

Working Life for Everyone podcast: Anni Kyröläinen

Interviewer: You are listening to Working Life for Everyone, a podcast where we broaden our horizons about the world of work and discuss the inequalities of the Finnish labour market with people who have dedicated their careers to doing something about them. My name is Jarkko Immonen, and I am one of the career counsellors at the University of Helsinki's Career Services. Today we are talking about equity in working life and its challenges from the perspective of disability and partial disability, that is to say ableism in Finnish working life. My guest today is Anni Kyröläinen, Secretary General of the Finnish Disability Forum and an expert on equity and accessibility. It's a pleasure and an honour to have you on the show.

Anni Kyröläinen: Thank you very much.

Interviewer: The introduction brought up many terms that should be defined a bit. In short, ableism means making ability the norm, admiring it and taking it for granted. Partial disability refers in the final analysis to the relationship between the task and the person performing it. An individual's ability to work is a very complex and multifaceted idea, shifting and changing over time. In addition to, or instead of, disability it may be affected by falling ill, one's life situation outside work or exhaustion. Likewise, work demands vary, and they can be often influenced by planning, rethinking and creativity. When a person's ability to work and the prerequisites for the job meet, the person is not partially disabled in the job in question. Therefore, partial disability is not a personal characteristic, even if in some sense, physical or cognitive impairment might be. Consequently, being disabled does not automatically mean that an individual is partially disabled at work, neither does being partially disabled mean that the individual is necessarily disabled. Anni, would you like to comment on or correct these proposed definitions?

Anni Kyröläinen: Yes, that provides a good background to the questions of partial disability and disability. But, as you said, not all partially disabled persons are disabled, nor are all disabled persons partially disabled at work, but it is precisely a question of a wider spectrum of the ability to work and function from a more diverse perspective. I could illustrate this with an example. If the work requirements of a disabled person and their competence and educational background meet, then they are wholly able to perform certain work duties even if they are severely physically impaired, cannot function physically by themselves, move around in a wheelchair and so on, while services are also in order and, for example, they are given the required personal assistance to participate in working life. That is to say, it's not solely a question of personal characteristics. Instead, it's about interaction. And, if we then think about it, no one is entirely able to carry out all possible duties to start with due to, for example, educational background or something else. However, many of us are

fully capable of doing some job tasks. Maybe that's how I would approach it. And the same is true of the definition of disability; nowadays we talk about a social definition of disability, which means that disability is defined in terms of interaction with society. For example, since I use a wheelchair, if I go to an old brick-and-mortar store with heavy doors and narrow aisles where goods are displayed high up, it's as if I'm more disabled than when I go to a modern shop where there is room to move, goods are at the right height, and doors open automatically.

Interviewer: Before diving deeper into our topics, let's talk about you for a while. Based on what I've been able to gather from the depths of the internet, you've had an extremely rich and diverse career so far. You have worked at the University, worked in a variety of jobs already during your studies, worked at the office of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman and as a planning officer for the City of Helsinki, and you are currently also an entrepreneur. And to top it all, you're now the General Secretary of the Finnish Disability Forum. Someone smarter than me has said that life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backwards. If you think of your career path so far, what thoughts come into your mind? Or what would you like to say to your younger self, who is only starting out in her career?

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, to my younger self I'd say at least not to worry, you will find your own thing. In fact, I studied political research, did a few minor studies here and there, in political history, media and communication and many other places. In a way, my challenge was that I was interested in a little bit of everything but not exclusively in anything. And then I worked for a while in all sorts of jobs, sometimes not even in my own field. And then all of a sudden a career path just opened up for me in a sort of organic way. One culmination point was the traineeship at the Office of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, and from there everything just snowballed, first to the City of Helsinki and then perhaps due to human rights and equity issues to establishing my own company. Maybe another anecdote that I'd like to tell here is that I remember in my teens swearing to a lot of friends at upper secondary school that I will never work at anything related to disability. Something so obvious annoyed me at that time in my youth. But the older I got, the more I felt passionate about that direction. And there is this thing about the rights of disabled people that if they are not promoted by disabled people no one else will do it either. So also in this sense it feels like a calling to me.

Interviewer: I see. You have said before that you no longer include the fact that you use a wheelchair in job applications, since you have noticed that it makes getting invited for an interview more difficult. Based on your career and experiences, what does ableism in Finnish working life look like?

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, this issue has two dimensions in that much of the ableism, or discrimination of disabled people in working life specifically, remains hidden. Some of it is hidden. For example, when you don't recruit a person based on the fact that they are disabled, it is quite hard to start questioning it, proving it. But then individual experiences of people are genuine. Then again, if you compare the situation to when I was at secondary or upper secondary school, disabled people are much more visible. This was not the case in the media when I was young. Or if there was someone, then the stories were condescending, based on medicine or sob stories. Therefore, I would say that we are progressing but we still have a long way to go. Only a few years ago a friend of mine was looking for a job. They also use a wheelchair. They didn't mention using a wheelchair in their job application either, and when they called the place a day before the interview to get the precise arrival instructions, Thinking that the place was accessible by wheelchair. They were a little bit confused about it all, and then the next day before the interview they called my friend to say that the person doing the interview had fallen ill and the interview should be postponed, but my friend never got a new interview time. Even though my friend tried through various channels. These are the kinds of cases happening under the surface. But on the whole, I would say that we have a lot of good things happening.

Interviewer: Yes, OK. It's pretty sobering to hear these kinds [laughs dryly] of stories. In 2020, you drew up a comprehensive report for the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment on the structural obstacles to the employment of persons with disabilities. Let's delve into that for a while. In the introduction, you quote Markku Lehto, Doctor of Social Sciences, and write, this is a direct quote: "The fundamental cause of the whole problem is that we have not made a clear choice in our country as to whether disabled and partially disabled people are to be moved away from the labour market or find sustainable ways to employ them." Would you like to tell a little bit more about the point of departure for the report and why it was necessary to write it?

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, the starting point of the report is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Finland ratified in 2016, and its article 27 dealing with labour rights. And since this Convention has been ratified, Finland should promote all its articles in all its activities and legislation. In fact, the report was proposed to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment by the Office of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman in order to concretely study the structural obstacles which place disabled people at a disadvantage in working life, recruitment and everything involved in it. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment then decided to implement the study, and I worked there on it. The idea was to study employment as a whole and survey where these points are located. Which services, whether we have some legal obstacles, everything... . Also attitudes, that is to say, to include all the dimensions. And what points place disabled people in an unequal position and what could be done to fix them. And now that the report is completed, we have been drawing up a roadmap of these measures. I hope we will get there soon enough... . Some of the measures are long-term issues and some involve many

different administrative sectors. But there are also a lot of quite simple specific measures having to do with, for example, some kind of support service or accessibility issues. So I hope that it will now remain in the ministries and also in political decision-making. I would also like to point out that I am truly happy about the fact that the report was carried out by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, since for a long time issues related to disabled people have been the sole concern of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. So our angle was like that and that is what that quote from Markku Lehto that you raised also refers to. Our services, support measures and everything for ... the treatment of disabled people have a bit of a bias that we provide for staying alive and sitting at home, to put it bluntly. The services are not always directed at full inclusion or working life requirements in particular.

Interviewer: I see. And it's nice to hear you mention this roadmap. I conducted another interview on this same topic with Amu Urhonen and we talked about this report, and she was pondering critically whether any measures have been taken now that the report is completed. It's good to hear that something is happening behind the scenes, so to speak.

Anni Kyröläinen: Yes, luckily things are happening behind the scenes, and the roadmap has now been worked on this spring and some measures have been advanced, and the work will continue in the autumn.

Interviewer: In the report, you describe the ecosystem of employment. What is it, and why do we need to understand it?

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, the ecosystem of employment is actually what I kind of referred to earlier in connection with inclusion and other things. It is the whole entity of working life competences and working life inclusion. In addition to clearly being part of working life itself, it comprises the services supporting people's employment but also the whole idea of inclusion. It also then contains education and individual skills. And also all those meaningful leisure activities, networking. It is kind of the whole society. If we think about employment and inclusion, the working life requirements are affected by, for example, what kind of leisure time you can spend. What kinds of networks you can create, whether in studies or any aspect of your life. I could give an example related to the University of Helsinki. When I was studying at the Faculty of Social Sciences, I drifted towards the Student Union to promote these accessibility issues also there when, quite frankly, I got fed up with the fact that there are accessibility measures in place in terms of studies and you can access lectures and participate in everything related to studies. But when it comes to leisure activities and student networking events, they are organised in inaccessible locations by student associations and such. And that's where networks are created, friendships are born, which are also a really important part of working life as a whole and so on. I was lucky since our

student association got interested in the issue really quickly and I could participate, and I have friends whom I've known since the entrance examinations. But it also quite sad that not everyone has the same opportunity, especially at the beginning. But the ecosystem of employment, it entails all this. It entails employment services, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, everything that somehow affects daily life.

Interviewer: In the report, you talked about the recruitment thresholds for disabled persons, which at least include employers' lack of knowledge of available support and services as well as attitudes and assumptions towards persons with disabilities. Would you tell us about these recruitment thresholds and what kind of work is being done in the 'field' today to dismantle them?

Anni Kyröläinen: Yes. The recruitment threshold may indeed be caused by a lack of information. Considering that we have, for example, a good support service called a pay subsidy that can be taken at the beginning of the employment. And if the employer is somewhat doubtful about whether a disabled person is as efficient in some tasks as others or causes some extra costs, employment services can provide a pay subsidy at the initial stages of employment, but many employers are unaware of this possibility. Or if they know, the pay subsidy process can be a bit challenging and bureaucratic in places. This can cause the employer not to apply for it even if the subsidy is available, but in a way, the subsidy can even make it more attractive to employ the disabled candidate. Especially small entrepreneurs may be easily scared off by the bureaucracy. In other words, it can be caused by the support services or because of ignorance of the services available. But it can also be based on, how should I put it, attitudes which come through the in functioning of the ecosystem of employment. Again, I'll give a personal example of when I've been... . After upper secondary school, I worked in the customer service of a company, and I had found the job straight away, and it was really good and they took all the accessibility issues into account immediately. All they really needed to do was move one desk and some other things. So then, if a tyre of my electric wheelchair breaks, for example, the mobility equipment service does not take into account the requirements of working life. Changing the tyre takes ten minutes, but the wheelchair may stay in the queue for three days and at worst it may mean that I'll be away from work. I used to be really scared of these kinds of things and leaving the employer a bad impression about people with disabilities because they're always absent for these kinds of reasons. Or that they are more absent than others. And then I thought that will be the end of them recruiting people with disabilities. What I'm trying to say is that I feel that these things may have an effect. Or if the transport service of a disabled person doesn't work very well and they are late for work several times because of that. So, yes there may be residual attitudes. That yes, once we employed a disabled person and they had these and these challenges that they couldn't help but didn't have anything whatsoever to do with the job or skills. I think it's really sad that we still have these.

Interviewer: I see. Continuing a bit from this, you also discuss in the report many angles about remaining in working life, in other words, life after recruitment. As part of the whole issue, you have studied the digitalisation of work and the digital leap boosted by the coronavirus pandemic as an enabler and promoter of employment and the ability to work of disabled people. This is interesting because we know, for example based on university career monitoring, that the 'coronavirus digital leap' and how it is linked with the sudden expansion of telecommuting and multilocation work have had a very strong, maybe even particularly strong effect, in the working life and labour market of higher education graduates, where various expert duties are particularly represented. Could you tell us a little bit more about the theme of digitalisation?

Anni Kyröläinen: Yes. Well, digitalisation has proved beneficial to people with disabilities in working life in many ways. First of all, already because digital aids provide opportunities for employment. We have all the advances made in accessibility in use. We may, for example, use smartphones to support disabled people in remaining in a job. They can be used as an aid. But when it comes to digitalisation during the coronavirus pandemic, it means specifically that when there was a shift ... it was noticed that certain duties are suitable to be performed remotely and as a consequence as multilocation work, which has proved to be hugely beneficial to people with disabilities. First of all, if occasionally you need to visit places that are not accessible, a teleconferencing option can be organised there. Or if you run into these wheelchair servicing issues I told you about. I've had them in working life also after the coronavirus pandemic and I haven't even had to tell my employer about them, I can just say that I'll be telecommuting today. It removes these kinds of obstacles. Or if there is so much snow that I cannot get to the workplace with a wheelchair, I can just work remotely. Earlier, before the pandemic, the attitude was somewhat negative or people just thought you just can't perform certain duties remotely. This change may be what has brought about this benefit. But here it is extremely important to remember to avoid slipping into the idea that disabled people must only work remotely. It cannot become a forced option, but it can be a means to design work and one available option.

Interviewer: The final questions were about working life and perhaps specifically about salaried work in the service of someone else. Let's raise another topic of discussion from the report, namely the entrepreneurship of people with disabilities. If I read the text correctly, entrepreneurship offers, or would offer, equal opportunities for inclusion and the tailoring of work to those interested in entrepreneurship, on the one hand, but on the other hand, various structural deficiencies related to, for example, subsidies and services make establishing and maintaining business activities exceptionally difficult for people with disabilities. Could you open this subject up a little more, and please feel free to correct my possible misconceptions and statements on the matter.

Anni Kyröläinen: Yes. Again, this will allow me to lecture about these services a bit. In fact, entrepreneurship is a very good option for many disabled individuals. You can tailor your working hours and the content of work completely for yourself. According to your own abilities and conditions. And then in the way that if you have no options to enter working life – the attitudes, recruitment and such – you can provide yourself with an opportunity for employment. But then again, you have to remember that people with disabilities must have equal opportunities for entrepreneurship. In the report, the importance of services specifically for disabled people, that is to say transport services and personal assistance, is greatly highlighted. According to legislation, these are available for work. And the legislation is applied in municipalities and cities that grant those services. We found out that it varies enormously from region to region or even within regions how entrepreneurship, especially new entrepreneurship, is interpreted as work. There were many cases where a disabled individual is requested to prove that they receive a salary from the company before they are granted work-related support and services for their company. And we all know that you never get paid right away from a newly established company. Consequently, they will be unable to establish business activities unless they can pay for personal assistance, transport service or some aid for themselves. And that is clearly unequal. It also puts the whole company at a different position compared to other companies because in the worst case they will have to include in the prices the higher costs incurred by the establishment of the company. These kinds of things that have not been thoroughly considered can be found in the regulation. They were like, “Oops, we didn’t even think that a disabled person might be able to do this or that”, that kind of attitude shines through. One example, not directly related to entrepreneurship, but which illustrates the attitude is another challenge I’ve faced: the commute. If a disabled person is eligible for a transport service from home, it doesn’t take into account that the individual might still also take their child to daycare on the way. This is another cause for complaints from regions; that you can’t go to work via the daycare. Or the instructions are that you can only stop for five minutes. And anyone taking a child to daycare in winter knows that five minutes is not enough to take the outside clothes off and leave the child there.

Interviewer: This brings us nicely back to you. You’re one of the founders of Riesa Consultative Oy. What is Riesa Consultative Oy, and what do you do?

Anni Kyröläinen: Yes. Riesa Consultative Oy is a consulting company focusing specifically on the promotion of accessibility and equity that I founded with three friends in early 2019. We do a lot of working life things, consultations, training in recruitment processes, things related to diversity, equity and accessibility. Then we are also engaged in consultation related to physical and built accessibility, taking part in building projects and developing the accessibility of existing facilities and events... . And we also do a lot of stuff related to diverse communications. It’s quite a wide portfolio, but the main scope is in accessibility and equity.

Interviewer: Yes. As has become clear during this interview... . Oh sorry, I almost skipped a question. Have you encountered challenges highlighted in the report in your own entrepreneur path, and if so, how have you tackled them?

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, we did encounter a few when starting the business. There are four partners in this founding group, and two of us move around in a wheelchair while two are not disabled. The other person in a wheelchair has disability allowances, support services and a disability pension in his background, and we googled that you could be eligible for some start-up money or other support for acquiring aids that you may need. He would have needed a certain type of keyboard and other aids for a start. And Social Insurance Institution of Finland has this start-up grant for self-employment for exactly these kinds of things. We then applied for this grant and then waited for an awfully long time for a decision. And then they called us and said that “Yes, this what disabled people use and this is specifically for that, but unfortunately it’s only meant for self-employed people, or companies where all the founders are disabled.” Another instance of how we really didn’t think things through. That the granting criteria has been decided that way because why would a person without disabilities go into business with disabled people. And then we just gave up on applying for it and bought what we needed ourselves. And another thing that I already mentioned was that we two disabled founders both live in Helsinki, but one of us got transport services to the workplace easily while the other one had great difficulties with it.

Interviewer: As has become evident in this interview, you have a long and varied experience both of Finnish working life in general and the promotion of working life inclusion and accessibility of people with disabilities in particular. Have the attitudes, structures or the position of disabled people changed in any way during your career? If so, has there been progress, or has the change been for the worse or both?

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, maybe in a way... . Well, maybe not both, in that sense not for the worse. It’s just that sometimes it feels that the slow pace of development is frustrating. We have all the knowledge and resources to make things better. But everything happens so slowly. But yes I’d say that a lot has happened as I said earlier in terms of visibility. When I was young, there weren’t any disabled people anywhere. People with disabilities were not seen in any catalogues, glossaries and such. So we have made some progress, and sometimes we even feature in articles where disabled people are not presented as heroes just because they wake up in the morning, but as an expert or a citizen like anyone else and not just from the perspective of their disability. Not only does it affect the attitudes of all people but also how disabled individuals, especially children and young people in general, see themselves and their expectations. Or the expectations in society. So I think that’s a really important thing even though it feels like a minor issue, how you’re presented in the

media. And then waking up to the fact that all politics is disability policy; maybe that is happening slowly. That maybe we're moving away from our care default setting. Now, if you raise a fuss ... or bring up that a place is not accessible by wheelchair or disabled people are being discriminated against somewhere, it fortunately seems that people are more willing to listen than maybe before. Both people with disabilities and others have become more aware of their rights. I believe a great deal is happening, it's just that it's all a bit frustrating at times.

Interviewer: Let's continue with a question about other people's point of view. Do people have any typical misconceptions or misunderstandings about people with disabilities or ableism in working life, or conversely about accessibility? If so, now is the perfect time to rectify them.

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, maybe not misconceptions about ableism per se but something you come across all the time and which is reflected also elsewhere, is that it kind of feels like that people think or see my life as being somehow really sad or hard or difficult. And maybe that affects people's attitude towards me. A classic example is that if I am at a gig or a festival or a bar, you always get these people patting you on the head. Saying how great it is that you're here and how nice that you have the energy to do things. It seems to be a very deep-rooted idea in people that the life of a disabled person is at the very least really difficult and likely involves suffering. And that can affect attitudes and other things. Perhaps another thing I could highlight here is a little bit like a ... I call it the vicious circle of accessibility. The fact that because certain places have been difficult to access for a long time, people with disabilities cannot easily go there. They stay home or go somewhere else, and then the venues think that they don't need to promote any accessibility issues, since people with disabilities do not visit them. This kind of a vicious circle is in place in part of society.

Interviewer: I see. It's true, yes. An important observation. If we turn our gaze a bit towards the future, then what does the future of inclusion of people with disabilities in Finnish working life, or conversely ableism in Finnish working life, look like, for example, in five to ten years? Is there hope for a better tomorrow? Why is there, or why wouldn't there be?

Anni Kyröläinen: There absolutely is, as I may have implicitly pointed out, we have made great progress. We finally have up-to-date legislation. We have ratified the UN Convention and have the accessibility directive. We have the accessibility directive and the Non-Discrimination Act. All these have come, and they raise the awareness of the rights, as I mentioned earlier. But, however, how should I put it... society in general is taking people better into account already. When new buildings are built, they are built to be accessible. When services are designed, perhaps the designers are waking up to the fact that

everything does not have to be designed only for people who are 100% capable. We are moving forward, and inclusion comes from that momentum. And another thing I consider extremely important is inclusion in education. Starting from primary school all the way up to higher education levels. Giving disabled people the same opportunities to participate and having disabled children and young people in ordinary classes, helps the future and attitudes of all people.

Interviewer: This segues nicely to my next question. What would you like to say to our students struggling with discrimination and challenges brought about by ableism in their lives and careers right now?

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, definitely that as long as you have personal resources, speak out about things, demand your rights. As I said quite early in the beginning that sometimes it is so that if people with disabilities do not demand and promote, no one will do it for them. But it is also quite sad that the assumption always is that people with disabilities always have the strength to fight and figure things out. Not everyone needs to have the resources, the capacity; I would then say that don't hesitate to turn to organisations or a support person and start promoting the issue that way. And the promotion and progress achieved happen exactly because disabled people have highlighted the issues. Not to be satisfied with the fact that okay, this will not work; ok, I can't go there. You need to demand that you have to have access there, it has to be possible. It starts from there, and also, when you look, if you can look at all to the past, it will also give you hope when you realise how quickly we have progressed this far after all.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add before we wrap up this interview?

Anni Kyröläinen: Well, I think we covered most of the relevant things quite well through the questions. Personally, I would only like to add that it's great to see this topic highlighted in this podcast. And everything the University of Helsinki has given to me, the networks, how everything has been done there, that has also provided me with the strength to come this far. And I hope that me causing an accessibility ruckus has managed to leave some kind of a mark.

Interviewer: Thank you so much Anni Kyröläinen, it was a pleasure having you on the podcast.

Anni Kyröläinen: Thank you very much.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to Working Life for Everyone. This podcast was brought to you by University of Helsinki Career Services.

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