

Working Life for Everyone? Podcast: Tiina Taipale

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 who have dedicated their careers to doing something about it. My name is Heini Hult-Miekkavaara, and I am one of the career counsellors at the University of Helsinki career services.

Interviewer: Today we talk about careers in the age of ecological crisis. I am joined by specialist Tiina Taipale who works as a project manager at Sykli Environmental School of Finland. Sykli is a national specialist vocational college which focuses on developing sustainable working life by training professionals and organisations. Welcome to our show, Tiina. It is an honour to have you here today.

Tiina Taipale: Thank you. It is an honour to be here.

Interviewer: So, we are going to talk about sustainability, green jobs and responsible careers. But could we start by you telling us a bit about your work? What exactly does Sykli do, and what do you do at Sykli?

Tiina Taipale: Yes, of course. I do work for Sykli Environmental School of Finland, which is a national specialist vocational college. That means, Sykli is a small vocational school that trains environmental specialists into different fields. Our students are already in working life, working as professionals in different fields. We, for example, train preschool, primary or secondary school teachers who are already in working life, but want to specialise in environmental education. Myself, I teach sustainability management in our quality, environmental and safety management programme. And we also have training in waste and water management. Apart from these upper secondary VET curriculums, we do short-term training and further education with companies training, which are targeted to persons in transitions. This means facing unemployment. And of course, we do a lot of different projects related to sustainability and the circular economy. And that is actually what I mostly work with. For the past years, I have been working on projects funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education. And these projects have the aim of steering vocational education towards sustainability. And right now, most of my working hours go into advancing this Vaski project.

Interviewer: Why is this Vaski project significant?

Tiina Taipale: It is actually quite exciting. Vaski brings together over 60 vocational schools around the common goal to build a roadmap to sustainability and carbon neutrality for vocational education in Finland. So, the project started at the beginning of the year, and right now we are in the phase of forming an image of vocational training in the future. So, what it should look like in 10 years when we have gone through the transition to sustainability and carbon neutrality. And this is actually what we are doing right now, imagining this desired future and what vocational schools could then look like when they operate within the planetary boundaries, and what this might mean for the professionals working there. It is an interesting phase because we are discussing many things simultaneously. For example, what would management and leadership in vocational schools look like? Could there be representatives for the silent voices in the future, that might represent future generations or non-human animals in the school boards? Or what could education look like? What skills would be trained and in what kind of learning environments? So, a lot of things right now buzzing there in the heads of the people. Of course, it relates to how we should now train teachers and what we should do now in order to then reach that kind of wanted future we could now imagine.

Interviewer: Can these findings apply to higher education as well?

Tiina Taipale: Why not? I think universities have maybe been more proactive, even earlier on than vocational training schools. Overall, I think universities have a central role in the sustainability transitions. They do research on describing why we need the change on climate change and biodiversity loss. They get the new information on why we need the change, and also how we could achieve it, what ways we have to the transition and what kind of new solutions we have in different fields. So, I think universities are already there and they are building networks for promoting sustainability, and, for example, climate universities are a great example of things that universities are doing together as now the vocational schools are doing this transformation together.

Interviewer: Actually, there is a sustainability course here at the Helsinki University, which is open for all students. At the moment, the same people who have built this sustainability course are teaching teachers how to teach these topics.

Tiina Taipale: Yes. I think that is the way forward. I see the same in Aalto University. They teach how to integrate sustainability in all curriculum. So, that is, I think, a very important thing to do in all universities and schools right now. That is also something that we have been discussing with universities doing teaching education. Now, we are educating the

already graduated teachers to be environmental educators. But what elements of that they should already have when they graduate to be teachers. That is something to think about.

Interviewer: Definitely, all of us who are studying in vocational schools or universities here in Finland cannot miss sustainability in our studies. But do you think that sustainability also is used as a buzzword? Because we seem to bump into it almost everywhere these days, which in a way is very good. But it also might evoke the feeling that it is used also as a buzzword, and unfortunately also used for greenwashing or responsibility washing. How would you define actual sustainability? Is it just something to do with stopping the climate crisis or is there more to it?

Tiina Taipale: That is a good question. It is very true. I think a lot of research has been done on the topic on how to define sustainability and what kind of problems we face now that we have so many different definitions and it means all different things to different people and groups. And of course, also these really vague understandings of sustainability can lead to problems in terms of achieving real sustainability. And I think historically we quite often go back to the Brundtland Report definition of sustainable development that was stating that it is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. I think we have moved a little bit forward from that definition. And now I think the most common way of defining sustainability among at least the sustainability educators is to define it through the planetary boundaries. So, when we, for example, think about this new GreenComp framework that was put forward by the European Union to define the green competencies for lifelong learning on all levels of education. That means, us in vocational training or in universities or in primary schools or in secondary schools, wherever. They were kind of also referencing these planetary boundaries. And actually, that report or framework defines sustainability as prioritising the needs of all life forms, and of the planet, by ensuring that human activity does not exceed planetary boundaries. So, they are rephrasing this idea of the well-known image of the planetary boundaries by the Stockholm Resilience Institute that you also might be familiar with. And this image brings front that it is not only the climate crisis that we have to deal with, but that we are facing a larger environmental or ecological crisis, and we need to also understand other Earth system processes than just the climate. So, the loss of biodiversity is one. And it is now, I think, considered as or even more important thing to consider than climate change. And altogether, there are nine planetary boundaries ranging from land use to fresh water use. And to ocean acidification so it is a more complex picture than just climate change.

Interviewer: It is indeed a big picture. The University of Helsinki currently and has been for a while educating top experts in different sustainability disciplines. And here at the career services, we also know that based on our counselling work with students, many are interested in green jobs or sustainability careers or careers in sustainability. But is the

Finnish labour market ready for them? What would you say is the state or stage of this systemic transformative change in companies and other organisations at the moment?

Tiina Taipale: It is a really good question, and I think it varies a lot. I think it is also important to understand that there are differences between generations that have been educated. So, in relation to their knowledge about the environmental crisis. So, the younger generations that are coming out of high schools or secondary schools, vocational schools or universities, it might be that they have learned about the ecological crisis throughout all of their years in the school system. And that is of course the way it should be, and we hope that it is the reality that happens. But when we think about the older generations, they might have not had that same kind of education that emphasises these ecological or planetary limits. Because it has not been there. We did not have that understanding, maybe, when they were in school. So, in some fields and among some professions, there might still be attitudes that these environmental issues are something hippie or irrelevant in relation to real work and professions and what they do in the industry. So, this might be still there. And of course, I still think it is possible to go through the school system and not really take this environmental crisis seriously. So, we are not done, I think, with how we teach this. But still, if we think about the people who graduate now with environmental expertise, the situation is really different from 10 or even five years ago. Because I think right now the need for transformative change is underlined by different institutions and stakeholders all around us. So, it is making sustainability and sustainability expertise really relevant in many of the fields, if not all. So, it is coming from the E.U, from our national policies, from our government right now. It is coming from the financial markets and it is coming from us all as citizens or employees or consumers. What I have actually seen in my work right now is that a lot of organisations are now integrating sustainability to their strategy and operations. And this means that they also need expertise to do that and to build even more convincing strategies in the future. If they start with some basic level, they will soon realise that they will need to do something more to reach the planetary boundaries that we are right now very far from.

Interviewer: What would you say to students who are maybe not studying such obvious sustainability topics? Like, for example, if you are not studying climate science or environmental science or new green energy systems, but maybe something else, can you only make a difference if you work in actual green or sustainability jobs? I know that you are researching responsible careers. How does that concept differ from these two other concepts?

Tiina Taipale: Yes, I have done interviews with people who are concerned about the state of the environment and environmental problems. And I have asked them how this concern affects their working life choices. So, these interviews I have done a few years ago, and I think that it is even more relevant right now. More people are asking themselves what to

do, how their work contributes to ecological crises, and how what they do for a living impacts the world. When these questions start to bug you a lot and you get more information and if you have not chosen an environmental, of course if you are still making your career plans, that might affect your choices. You might steer your career or choose your study place while taking this into consideration. Now, we see a lot of educational units, be they universities or vocational training schools, that actually market their schools through this. You will become a change maker. You can save the planet. I do not know if you would notice, but that is how they try to attract the best students or so. But if you do not do that, then it might leave you in a very uncomfortable place where you kind of have to think about how your working life may endanger life on the planet, and it is not a nice feeling. Of course, then you can turn the question around and start to think about whether you could maybe rearrange your career or look for something in this organisation where you could make a difference, or whether you should start studying these things and see what happens in order to maybe find a new responsible or green career.

But it can also lead to another kind of action. You can do something differently in your current job. You can also do things a little differently. You can just start to think about what we do here, find like-minded people, unite with them and start transforming your workplace. And I think that is a way to move things forward. You can start asking questions from your boss or from the CEO about how these sustainability issues are approached. And of course, it can also lead to other kinds of activism outside of the workplace. You can also try to change the bigger system, take part in campaigns or maybe through your trade union you can also do something at some point. Some people try to make as much money as they can and try to be impact donors, to give money somewhere to make a big change there. You can also choose to limit your commitment to work, downshift or reject some kind of working life paths that people take and kind of just continue producing and doing things.

You can try to leave that kind of lifestyle behind and maybe opt for more self-sustaining ways of life. Maybe look for eco villages. Not many people do that. It is not the most common way, but it is also an option. I think there are many ways to make a difference. And maybe the most common one is just trying to find people that are in a similar situation, maybe at your workplace or at different workplaces, and try to figure out how you could transform the field towards sustainability.

Interviewer: Transform it from within. That is really well said. Thank you, Tiina. There are lots of choices and lots of decisions that we can do and take. Would you say that there are some specific generic sustainability skills or competencies that we can all learn or gain, despite the field of study or work that we have?

Tiina Taipale: I think that is what the green competence framework says. That there are some competences that are relevant in all fields. We all need to understand the value of nature and just really grasp the commitment to sustainability, maybe the stronger version of sustainability. It is not enough that we think that we reorient the system or optimise the

system a little bit towards less carbon emissions. But we really need to think differently. We are facing a big change now. I think the news says that if we do not change this bad, then in eight years we have reached a 1,5 degree temperature rise. So, we really are in a hurry. And I think this year we have a record high in emissions. So, kind of really grasping that. So, it is not enough that we do a little, but we have to think that we have to change the current system. And then, in order to do it, we need these skills that are relevant and competences that are relevant everywhere. We need to value nature and make connections with it. And then we need to have systemic thinking skills. It is a complex problem. So, how could we – we need critical thinking and systems literature skills. We also need skills related to thinking up new kinds of futures and maybe envisioning what could be more sustainable. And we need skills that are related to acting together, having agency in different fields around these issues. We do not really know what kind of skills we will need. It is really interesting to start to think about it. Like, how should my working day or my profession or my workplace change if we were really now living within the planetary boundaries? What would it look like? It would be something really different, maybe. Or then the infrastructure around it should be something really different if it is not the actual things that I do. And I think that there is something that we all have to learn and try. We have to do all kinds of new things to figure it out. And maybe it is about doing less. We have to learn out of things that we are doing just for a habit and start to do something different. Lately, I have been thinking about this compensation, if all organisations started to compensate for the biodiversity loss or carbon emissions that they cannot really prevent or take out of their systems. So, what could that money be targeted to in terms of professions and what people do? Could we have these compensations targeted to people living in eco villages and restoring something in the ecosystem there or maybe mental health even? Because now, we also see that this current lifestyle is impacting our mental health in many ways. So, if we just use that compensation money to just let some people be there reconnecting with nature and healing themselves and the nature, and we could somehow make a living out of that. But that is an idea. It is kind of this idea that I have been playing with in my head lately.

Interviewer: Sounds like an excellent idea. It is funny actually, you mentioned skills, systemic thinking and future's thinking, enhancing your agency. They sound pretty much, if not exactly the same, like the sort of skills that we as career counsellors try to enhance in career guidance. You also mentioned mental health. What would you say to, for example, our students who might be struggling with eco anxiety or other difficult environmental feelings at the moment? Because, like you said as well, we are in a hurry if we want to bring about the change.

Tiina Taipale: There has been research showing that if you work as an environmental specialist or responsibility professional, you might face these anxieties to some extent if you do not feel the progress happening, or you might get all these values... You do not feel that you can work for your values. So, it might be really devastating for some. I would say that there is still hopefulness in doing things. Like, false hopefulness with kind of waiting for

things to happen miraculously. So, I think this recent research about environmental anxiety also shows that we are quite often afraid of telling the young people about the climate change and that they should not be scared, or their mental health might scatter with this knowledge. But it is the reality that we live in. And I think the only way that helps us is to also discuss and show that we are doing things and moving forward. And also from this anxiety and maybe frustration, all kinds of action and deeds and agency come along. And those give us hope. That we all the time are doing something and we are not just watching from the side the things that are happening. So, true action, maybe. It also links a little bit to these greenwashing things. Because then we also need to say that we are doing things, and maybe we even have to say that we are doing things that are not perfect yet. But we are still doing things and trying to find the bad. These are really complex issues in the end. How to talk about this is also not always easy.

Interviewer: That is true. As you said, action creates hope. As we know, our careers consist of many different roles and things that we do throughout our lives, not only in the working life or in our jobs. Like you mentioned also, you can, for example, take action in some other role.

Tiina Taipale: If it is not possible, then try to look in other spheres of life how to make a difference. That helps. And I think that it is also good that we talk about these things at the workplace. It is worse if we kind of hide our heads or if you just start carrying this feeling at the workplace all by yourself. So, when you say it out loud, it also already helps and it is the first point in taking the first step to make a difference. And maybe you find somebody who thinks the same way. There is also this support from others that makes a difference.

Interviewer: Well said. We are all in this together. So, we do not have to solve all of this alone. And careers are not an individual struggle either.

Tiina Taipale: But I think academics and people trained by universities are quite well equipped with these green competences. That is what universities do. They teach critical thinking and systems thinking. Maybe in the vocational schools it can be harder, because then sometimes the education is really dedicated towards the practical side of the profession. So, how to incorporate these metaskills to the curriculum might be a bigger question there. That is something that we struggle with sometimes.

Interviewer: That is good to hear. All of our students already have necessary thinking skills. And then we can also educate ourselves a bit more about the actual actions that we can take. That is good to hear.

Tiina Taipale: And maybe the level of the transformativeness that is needed. So, maybe go deeper there. What I have heard lately is that it is not only a cognitive thing to grasp, but you also need things like arts and imagination and your whole body and feelings to grasp what it would mean to be in a world in a new way, where we would actually live within the planetary boundaries. This GreenComp is a lifelong learning framework for these sustainability competences. It means that we are all learning this. None of us is ready. So, all of us educators are also in the same process of learning this. And this will not go away. The sustainability skills we need right now are not the same that we are going to need in two or five years or 10 years. We will face new understandings and new problems and new solutions that will be required. So, we all need to learn.

Interviewer: Thank you very much, Tiina. This has been most interesting and such a great pleasure to have you here. Is there anything else that you would like to say to our listeners?

Tiina Taipale: Well, maybe one thing. We really should start thinking about working life and not just thinking about ourselves as consumers or citizens. When we think about our careers and us as workers and finding ourselves in these situations, it is the fact that we really do live in paid work societies. And the paid work society kind of regulates our life, how we participate in this world and how it operates, and what's our stance in there. We cannot find solutions to these sustainability issues if we cannot make solutions to this question, how we make a living and how we make this living in a way that is sustainable and within these planetary boundaries. And also, when you are a student entering the labour market, we are to various levels dependent on this paid work. Some people might have other means of income. They might have their partners supporting them or family or money from the family, from generations or something. And some people have nothing. So, also what you need to do in order to make a living some people have more kind of freedom to choose to not go that way or to not take that job. But not all of us have that choice. So, also, understanding that, I think, helps a little. You see how you are connected to this paid work system. And what means that you have, maybe what is your position. Those people who make strategies and the rules of the game have more responsibility than the people who are in the vulnerable positions. But then we have various ways to try to make an impact as an employee or through voting or making these initiatives. There are various ways in which you can change the system. But also, just thinking that it is a job and that you can do it differently somewhere else might help. But just really trying to think about it, what your place in the paid work system is and how we should maybe transform the whole system. But while we have not done that, then maybe being merciful to yourself in a way that you do not take too much of the pressure. It takes us all to change the system, but no one is left alone as responsible for changing it.

Interviewer: Thank you, Tiina. Just to end this with, what would you say would be a small step that each one of us could take to change the system? A sort of a minimal, viable little step.

Tiina Taipale: I think the first step is to think about it, like how my work contributes. And whether I could just by talking to someone somehow initiate a change. And I think the other point is to think that it is not about some of us getting the wanted responsibility or green careers that everybody kind of strives for, and then competing over who gets them, who gets to save the world. But that we are all together responsible. We have to build a place where everyone can go to work without being worried about having to destroy the basis of our lives through his or her work. So, we are all responsible for trying to make the system sustainable in all the means and all that the world holds in it. So, maybe that.

Interviewer: Thank you very much. It is good to hear that we all have the means and possibilities to change the system. Thank you. I am sure that this has been very interesting and enlightening to all of our listeners. Thank you for coming, Tiina Taipale.

Tiina Taipale: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to Working life for everyone. This podcast was brought to you by University of Helsinki career services.