

Working Life for Everyone? podcast: Sunna Mbye

Interviewer: You are listening to Working Life for Everyone?, a podcast where we broaden our horizons about the world of work, and discuss 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 career services.

Today, we talk about doing anti-racism and DEI work in general in the realm of the world of work in Finland today. The term DEI is short for diversity, equity and inclusion. It includes, but is by no means limited to, anti-racism, which is something of a theme in this episode.

I am joined by project coordinator and DEI specialist, Sunna Mbye from the company deidei. Welcome, Sunna. It is an absolute pleasure to have you on the show.

Sunna Mbye: Thank you for having me.

Interviewer: Before diving deep into today's topics, I would like to know a little bit more about you. As mentioned, you currently work for the company deidei, which, I quote, "helps organizations on their diversity, equity and inclusion transformation journeys." Can you tell a little bit of what that means in concrete terms?

Sunna Mbye: Yeah, absolutely. So, we at deidei help organizations kick off and accelerate their DEI work. So, we do DEI consulting, and we create and implement DEI strategies, we do DEI training and workshops, and we do DEI change management. So, in that context, what we at deidei mean by transformation journeys in regards to DEI is that we approach the DEI work as more long-term work. So, the transformation refers to a more strategic approach when it comes to doing DEI. For example, than just a training or one-off workshop.

Of course, the trainings and the workshops have their place in the longer DEI journey. They are great tools for gaining knowledge and having more understanding about DEI. But we like to see it as more of a transformation journey. A marathon and not a sprint.

Interviewer: What do you yourself like best about your work?

Sunna Mbye: Honestly, I really like the customer side of things. I really like working with our customers. I really like interacting with people from different kinds of organizations and from different kinds of fields of work as well. The customer work is really important for me. I

also like the creative thinking part about consulting work and the problem-solving together with the customers. To really dig deep into it. What it is that they need and how we can help with their problems.

And then I also like the freedom. deidei's a young company. One and a half years old, approximately. So, we have a lot of internal freedom to mould and make our own positions there based on our strengths and our interests. So, I really enjoy that part as well. Of course, there is a responsibility to that as well. You have to be accountable for your own work and take ownership of your own work. But it still allows a lot of freedom.

Interviewer: What is on your desk right now?

Sunna Mbye: I am involved in many, various projects with different kinds of organizations. Actually really interesting projects that I wish I could talk about, but maybe one project that I can highlight, which is actually pretty topical for this podcast theme, anti-racism, is we did a collaboration with Plan International Finland. We did an equity and anti-racism assessment and a roadmap for them. So, for those who do not know, Plan International Finland is a development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and girls' equality globally. So, we did this with their Finnish offices. And we first assessed the current state of equity and anti-racism at Plan internally. And then, from the findings and the data, we made some recommendations for the next steps. And that really culminated in this roadmap. Which is, again, alluding a bit more to the transformation journey. It is a more strategic tool for Plan International to advance their anti-racism and equity work internally in the future as well.

Interviewer: It also just so happens that you are a university graduate yourself. You have a Master's degree in social sciences with a major in international relations and affairs from Tampere University. In your current position, are you able to make use of your education? And if so, can you name some examples?

Sunna Mbye: Yeah. Maybe at first when you hear international relations and political science, which I studied as well, the correlation with DEI does not seem that apparent. But actually it does connect through the critical thinking part of it. So, at the university, we really thought about how to critically approach these larger concepts. And then find that valuable information in it. And then boiling it down to what actually matters. And that is what we do in DEI consulting as well. And it is also understanding these larger global phenomenon and how they reflect and play out locally.

So, in this case, in Finland. So, those skills have really helped me to approach DEI, which is a global phenomena. And what we do with data is we take that global phenomenon and see how it fits into the Finnish working life context. So, those are really good thinking skills. But

maybe one of the more concrete skills that I think universities teach students regardless of field or whether it is Bachelor's or Master's, is that they teach you how to take ownership of your own studies and how to take ownership of the completion of your projects. So, that is a really important consultant skill as well. To have that ownership and that ability to take things to a completion from start to finish.

Interviewer: From what I read about your career path on the deidei website, it seems that you already have had quite a journey up to where you are now. What kind of roles have different forms of work, such as activism, volunteering, communal activities, or other so-called alternative types of work, played in your career path?

Sunna Mbye: I would say a really big part. I would say, I have been active in the university associations. I have been a board member of our own student associations of international relations and political science. And I have also done some volunteering work for Erasmus, E.S.N, and working with international students and those types of things. Any experience is a good experience, I think. And those experiences and doing the volunteering work in associations landed me in my internships at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So, any experience is a good experience. So, I highly encourage students to take part in different associations.

Interviewer: I remind you, dear listeners, this was not a paid advertisement. As we all know, as wonderful and rewarding it is to graduate from the university, it can also feel quite intimidating leaving the familiar behind and taking on the unknown, as it were. Looking at that fairly recent phase in your own life in hindsight, what would you say to a younger version of yourself or to the students feeling that pressure and anxiety in their own lives right now?

Sunna Mbye: I would say, be patient. And learn to live with the uncertainty. These are uncertain times and we are living in an uncertain world. So, really trying to learn how to mitigate those feelings that come with uncertainty, for example, the feelings that you might not be enough or you might be lacking in some sort, just be merciful towards yourself. You will find your way. I think that it is good to have dreams and goals, but do not get too stuck on this idea of what your future career path should look like or would look like. As I said previously, all experience is a good experience and will give you something valuable for the future as well to work with.

This is maybe coming from my own background and position. But if you are not interested in the research position at the university, do not stress too much about the Master's thesis. The best one is a completed one.

Interviewer: All right. Racism. From where you are standing, how would you describe racism in the Finnish world of work? How and where does it manifest?

Sunna Mbye: Racism in the Finnish working life is very structural. It is maybe not so easy to identify and easily seen. So, it is hidden in the processes and the structures of our working life. And there is this very strong narrative in the Finnish society about equal opportunity. Which is a good value to have. But as you have noticed, in DEI, the E does not stand for equality. It stands for equity. So, we want to take that equality thinking a bit further. Because that equal opportunity in narrative can somewhere prevent the talk about the structural problems then. It can hide them, in a way.

So, for example, a big racism related root cause in working life context also is unconscious bias. And unconscious biases are the biases that we have that we do not even know we have. So, they are the ones that we have internalised simply by being a part of a society. So, it is completely normal to have them. But they do exist and we need to recognise that they exist. And especially in the Finnish context, one bias that is recognisable is the name bias. So, actually, a researcher from the University of Helsinki has done a study, Akhlaq Ahmad, that having a foreign sounding name really gives you a disadvantage of even getting a job interview.

So, there are studies that have proven these different kinds of biases in working life. And also in regards to the name bias, there are variations inside these biases. For example, if you have an English sounding name, versus you have an Arabic sounding name, there can be different biases attached to those as well.

Interviewer: Overall, do you think Finnish companies...? Sorry. I was skipping a question. Taking it back a little bit. In your estimation, what are the biggest challenges Finnish companies and organizations face, or the biggest weaknesses they have regarding racism and DEI issues?

Sunna Mbye: I will approach this question in two parts. First, anti-racism, and then DEI. The biggest challenge in regards to anti-racism is that the problem is not even being recognised. So, racism is not even being recognised because of the previous problems that I said. The structural problems. It is not so easy to spot. Especially in the working life context. So, when the problem is not even recognised, it is hard to start a conversation about it. And then, if you do get into the conversation part of it in organizations and companies, many are afraid to talk about it because many are afraid of making mistakes. And that is completely normal. But we cannot let that hinder the advancement of anti-racism still.

So, usually in deidei, we try to approach this racism and anti-racism with a very forward-looking attitude. But still, having that accountability with us. So, when we know better, then we must do better. So, understanding racism and its different levels, and recognising those

barriers standing in front of equity and inclusion, those are the first steps that we can take towards anti-racism. As individuals in organizations, but on the organizational level as well.

And then, maybe the biggest challenge regarding DEI from my perspective, in the B2B space, is how to make it a long-term part of organizational strategies. A part of the daily functions at organizations. Because it requires time, effort and resources. But I still would argue that it is worth it. There are many studies that have proven the benefits for, both, the employees and the organizations, in the advancement of DEI. So, I would say, the challenge is how to make it more long-term. But you can do it.

Interviewer: On the note of looking forward, overall, do you think Finnish companies and organizations are interested in getting better at DEI or not? It does seem to a layman like myself that there is rising awareness around these topics, but from your point of view, are we still talking about a storm in a teacup or is this becoming a wider trend?

Sunna Mbye: I have been in the Finnish DEI space for about three years now. Because I was doing a little bit of DEI association volunteering work and being a member of a DEI association board and these types of things. So, I have been in the space for a while, and I would say that there is a definite increase of interest. Especially if you compare to the pre-2020 Black Lives Matter movement when it accelerated. There is a definite increase. And I think it is getting better. Organizations are getting genuinely interested as well.

So, it is not just doing it for the sake of doing it. We have many really motivated clients, and it is a pleasure to see that, truly. In regards to anti-racism, the situation is a little bit different. It is lagging a little bit behind. Especially coming from my perspective in the B2B space, I think many activists and many associations dealing with anti-racism are very active in this Finnish society and there are many players in that field doing really interesting and forward-looking work. But in the B2B space, that is still lagging a little bit behind. But I am still hopeful for it.

Interviewer: Are there some common misconceptions people have about racism regarding the Finnish labour market? And if so, feel free to correct them, here and now.

Sunna Mbye: Maybe the biggest misconception is one that links to what I said earlier about the racism being hidden in the processes and structures. The biggest misconceptions people usually have is that racism is something visible. That it is something happening between people, it is interpersonal. It is racist slurs or racist language or straight up racist behaviour. And it is usually not. So, it is the understanding and recognizing the structural racism that is all around us in society, in working life. It is the key to moving forward towards anti-racism. And anti-racism is the active deconstruction of these racist structures wherever we may encounter them. So, that is the biggest misconception people usually have about racism.

That it is only done on the interpersonal level. But there are a lot of levels to racism in our society. And in working life as well.

Interviewer: How do you perceive the future regarding racism in the working life? What do you predict it will look like in, say, five or 10 years? And if you think there is hope for a better tomorrow, why do you believe so?

Sunna Mbye: I really hope that anti-racism and the understanding of racism and its full scope, meaning the structural part of it as well, will increase in the future. I am hopeful for it. And I do see the signs. As I mentioned about these players in activism and association fields. I am very hopeful about the future of DEI. I think it is a very trending topic and for a reason as well. Like a good reason as well. Because I think it is becoming more and more comparable to, let us say, the sustainability aspect of environmental conscious things. So, there is the sustainability of the environment, and there is also the social sustainability side. So, I think those are starting to gain equal momentum in organizations and in working life.

And maybe linked to that, the five- to 10-year vision, then would be that DEI strategies are seen as important part of organization strategies as the environmentally conscious strategies are. So, those could be under the same umbrella of sustainability. Just different sectors of it. And about the better tomorrow. I always believe in the better tomorrow. I mean, you have to. Otherwise, why keep on going? But it does require work. And commitment. And proactively doing things. On the societal and the organizational level, and individual levels as well.

Interviewer: What would you like to say to our students struggling with racism in their lives and careers right now?

Sunna Mbye: This is maybe relating to my own experiences while I was at the university. Mostly, I had a lovely time. But there were of course instances where I can, in hindsight and looking back, definitely spot the unconscious biases that were there. And maybe the positions of privilege that people were not able to see where they were themselves. So, I would like to say that your experiences are valid. If you encounter racism. It does exist in our society and in our working life. And in universities as well. And minority stress is real. And the challenges in working life are real. There are structures that are racist. And there are structures that are unequal and unequitable. So, it is not just you. It is not just in your head.

But there is support. There is the Students of Color ry inside here, Helsinki University. Which is a great peer group association for students. And there are various different organizations doing amazing anti-racism work. For example, Fem-R or Ruskeat tytöt. So, if you are looking for a community or you are looking to actively participate in these topics and this work of

anti-racism, or you just want to have a place to hear people talk about this and want to be a part of the conversation, there are a lot of great associations, besides those that I mentioned here as well. So, do a little research if you are interested. Dig a little deeper for what fits you. You do not have to be alone. There is support.

Interviewer: Before wrapping up this super interesting conversation, is there anything more you would like to add?

Sunna Mbye: I would like to thank you for inviting me to have this talk. If the listeners or any students are interested in knowing more about anti-racism or they have any questions regarding anti-racism, you can find me on LinkedIn. Unfortunately, it is not the most inclusive of platforms because it is so working life related. But I am not active in social media at the moment. Taking a step back from all that. Unfortunately, now it is only LinkedIn, but there you can send me a message and I will try to get back to you.

Interviewer: Thank you for that. And thank you so much for being here, Sunna. It has been an honour to have you on the show.

Sunna Mbye: Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to Working Life for Everyone. This podcast was brought to you by the University of Helsinki career services.

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