, help to build a more robust framework for the project. We introduced them to [Cory Janssen](#), the folks at [AltaML](#), and a few other collaborators that were part of that equation to make their project more robust.

Ultimately, we have an independent project selection committee, which is separate from our team, which ultimately evaluates the merits of projects. Out of the more than 500 project ideas that were submitted as part of our COVID program. Ultimately, we funded about 30 or so of them so you can see the demand side. For HelpSeeker to be successful, it really had to meet a lot of the aspects that we're looking for in a project.

Fundamentally, as a supercluster, as I mentioned, a lot of what we're trying to do is build the framework, the collaborations to interconnect. We have more than 1,000 organizations that are members and associates with the superclusters. It's really about matchmaking and building the right business relationships among them. Ultimately, that's what led to their success with many iterations of their project until such a point that it really did meet all the requirements in the end, and ultimately, they were successful in the selection method.

[music transition]

Thierry Harris: For more on the Digital Supercluster, check out our episode on Canada's Digital supercluster on our [episode show page](#). Dr Turner elaborates on working with the Digital Supercluster to apply predictive analytics to the social sector.

[music transition]

Alina Turner: When the Digital Supercluster put out a call for proposals on helping Canada's response, and we pitched having the ability through the pandemic to collect this data on what Canadians were looking for and needing, but then also merging it with diverse data sets that we could get our hands-on. Data sets that we

either created or curated or could get our hands-on. And starting to look at what COVID is going to do in terms of homelessness, domestic violence, and suicide in Canada.

Then taking that a step further with machine learning and asking whether we could predict that into the future so that we could then advise government and donors, sometimes philanthropy, corporate social responsibility folks that are interested in these issues, if we could then give them the guidance on where the hotspots were going to be and what the social needs were going to look like into the future.

[music transition]

We're not the typical AI firm that's profit only where we're B Corp. That means we have a social mandate, and we want to be sustainable and competitive from a business perspective as well. We're definitely not a charity. We definitely are here to be innovative and drive Canada's economy forward. We're definitely here for both sides and trying to show that there's a different way of doing business, and a different way of doing social purpose as well.

[music transition]

Thierry Harris: The storyline proposed by Helpseeker, marrying social purpose with digital technologies in order to produce a greater social good is a compelling one.

The company has released products & services aimed at different markets: end users, folks searching for social service help in their communities; Service providers, who provide social services to the community; and Decision makers, who can be from government or private foundations who fund social services.

They've released two primary tools, [the HelpSeeker navigation App](#), providing access to over 250 thousand community, health and social services in Canada.

And [The Community Success Hub](#), a digital social decisions support platform designed to streamline decision making to help provide more effective social services in communities.

The Community Success Hub leverages machine learning and artificial intelligence suggestions and solutions to shorten the time from research to action.

Dr. Turner provides us with more context on her personal background & HelpSeeker's story.

[music transition]

Alina Turner: My personal story is so entwined with HelpSeeker that it's tough to differentiate them nowadays, but a little bit about me, born and raised in Romania during communism, and then ended up in Canada initially as a refugee. Now I'm a

Canadian citizen and living the dream. HelpSeeker is a company I co-founded with my partner, [Travis](#), about three years ago.

It's primarily to do with systems change around social issues across Canada. We focus on bringing to market new technologies that will help innovate new ways of doing business in the social sector. We do this by partnering with communities at the local level and partnering with governments. By introducing products and services that are meant to transform Canada's social safety net into one that's ready for the [fourth industrial revolution](#), because that's a sector that's been typically quite lagging when it comes to digital innovation.

[music transition]

We produce various tools and services. One of the ones that we are particularly well known for is our health navigation apps. These are apps that create an access point for people looking for help services anywhere they might be across Canada to give them access to what's to be about 250,000 different services that are active in the social safety net in Canada.

Somebody might be looking for help with domestic violence, for instance, or with homelessness, with mental health challenges. Oftentimes, the biggest problem, actually, that I found as a social science researcher in this space is that people don't know what's out there and how to access it. The apps actually curate the content and produce it in a way that's easy to navigate for these end-users that might be struggling with these issues, or they might be somebody that's helping someone else, a friend or a family member access these services. That's one set of tools that we've brought to market in the last few years.

[music transition]

The piece that we've been developing now that we have a lot of this groundwork done on mapping the system, is getting that intelligence to help us plan for better outcomes as well. There's lots of decision-makers involved in Canada's social sector, they might be policymakers in different levels of government, in different departments. They might be council members, political-level players. They might be elected officials at the provincial or federal levels.

The key challenge that they often have to overcome is where do they invest the funds that they have available for social services or for social impact and social benefit purposes and where and how best to spend that money and how to make the policy decisions that are going to support different populations in different communities.

Again, we've primarily been reliant on pretty traditional ways of gathering knowledge about what problems there are, what community assets might be. What does community have? What does it need? What are priority-investment moving forward?

Such basic system intelligence information is just not out there, but because we've been able to map Canada's ecosystem in the way I'm describing, to bring it to the end-users was our number one intent. The number two and entwined intent is to bring the data to the decision-makers and support those decisions in a more data-driven way as well. The decision support systems that we're able to develop out of this information are our next level of development that we've been working on.

[music transition]

Thierry Harris: That's fantastic. Thank you for that overview. It's really critical that we're talking about the need over here. In another life, I actually ran for a municipal office in Ottawa, the nation's capital, and I know all about the silos and working within different programs, sitting on different boards, and everybody is working in their own silos. It is a mess, frankly, in terms of trying to help the end-user, which is a person who becomes terribly confused and frustrated at trying to navigate the system.

And, you're right to say that there's a lot of funding that is going into the city and it cross-pollinates with provincial funding, there's some federal funding in there as well. Everything is a big smorgasbord that ends up not tasting very good because it's not being applied efficiently and effectively and there's a lot of waste occurring.

I guess what HelpSeeker is attempting to do, and please correct me if I'm wrong, is to (a) take this data, and then eventually, there will be a map or a roadmap that a select committee or somebody can apply towards directing the funding in a targeted way, but also make that decision making process a community-based decision process. Whereas a lot of times we see cities in a top down kind of, well, we can do this, or we can't do this. It's the financial folks on the budget committee that really wield the big stick in terms of impacting all the different social services that are out there.

Oftentimes, these social services are the first to receive funding cuts, unfortunately, and people are caught in gaps, and they don't have access to the services that they need. They become frustrated with the program, the frontline workers are in constant crisis mode, helping things with like, for example, the opioid crisis that we have going on, the housing and homelessness crisis that we have going on. All of these things are interrelated.

I guess your approach with HelpSeeker was (a) to take a step back and then attempt to use technology, with a social mission, with a social purpose to map out what's happening and what's going on, and then try to apply that getting the buy-in from the different stakeholders who are part of this decision-making process.

Perhaps you can talk to us a little bit more detail referring to Lethbridge, about how you applied some of the concepts you're working on and integrated into real-life scenario here with a city that was going through a tremendous spike in terms of

uptick in domestic violence, in terms of uptick in homelessness, in terms to uptick in theft and crime. Really press the pause button, maybe give us a bit more detail about that experience. Yes, please.

Alina Turner: Sure. Yes. No, absolutely, it always makes it more real when you actually tackle it from a community perspective, because it's one thing to-- this is something that I learned earlier on, even before HelpSeeker, just being a social scientist working in this space. Learning about tools and developing tools is one thing, and another one is actually implementing the change management process on the ground. That's something that we do at HelpSeeker alongside with the technology development, which is an important part, but tech on its own is not going to change the world. We actually need to walk with communities and support them as they make this transformation happen.

[music transition]

[The City of Lethbridge](#) is a really interesting example. As you foreshadowed, it was undergoing and it's still undergoing tremendous social change right now, not from a positive perspective. They had a supervised consumption site that was the busiest in the world. This is a city of 100,000 people. It just cracked 100,000 a couple of years ago when we started working with them. When they approached us, their number one challenge was the opioid crisis entwined with downtown safety issues.

You will know the hard-pace decision-makers are at when on the one hand, they want to implement harm reduction initiatives that they know are going to save lives of vulnerable people. On the other hand, they're getting the concerns from business owners or customers and downtown-core businesses that are concerned about their safety, because they're seeing needles on the ground there. There's increased perception of B&Es and small theft, et cetera.

There's this unfortunate rub between the needs of these two groups. You walk into a community like that, that's got a doubling of homelessness every couple of years and it's got this supervised consumption site that is so busy. It has an over-representation of indigenous people in its shelter services and in these emergency services as well. There's this other aspect around our role in reconciliation that needs to be considered in all of this as well.

[music transition]

From the beginning we set out to understand what this ecosystem looks like from a service delivery perspective, [systems mapping](#) was the first step. Using our apps, and our systems mapping team would go in and actually understand who was doing what. Again, you think, "Okay, 100,000 people, take a guess on how many services they could possibly have?"

It's a tremendous amount of services, they have over 6,000 service elements in a community of 100,000. It's not just a couple of 100 two-day job and you're done,

you've mapped it all. Also, it's extremely dynamic. You needed to have a dynamic inventory process so that you can map things one day but then they disappear the next day because it's a very high turnover in this field.

Thierry Harris: Wow.

Alina Turner: That was step one. Step two was taking a look at the population indicators and looking at what citizens were saying was happening in their community, too. Lots of community engagement on the ground. Hundreds and hundreds of one-on-one stakeholder interviews and conversations that had to be had and documented and analyzed. Just that pure qualitative research piece that you can't get machines to do that part. We also did a public survey to understand the social needs and perspectives of the community as well. It was great. It was 2,000 people participated in that.

Obviously, there's selection bias in terms of online surveys, but you take that and you take your stakeholder group interviews and you get a pretty solid sense of what's happening. Then you look at the data, and that's where you reference homelessness going up and domestic violence rates going up. Those were from myriad of sources of data that are not necessarily comparable. You can't just throw everything into a machine learning black magic box and spit out what's happening in Lethbridge, you actually have to do some grunt work to identify the data sources, make sense of them because it's apples and oranges most of the time, and see what's actually popping at the top.

That's, for instance, domestic violence, didn't really pop up as a key issue when you look at the survey. It's there but it's not number one. When you look at the police data, you see it went up tremendously. It's one of the indicators that if you're not looking across data sources and stakeholder groups, you're going to miss how important it really is. Food insecurity is another one amongst seniors specifically. Lots of that needs assessment is what it's called. It's an integrated needs assessment when you look holistically at what's happening and you use different methodologies to figure out what's going on.

Out of that, we found what the priorities were in terms of pressure points, and from there, it was, "What do you do about them?" I think you will have to forgive my short digression into social theory, but in terms of what you do about these things, we come in because we're invited by communities. You're necessarily looking at a local dynamic of something that's much bigger. There's only certain things truly, and again, you'll know this, as a municipality that the city can and cannot do

Thierry Harris: Absolutely.

Alina Turner: Within its capacity. You have to be so realistic about that. Yet, you want to identify what the causes are of some of these challenges.

The fact that indigenous people are over-represented, that's a colonialism effect that's continuing. The fact that we have a social hierarchy that is quite punitive to the lowest decile, the lowest rung on that hierarchy is a feature that's part of capitalist and global capitalism. We're not going to change that with systems mapping, right? We're very realistic about it. However, there are certain things that we can do at the local level. What are those things? What are those best practices that have some evidence, or at least some promising? It may not be as scientifically proven as, let's say, the COVID vaccine, right? Because social science is not that rigorous, unfortunately.

Where do we have some promise of effective strategies that we could be implementing on the ground? So that's the next part of it, and who's going to do what. There's the whole issue of at the local level, you've got some control over municipal policy, assuming council's behind you, and in Lethbridge they were. Then there are certain things that the nonprofit and charitable sector we can get them to do or ask of them to do, but then it's a system's change process. You need to coach and you need to prod and you need to cajole, and sometimes, it's not that easy, right?

I'm sure you're wanting to know about the technology stuff, but I'm telling you about, this is how this stuff works on the ground, because this is one city, and we're in 200 cities, so every city is different. Every dynamic is extremely unique. What they all have in common, though, is that there's these early adaptors that are frustrated with the status quo and are willing to try new things. Going back to Lethbridge, one of the things that we found as we were doing our work, and when we were analyzing the data through the platform, again, we could tell them now, "Here's your top issues, and here's the best practices on what you need to do and your priorities."

That's the thing that lots of communities never get to where they can actually articulate that using data and using evidence. That's a big deal.

Thierry Harris: Yes, definitely. Sorry to cut you off, but you are also saying this in a holistic form. You're not just looking at the impact of policing, or the lack of community policing, for example, or the impact of lack of affordable housing. You're looking at the entire chessboard completely, holistically, and that's your purpose, is to do that integrated needs assessment, and then that leads into-- I guess the third point there was the social impact audit.

Alina Turner: Yes.

Thierry Harris: That's directly, basically, saying, in layperson's terms would be, "Where's the funding and how's it being applied and how effective it actually is?" That's a huge question, a very touchy question because everybody likes to play in their own sandbox. Again, the silo effect in cities, I've seen it for sure in Ottawa. It's really unfortunate because it seems like you give the analogy of people in a dragon boat and they're all paddling in different directions and the boat's spinning on itself, it's not getting any yardage here in terms of distance to cross the finish line.

Even though the goals seem to be aligned, just the reality of life takes over, and people protect their turf, quite frankly, and they want to keep their funding going. They believe in their purpose and if there's any overlap there, that's got to be a really hard thing to overcome. Have you seen this? Is just this my imagination or is this actually happening ?

Alina Turner: Totally, This is it; because it's all fun and games until you get the money.

[laughter]

It's all, everybody wants to talk about needs and priorities and how collaborative everything is and then you start like, "Okay, well, let's see your balance sheet. Let's see, where are you getting your money and what are you spending it on?" Which is, from a researcher perspective, it's like, "Well, of course, I need to follow the money to understand what's going on," but from a culture perspective in the social sector, it's one of those, as you said, it's, "We don't talk about money," type of thing. I guess it's the same in our personal life, [laughs] you don't go around asking people what their salary is and what they're spending their finances on.

It's definitely got that culture of don't ask don't tell type of thing, even though, it's so gossipy at the same time, just like real life, right?

Thierry Harris: Yes.

Alina Turner: So, absolutely. One of the things that, again, I was really obsessed with, and this comes from my background, I was at the Calgary Homeless Foundation, which was a funding organization, and I was always obviously interested in the funding aspects because we were a funder, and we managed a whole lot of money. I don't know what their budgets are now, but when I was there, I was responsible for \$40 million per year in homelessness funding.

Thierry Harris: Wow.

Alina Turner: I kept getting asked, "Why haven't you ended homelessness?" I was like, "Yes, why haven't I? That's a lot of money. You should be able to do this." I've realized over the years that my \$40 million was nothing in comparison to what was going on in Calgary in terms of funding. Again, to go back to the Lethbridge example, the City of Lethbridge invests about \$20 million per year. Of course, not all of that is going into social services or anything like that, but they were putting quite a bit of money into the community as well, into different social services.

However, what we found in the social impact audit was that that only represented 2% of what was going into the social sector in Lethbridge. When the municipality makes up 2% of the pie, then what hope in hell does it have to change the world? Right? Just take away market capitalism and all these other dynamics that we referenced before. Even just from the local perspective, the municipality is actually

not the big player. Big players are provinces, and obviously the feds via province, social transfers as well.

Thierry Harris: Yes. It's like the municipality is in charge of all the decision making, but it's powerless when it's requesting funding. It's at the mercy of other provincial and federal bodies to impact things that are going on in their municipality, which again, the end-user becomes confused in terms of, "Who do I ask help for? Is it the provincial person? Or is it the municipal person?" Then they pass the hockey puck back and forth, and again, frustration, redundancies, all the negative kind of resentment things that happen with people not operating in an effective system.

This is an amazing purpose that you have with your organization, with HelpSeeker, what was your ideation to kickstart this, the marriage of using AI, machine learning to collect data with a social purpose? You're putting in the right types of variables into the computer, and it's trying to do what exactly?

[Music transition]

Alina Turner: Well, I guess we use AI in a couple of different spots. First is the actual algorithm to support people to find the best help for what they're looking for, so there's a front-facing machine learning component to it. Because again, when you've got, what, 250,000 different service elements across Canada, let's say, going back to Lethbridge, 6,000 in Lethbridge, it's overwhelming. Just because you have 6,000, doesn't mean that all of them are going to be good and a good match for you. There's an ML kind of function on the front end, to support that.

Then on the back end, in terms of insights for decision-makers, it's building the data pipeline with these various data sources, there's everything, from economic indicators, population indicators, to different social indicators. Then the most critical one that we didn't have before is our own data set as well. Those interactions, again, they're anonymous interactions, we don't track, "Joe in Lethbridge did this, this, this and this." We just know that, "Somebody in Lethbridge did this, this and this."

You take all that and the system is mapping, you mash them obviously together, the beautiful black box of AI that I'm not even going to pretend I understand as well as the people that are actually doing the technical work, but yes, it's essentially developing the algorithm to predict on a community level what these target indicators are going to be looking like in a year, five years, et cetera.

Homelessness, suicide, and domestic violence have been our focus thus far. Through the Supercluster investment, that's what we've been working on and are going to be bringing to market.

[music transition]

Thierry Harris: Dr. Turner describes in greater detail Helpseekers community success hub.

[music transition]

Essentially, if you can imagine a KPI dashboard, for those folks that are from the business sector, you probably know this better than anybody, then looking ahead and understanding, "Okay, well, here's the driving forces on homelessness," if that's your pain point, or mental health, so suicide would be your pain point there, and understanding where the trends are and what the key indicators are that are important for you to watch, then even more importantly, understanding in your community relative to other communities, what are your numbers going to be looking like in a year or two or three from now.

Then obviously, it's the, "So what?" from there. What are the strategies that they should be looking at? This is where the funding component comes in, because you might be seeing that, "Well, on--" Take Abbotsford for instance, it has a dearth of suicide intervention programming, for instance. Suicide is a huge thing that people are obviously looking for right now, but it's something that they don't have a whole lot of. I don't even think that they had even one listing. The data leads to the next step, which is the, "What do I do about it? If I know what the issues are, what's my next step as a decision-maker?"

Sometimes these are things within your control, and sometimes they're not, because as you mentioned before, municipalities might be the ones to feel the brunt of a lot of social challenges. They're the closest to the ground, everybody's going to call their councilor, but the actual decision-making power and the funding might be at the provincial level or federal level. What do you do then? Right?

Thierry Harris: Exactly, and you're getting into the idea of a systems planner and the municipality as a systems planner. Maybe you can talk a little bit about that, that outcome where the municipality, in an ideal world, would be that system planner and define what that system planner is exactly in your words so that our audience can understand what we're talking about.

Alina Turner: Yes, no problem. No problem. To me, the [systems planner](#) role, when it comes to social issues, you do need something on the ground that acts as that quarterback, that's able to see the playing field at a local level and understand who the players are on the field and what the right moves are, and to anticipate what's going to be happening locally and connect that to the bigger playbook, if you will, of the league. My husband always talks about like, "Do not use sports analogies, you do not know anything about sports," but you get what I mean, right?

Thierry Harris: Well the quarterback needs to win the game, they need to know where all the players are positioned, they need to know what play to call, what's the right strategy to apply in a certain situation if the players on the field are doing X; ie, there is this amount of homeless people, there's this amount of people going for

food banks, there's this amount of people looking for affordable housing. What's the magic formula that the quarterback needs to apply?

In order to do that they have to view themselves as somebody who can pull the trigger on different levers of funding to then again, try to output something that's going to be as concise as possible and as productive as possible according to the KPIs that are in your systems mapping. Maybe that's--

Alina Turner: Exactly. Oh, well, there you go. See, it worked, it worked. I shouldn't have been the one to pitch it.

Thierry Harris: That's all right. We're happy to assist here on Market Hunt any way that we can to clarify things because that's a big deal.

Alina Turner: That's perfect. Yes, that's exactly it. That's what the systems planner role is. Now, is the municipality, or the regional district, in some cases, the right entity to be taking that on? This is a touchy one because there's competition for the systems planner role. There's different players, different foundations, different non-profits, different government departments that are vying for that role. That's not clear, who the quarterback is, it's not.

Thierry Harris: It's not even clear. Exactly, yes.

Alina Turner: That actually is part of the problem, because then you've got quarterbacks all over the place calling plays, so the dysfunction continues, right?

Thierry Harris: Yes. For the food fans, too many cooks in the kitchen, again, it's going to make something, it's not going to taste great or too many creative people in the music room, it's going to sound like a bunch of noise. It's not going to have any harmony.

Alina Turner: That's right. Exactly. The analogies are bound from this, but that's exactly it. For me, the municipality, we've got municipalities, number one, because not every community in Canada has a non-profit that can take that role or a United Way or whatever, mission or bank, et cetera. Just the fact that we have coverage is key. The other part is that there's an elected aspect to this. There's some legitimacy from the citizen base that is really important, and then there's some infrastructure already there because there's a means of raising funds, for instance, et cetera.

Then municipalities have this ability, I think to look at things holistically, because they're not just thinking about the social needs of a particular class or group of people. They're looking at physical infrastructure, the bridges and buildings and land-use planning. Then they're thinking about people as well. In some cases, though, municipalities are quite bad at that, I would say, where they're really good at the engineering part, but not the social part.

Thierry Harris: Yes. They build a building, but they forget about the programs for that, you know homelessness, we can build a whole bunch of towers and put people

in them, but if we don't have social programs to help them, likely they're going to be back out on the street. That was one of the items in the Lethbridge report, which we'll put on our website and which you can find on the HelpSeeker site as well, in the case study section, that a lot of people just go back into the vicious circle of getting back onto the street, and then it's consumption and it's a lot of other problems that come about that.

You talked a bit about the community well-being integration table as, I guess the hub where you have people from the police force, you have people from indigenous communities, did that actually happen in Lethbridge? Again, just getting to a real-life example here.

Alina Turner: Yes. Getting back to the Lethbridge story, obviously, we had to get council on board first. What a really smart city council. They're really savvy and I get to interact with a lot of them, they just really got it. Really critical thinkers, they always rake me over the coals whenever I present to them, but I love them for that.

Thierry Harris: Good.

Alina Turner: Really critical questions and gave permission to administration, because this is the other thing when you think about political and the civil servants, is they're often in tension with each other as well.

In this case, there was an alignment between the city manager, the manager of social development and city council, saying that we need to change something or we're going to get the same results, and it's not working for us. They gave the city's administration permission to essentially cancel all contracts with social service providers and reissue everything in alignment with this new approach.

Thierry Harris: Wow, that's amazing. That's just a tabula rasa, starting again, pressing the reset button and going under a different set of KPIs and giving a committee basically an approach, so they actually implemented that. That's fantastic.

Alina Turner: Yes. It's not without bruises, scars, mass anxiety, and all these other things. I don't sugarcoat that this was a easy, rosy process. It's not. Change management is totally, totally tough work, especially because the start button or the reset was hit in February, March being when shit hit the fan.

Thierry Harris: Oh, my goodness. Yes, because the report came out in November of 2019. That's the case study report, so they pressed the reset button in February, and all of a sudden, in March, just when they started fresh, a new big hairy monster comes into the sandbox and it's COVID-19. Just a global pandemic, nothing to worry about. My Goodness --

Alina Turner: Yes, totally. It was like, "What should we do?" and we're like, "Press the gas pedal, this makes it even more important that we get our shit together."

Thierry Harris: Wow.

Alina Turner: There's tension, obviously, between the nonprofits and charities that got this money canceled and had to reapply under this new premise, and some of them didn't get funding because the committee, this advisory, this integrated table didn't necessarily choose the same players as before, so people did lose funding. There was hard feelings and movement of staff from this entity to that entity and all of that tension. I don't want to discount that. However, the pandemic just highlighted how critical that was to do; because without an integrated approach, you're going to be at a loss when things come to shove.

One of the things I'm really proud of to be involved with Lethbridge for is within the first 48 hours, they had all of their services, they were able to be on-stream for the pandemic response, they were on-stream within 48 hours. City council issued press releases on if you need help, HelpSeeker has everything up to date, so every single entity was able to report what they were still able to offer and to move things for truly, and to do that in 48 hours and to have a COVID button and COVID resources up and running that quickly, it was incredible. Despite the hard feelings, everybody really pulled together, they created this pod structure.

Again, supporting technology was our role, and coaching things from a "Here's what so-and-so is doing in Singapore. Here's what so-and-so's doing over here." Transit, food, mental health, childcare, so, "What are all the things that we could be doing right now through these pods?" The activated pods were made up of social service providers, but also volunteers, not just the typical. Then, of course, the emergency response mechanism that the city activated, because it was in a state of emergency, was fed through these pods as well.

They were getting real-time information of what the key pressure points were. Then the pods were activating, like delivering meals to seniors or doing mental health checks on families that we knew were vulnerable, et cetera, making sure everybody knew what was still up and running on a real-time basis. Those are the things that they were able to activate in 48 hours.

Thierry Harris: Wow. That's fantastic. Well, it's 48 hours, but the data that went into the HelpSeeker technology-- When did you guys start collecting data and Lethbridge, just so we have a kind of idea--

Alina Turner: I guess it was two years this last fall was when we started the mapping process, and then that changed the needs assessment, that changed management process, all of that, then the re-RFPing, the-

Thierry Harris: Yes, request the proposal.

Alina Turner: - re-figuring of the contracts. We've been active there for two years, but again, I don't want to make it seem like HelpSeeker did all this stuff. We were just an enabler, part of the package, if you will.

Thierry Harris: Yes, I agree with what you're saying, but I think that you're being very humble right now, which is a great Canadian trait as well. Your credit to your organization, I think is really important to underscore. Because if the silos are not speaking to each other, and if there isn't a technology that allows them to speak to each other, which essentially, correct me, please, if I'm wrong, what HelpSeeker is doing, then if people aren't agreeing on the data in the first place, look at what's happening with our neighbors down south, when you can't agree on the basic fundamental facts of things, things can get very, very, very messy.

It's really a critical mission that HelpSeeker is having here, and you're doing this with not just Lethbridge, you mentioned 200 cities that you're applying this technology in?

Alina Turner: Yes. Actually, that's a good point because we were-- recently [got an investment through Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation](#) to support the National Housing Strategy rollout. Folks are not familiar with that. This is the federal government's commitment to address homelessness and affordable housing needs for Canadians. I think it's a milestone part of their platform. It's about \$40 billion that they're investing in new affordable housing initiatives and homelessness initiatives over the next, I think now it's less than 10 years, but it was 10 years originally. Our goal in that is to be present using these tools and processes in 5,000 communities, which means basically everywhere in Canada.

Thierry Harris: 5,000 communities. Wow, that's spectacular. Congratulations and thank you for what you're doing. Dr. Alina Turner with us here on Market Hunt. We're looking at definitely an SME hitting well above its weight, integrating its technology through the CMHC, the Canadian Mortgage Housing Corporation, mandating it essentially to take a look at homelessness across cities, across from coast to coast. It's a big country and that's a huge ask that they're making of you.

Let's take a systemic look at a company like yours within the greater ecosystem. What does a company like yours need in terms of working behind you but also working in front of you in the stakeholders to make it successful? You are the glue that's sticking a lot of things together. A lot of this might come with procurements, for example, government should be asking for the top technology to be able to enable them to make right decisions.

They're pulling the levers on funding, but give us, just from the HelpSeeker perspective in terms of being a company with a social mission, a B Corporation as we call them, how does a company like yours become more effective in optimizing your own KPIs for what your measures of success are?

[music transition]

Alina Turner: That's interesting. I've been thinking quite a bit about it. I think from a procurement perspective, there's a benefit to growing more of us out there. I think about having a B Corp means that you're taking care of your team, you're hitting

your diversity targets, for instance. Having a team that's diverse from an indigenous perspective and visible minorities perspective that's key because that brings that lens to our work from the get-go. I think there are ways that government could be looking at B Corps as having a-- if they're hitting the same targets and are bringing the same value as typical corporations, why wouldn't you go with a B Corp?

Why wouldn't you use your procurement power to support this social impact sector there's a third way here that could really be beneficial to Canadians, especially homegrown B Corps. That would be so beautiful to see.

The money doesn't need to funnel to this capital class that's somewhere in the Valley. Again, nothing wrong with that. I'm saying that for those of us that are wanting to use our purchasing power for a social purpose, then there's actually a middle ground here. Really for capitalism to survive it should definitely be looking at that longer term for humanity to survive as well. [chuckles] That would be my perspective on that and why we're in this middle ground.

[music transition]

Now, specifically to HelpSeeker, what do we need? We have found it really tough, and we still don't have this. We don't have mentors, for instance. Folks that have been exited, for instance, that have been through the B Corp process before, we are either matched up with people that are in the social impact world like nonprofit world or people high in the corporate world that are wondering why we're not doing however many series of funding. We're like, "Well, yes, but what about the social benefit of this?" I think it would be great to have somebody that gets the social and the more traditional sense.

Thierry Harris: Business. Yes, I see what you're saying.

Alina Turner: Yes. The other thing is all of these accelerator programs and things like that, they're not meant for a social tech company. They're just not meant for it. If we apply for a social impact thing, they're like, "Uh, no, you're too tech," or "You're too business," or "You're too tech." If we apply for tech, they are like, "Well, what's the social stuff about?"

We have to walk this line all the time, and that's such bullshit because what else are we doing this innovation for if it's not to make life better for people and challenge some of these social issues? I would love to see us do a better job just at embracing this tension, which is a creative tension as well for orienting, but it's a good one to have.

Truly this whole Digital Superclusters thing, they saw this. You know what I mean? They saw that there's this third way. If it wasn't for them and CMHC, we would still be around and scrapping our way through, but they're really taking us from the small leagues to the medium leagues, for sure. Definitely not big leagues, but it's

credit to them as well, because they took a leap in something that they don't usually do. We're super, super grateful for that help.

Thierry Harris: So there you have it folks, the third way. The certified B corporation. Who knows? Maybe one day, some people will listen to this and wake up to the opportunities that present itself when you marry technology with a social mission. That's all the time we have for today, we hope you enjoyed the conversation and be sure to check out the episode show links for further readings on Helpseeker and what they are undertaking. If this company is able to succeed as a technologically oriented B corporation, it might serve as a template for others to follow. We'll be watching them closely here on Market Hunt.

[begin promo music]

Narration: And now a final word from our sponsor, the IE-KnowledgeHub. IE-Knowledge Hub is a website dedicated to promoting learning and exchanges on international entrepreneurship. If you are an education professional looking for course content, an academic researcher seeking research material , or someone interested in business innovation check out IE-Knowledge Hub. Let's go back to Rune Kongshaug from Produktif and learn more about the logistical challenges he faced to build sustainable condo units.

Rune Kongshaug: In the course of 2007 I started making presentations in the neighbourhood to community groups of what I had in mind in terms of urban agriculture, a bakery, a lot of people showed up, but a lot of people: ahh one of those university kids, bright ideas you know? I don't think anyone really truly believed that I was going to do what I said I was going to do. Because there is traditionally a lot of suspicion surrounding promoters and what drives promoters is usually the bottom line only. Sometimes the community feels with reason that they are getting the short end of the stick.

Narration: Kongshaug was having a hard time selling units to help finance the construction. He was not able to obtain a demolition permit and needed to transform his original idea of affordable green housing to green living luxury units. He was caught in a brand positioning trap where his vision didn't chime perfectly with either of his target markets.

Vikram Bhatt: He was going into a neighbourhood which is a well established neighbourhood, there are missing deeds, there are existing run down type buildings. So certainly there were classic urban renewal challenges that he was facing. An outsider coming in and gentrifying the neighbourhood, those kinds of concerns which are normal in especially relatively low income neighbourhoods of a city. and it got quite tough.

Narration: That's Vikram Bhatt, Rune's Professor at McGill's school of Architecture. To validate Kongshaug's ideas he needed a prototype which he now had in Montreal. But getting it built and running smoothly was no small task. Kongshaug

also knew that he needed data on water management and energy consumption to be able to scale his ideas to larger buildings, and eventually, to whole communities.

Rune Kongshaug: We are not trying to replace the conventional O & M, operations and management, but we are trying to complement it by doing all the ecosystemic monitoring in terms of onsite energy production, water management, food production, all the stuff that conventional building management firms do not touch on. Now we have an opportunity here to use these projects that needs a new form of technical expertise and technical skills which are very hands on, urban agriculture, water management, on-site energy production monitoring and optimizing of these systems. you name it. and it's all systems integration, it's a new profession.

Narration: You've been listening to segments of the Produktif video case study. To learn more about building sustainable communities, watch their full case available for free at [IE hyphen knowledge hub dot ca](http://IEhyphenknowledgehub.ca).

[End promo music]

[Begin credits music]

Thierry Harris: Market Hunt is produced by Cartouche Media in collaboration with **Seratone Studios** in Montreal and **Pop Up Podcasting** in Ottawa. Market Hunt is part of the IE Knowledge Hub network. Funding for this program comes from the **Social Sciences and Humanities Resource Council of Canada**. Executive producers **Hamid Etemad**, McGill University, Desautels Faculty of Management and **Hamed Motaghi**, Université du Québec en Outaouais. Associate producer Jose Orlando Montes, Université du Québec à Montréal. Technical producers Simon Petraki, Seratone Studio and Lisa Querido, Pop up Podcasting. Show consultant JP Davidson. Artwork by Melissa Gendron. Voiceover: **Katie Harrington**. You can check out the IE-Knowledge Hub case studies at [le hyphen knowledge Hub dot ca](http://lehyphenknowledgehub.ca). For Market Hunt, I'm Thierry Harris, thanks for listening.

[End Credits Music]

Runtime: 58:56