



We Are Vodafone - Episode 5

Transcript

HOST

Cara McGoogan

GUESTS

Caroline Southall, Mel Mooney

Cara McGoogan 00:02

Welcome to We Are Vodafone, a new podcast series where we'll bring together people from very different parts of the organization to hear their opinions, theories, fears, passions and successes. Over the course of this series, we'll explore the subjects that matter most to you and how they impact on your life. I'm Cara McGoogan, a journalist and podcaster and in this episode, we're going to talk about neurodiversity, and encouraging and embracing different ways of experiencing the world in the workplace. My guests are Mel Mooney and Caroline Southall. To start things off, I asked them to introduce themselves and explain a bit about why they wanted to speak to us.

Mel Mooney 00:47

Hi, I'm Mel, I work with Vodafone Ireland Privacy Team. I graduated last year. I'm here today because I have a diagnosis of autism and dyspraxia. I also have a sneaky suspicion I might have ADHD too, but I don't have a diagnosis. So I'm very personally invested in neurodiversity and the role that this will play in the future of work. And I'm also heavily involved with Vodafone Ireland Diversability Network, which champions disability in the workplace.

Caroline Southall 01:14

Hi, Mel, hi, Cara. I'm Caroline, and I work in Vodafone UK, I run the mid market sales team and I'm also Chair of the Women's Network. In terms of my contribution, so I have a 13 year old son who has a diagnosis of ADHD and also dyspraxia coming at it very much from a parent angle.

Cara McGoogan 01:36

I wonder if you could both tell me what neurodiversity means to you and what your experiences of that are? Mel, do you want to start?

Mel Mooney 01:45

Yeah, sure. I suppose like the whole idea of neurodiversity, we tend to build it up in our heads as something that's very complex, but it's actually quite simple when you break it down. Brain differences are part of normal human variation. Just like we have some people who are tall, and some people who are small, or some people are left handed, some people are right handed, it is no different to that and there's nothing wrong about being different. I was diagnosed very young, and I knew I was autistic for pretty much as long as I can possibly remember. I was really lucky to have a Mother that wanted to understand me, rather than change me. She saw an article, about autism in the paper one day and was like, "Oh my God, that's my daughter, it's all making sense to me now". And immediately went about getting a diagnosis for me so that I could get the supports I needed at school, learning about things that are intuitive to others, but not to me, like as a kid, I really tended to take things literally. I remember not long after my diagnosis, I was at a classmates birthday party and we all piled into her room, and she was like, "Wait, there's too many people in here, Melissa, you've got to go". I went downstairs and spent the rest of the birthday party with her Mother in the kitchen. My logical way of thinking at the time, I didn't necessarily realize that she did that with the intention of hurting me. I thought, "It's a small room and I was the last one in so it makes sense, that I would be the first one out, that's fair". Social isolation was definitely something I struggled with a lot as a kid. Because I was just so hyper aware of how different I was to the other kids. I got like really badly bullied in secondary school, it actually got to the point where I had to drop out for a while and go to therapy and just focus on my mental health completely for one year. By the time I got to college, I didn't even know how to make a friend, even though people were polite to me and they didn't outright bully me like in school, I just found it hard to



kind of get through to people, and I found that people were kind of keeping me at a distance. But that was also when I started to really take an interest in neurodiversity and start to appreciate it as something that isn't necessarily a negative part of my identity. I went back to therapy in college, and it was the best thing I ever did because I started becoming a friend to myself. I basically learned to like myself in a way that I never thought the world would allow me to as someone who was different. And I got to see so much more of the world than the little, small town I was born and I kind of learned that I'm not unique in my uniqueness. I can't and shouldn't deny myself the privilege and the right to be myself and to march to the beat of my own drum. That's basically what neurodiversity is, to me. It's something beautiful, and not a defect. It's not a false or any kind of disease that needs a cure.

Caroline Southall 04:24

Thank you for sharing that. I know it's a very personal experience and story. I think, in terms of what it means to me, I really liked your comparison between neurodiversity and physical differences. It typifies exactly what neurodiversity is, it's just a difference between one person and another. Somebody said to me very early on in my son Ruben's journey that we're all neurodiverse and it's really stuck with me. The challenge is that we live in a world that is structured in such a way that we make it very difficult for people who are neurodiverse. In a world that was more flexible and more accepting, we would see less of what you described actually Mel, in terms of feeling different, being singled out, because you're perceived to be different. The challenge is incumbent on us all really, in terms of challenging people's understanding and educating. Until we get to a place where people understand this stuff, then I think we'll always have this almost segregation between what we perceive to be normal, and the rest. For me, neurodiversity, it's not even a difference really, it's just that it's perceived to be because of the very structured and inflexible world, in which we put people really.

Mel Mooney 05:47

I've been approached by so many parents despairing because there's such a lack of support for them and in the early stages of their child's diagnosis journey. They don't understand what's going on, and there's still so little available to them, they get so worried about their child's future, they want some hope that autistic people are successful as adults and lead successful lives.

Caroline Southall 06:07

It resonates with me so much, that if I think about the journey we've had with Ruben, it's been really, really hard. As a parent, you want your child to be happy, first and foremost, and you want them to be well, and you want them to feel like they're part of something. And for a long time, you feel like none of that is the case, you know that your child is unhappy, because they can see that there on the outside of this circle that exists. And you know, you're pretty desperate to put that right as quickly as you can. It's the challenge of your life as a parent really, to try and put something in place that is going to support your child, not just while they're a child but more importantly, as they grow into adulthood and beyond, because it never stops being your responsibility. You know, every step of the way, you still feel like it's your responsibility, really.

Mel Mooney 06:57

And that's why I think role models and having some kind of platform for adult autistic voices is so important, because I did not know any other autistic people growing up; there was no one for me to look up to and I think that has contributed quite significantly to how negatively I perceived it, as recently as maybe, five years ago, when I was in college. It's something we're starting to see a bit more as we're seeing the likes of Greta Thunberg and Anthony Hopkins coming out as being autistic. Representation really does matter.

Cara McGoogan 07:28

It sounds like at times, it's been difficult for both of you with your experiences, I wondered if there were any coping strategies, you'd come up with? Things that you've learned that have helped you on your journey's to where you are now?

Caroline Southall 07:41

I mean, we take our inspiration from Reuben really, he's an amazing child, he's engaging, energetic, he's sociable, he can engage with all sorts of people on any level and he's got some very obvious, really endearing characteristics. I think for us, we didn't really understand how difficult it was going to be for Ruben, until he entered



formal education and suddenly there was this box that he needed to fit, which he didn't fit. It was really difficult at that time, not to keep going to him and asking him to be something that he couldn't be. And I'm sure we did for a long time. You know, we talked him a lot about what the expected behaviors were at school and the kind of things that he was doing that he needed to stop doing. And rather than speaking to the school and saying, actually, this is who he is. And what we want you to do is channel the energies that he has into things that are going to give him positive outcomes. We make a conscious effort to celebrate the achievements that he has. And those achievements might be different to other children, but they're still fantastic achievements. We've been quite open about Ruben and his challenges and experiences and stuff and generally people have lent in to support knowing that you've got people in your camp and in your corner and that Ruben has that is really important. I've always bought my whole self to work. But when I talked about Reuben, I'd always talk about him in a very positive light. I don't think I ever mentioned the fact that we were on this journey towards a diagnosis of ADHD. It's only since we came into lockdown where, you know, I perhaps had to be a bit more open because I was very obviously trying to balance a challenging home situation with a son with ADHD that I'm trying to home educate and keep occupied, whilst balancing a really quite demanding and senior kind of sales leadership role. You know, those two things don't sit well together really. I guess there's an element of me wanting to be perceived at work as capable and independent and uncumbered by any domestic situation that might be ongoing, and, you know, I wanted people to assess me on my merits without thinking, "Oh, yeah, but she's got a son who's got needs that might take her away from the role". And in the last couple of years, it's just been, it's been impossible to keep those two things apart really.

Mel Mooney 10:22

That was something I used to feel up until I started to get more accepting of my diagnosis. I had this kind of personality, who I am when I'm on my own, and who I am around other people, like I always say, I was diagnosed twice, once, when I was formally diagnosed. And once when I actually understood what my diagnosis meant, which was when I was in my early 20s. That was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me. And I suppose when I started Vodafone, it sounds really corny, but I actually felt like I was almost freed from that dual personality, and that there was no expectation that I have to maintain that at work, that I had to put on this act and be this person that I'm not, just to fit in, in the culture. Even just having that space where you know, everyone there is going to allow you to be exactly who you are, and that you don't have to water yourself down or self edit, because it actually is quite exhausting, pretending to be someone else everyday. And it's energy that would be much better spent towards my work. Work is quite business likeness last place, you'd expect to necessarily find allies or friends. But, I'm honestly just really like taking aback and proud that Vodafone genuinely encourages you to bring your best selves to work. And that, they're not only allowing it, but like encouraging it.

Cara McGoogan 11:35

You mentioned Mel that bring your best self to work. being yourself also doesn't mean trying to be more than who you are and I know that you talked a bit about this idea of positive stereotyping when it comes to neurodivergent people. Can you explain a little bit about that, for us?

Mel Mooney 11:52

Something we're seeing a lot in recent years is this thing called positive stereotyping. We're assuming the positive traits of a given group, particularly in relation to autism takes prevalence. One example of this would be the prevalence of the autistic savant stereotypes, when you think about TV or film representations of autism that are being consumed by the world at large, where we get a lot of the picture that we have of autism in our heads, disproportionately, what we're seeing is this very small slice of what is an incredibly broad spectrum being portrayed. Autistic people who actually only represent 10% of the spectrum, who have special skills or are extremely, extremely talented in one area. And I think that can be as problematic in a number of respects, it gets to over 90% of the spectrum, the sense that if they don't meet this very high standards, that they fall short, or that they're not worthy of employment. It leads to this expectation among particular employers that you are going to come into this role with some kind of special skill and that you're able to do complex mathematical equations on the spot in your head or things like that. I never got that impression from Vodafone, because I think they recognize and valued that I was just as capable of doing the job as anyone else and that in itself is a reason not to discount me. 85% of the autistic community in Ireland are unemployed or underemployed at the moment, that needs to change but it also needs to be done right.



Caroline Southall 13:17

When you highlight that, Mel, I mean, you can imagine, as the Mum of a child who is neurodiverse, it makes my heart sink, because I know that everything you've articulated there, unless we drive real change will be his experience, too. It is incumbent on organizations like Vodafone. You've spoken really glowingly around the experience that you've had, there's an argument that says you shouldn't have to feel that level of gratitude. I'm sure that you would want to be judged on the merits of the contribution you make.

Mel Mooney 13:56

It's a double edged sword, the whole bias around autism and recruitment. Vodafone was actually the first company I disclosed my autism to during the recruitment process as opposed to post hire. I still had this kind of niggling fear in the back of my mind that if I disclosed in the recruitment process, on the one hand, it might negatively impact my chances of getting the job. But then on the other hand, I didn't want to be the company diversity hire, I didn't want to be there to meet a quota. I wanted to get in on merit. It's not something that should have to factor into anyone's thought process when applying for a job, but, there's kind of both sides to the bias.

Caroline Southall 14:29

Yeah, you talked about the scale of the spectrum for autism, and there will be a lot of people on that spectrum who would not have a choice as to whether they disclose their autism or not, because they know they're going to be challenged once in the role. What strikes me is that you have almost taught yourself, how to be, in order to navigate this path and then it becomes your choice as to whether you share that information about yourself or not. There are so many conundrums around it and the point I keep coming back to in my mind is, this real need for education. That has to start with the leadership of companies and organizations. We have to make sure that on a human level, people that work in this company have an awareness of neurodiversity. I think from reflecting on my own team. Have we ever had a conversation about neurodiversity? I don't think so. Is it something that is broached in terms of our standard resourcing conversations, I've never had a conversation around it. This is an area that we have to focus on now. So that we are keeping pace with the progress that we're making in other areas. This feels like an area that we've made limited progress in, but actually something that we need to work a lot harder to bring into line.

Mel Mooney 15:55

I feel like we're almost at awareness at this stage. Because when you think about all awareness is it's knowing something exists. I know the particle physics exists doesn't mean I know the first thing about it. What we need now is understanding. So awareness is like saying, "I see you", understanding is saying, "I hear you". That's exactly the conversation we need to be having now and once we have that, we can start moving towards acceptance to the point where maybe someday I don't know if it'll even happen within my lifetime, that, there doesn't even have to be a conversation around neurodiversity that it's just accepted as a natural variation of humanity, and its integrated and organic.

Cara McGoogan 16:32

As we come out of the pandemic, hopefully, that day is soon upon us. What are some of the things that you've both learned from the pandemic that you want to bring into the world after that you hope other people will have learned and can grow from?

Caroline Southall 16:46

This blurring of lines between home and work is something that has really been accentuated and accelerated by the lockdown period, I think we will miss a trick if we move back from that position really. That's not about exposing people who don't feel comfortable talking about personal things, or things that are non work related. But it is about giving people the opportunity and the platform, if you like to be able to talk about things that are happening in parts of their lives that have the potential to impact on what they do at work. As employers and as managers, I think we've got an obligation, now more than ever, to make sure that our people are accessing the right support when they need it.

Mel Mooney 17:33

We were all in the situation where we were having to grapple with new social rules that were changing every week. People were talking about Zoom fatigue, which is basically a version of what autistic people like myself often go



through every day. Reminding myself to make eye contact or reminding myself to nod to let people know I'm paying attention. People suddenly have this opportunity to empathize and relate to what's actually an everyday experience for many autistic people, or even disabled people in general. And seeing the world almost become more accessible overnight because of things disabled people have been asking for for years and has often been denied by their places of work. Vodafone is actually ahead of the curve on that, I was very impressed when I did the internship with them a good year before the pandemic even started, that they already offered flexible working. Personally, it gives me the benefit of the consistent and I suppose more controlled sensory environment when I work from home. So I think for people like myself, to move towards a more flexible working model is a net positive for sure and I think it's really exciting to imagine what we could achieve if we are actually consciously trying to embed neuroinclusivity into our work culture.

Cara McGoogan 18:42

There might be some people listening to this whose own experience sort of resonates with yours who might be thinking, "I actually feel a lot of those things or I can empathize there". What advice do you have someone listening who might think that perhaps they could be neurodiverse and not necessarily have the words to address that?

Mel Mooney 19:02

Well, first off, I would say, don't immediately look at the diagnostic criteria and say, if it doesn't resonate with you, that that's case closed, because it's really important to know that that diagnostic criteria is actually quite dated by now. It was made 80 years ago on a study that was done on boys and on children. So it doesn't take into account adults or women and girls, which is why those demographics in particular are still slipping through the net, to some extent. I think it's much more important that you read experiential accounts from neurodiverse people, there are loads of articles that you could pull up quite easily from a basic Google search that are written by neurodiverse people talking about their life experiences. If that resonates with you, then you're probably onto something and it's something worth exploring. You can also join online groups; groups for neurodivergent people tend to be quite welcoming towards people who choose to self identify. I've talked to so many people who were diagnosed as adults and there were just like, my whole life made sense; I just wish I'd known it earlier, I wish people, well, anyone who's embarking on that journey and welcome to the tribe.

Cara McGoogan 20:08

And Caroline, what do you think tomorrow looks like for your son?

Caroline Southall 20:12

It's an interesting question for me, because I actually don't think I look too far ahead. We do take each day at a time, really. What I hope it looks like is, that he finds himself on a path where he is able to tap into his talents and use those. The things that he's good at are the things that make him happy and I am hopeful that he will pursue those things, you know, as he goes through education, and ultimately, beyond that into the workplace. I guess my reservations are that, at this stage, it isn't obvious to me that he will land in a company like Vodafone that recognizes these differences for the positive aspects that they can bring. I worry that because he is perceived to be different, it will be difficult for him to carve his path. And I reflect on his young life so far and I think it's difficult enough, to be honest at this point. And I want him to feel like it's not always going to be a battle, I want him to feel like he's going to get to a point where the things that he does are valued, and that he feels like he's making a contribution and that he has the satisfaction of knowing that he's part of something rather than just kind of working in isolation. I need him to be able to make his way in life without being dependent on other people carving that path for him. And that's the piece really, that would mark a real step change in the way that we perceive neurodiversity.

Mel Mooney 21:48

To live independently, you need money and you need to work to have money. It's just such a barrier for autistic people to have an independent life that is often there so needlessly and for the most nonsensical reasons, like someone didn't make eye contact with you during the interview and didn't get the job for that reason, because of some measure through. Like in other cultures eye contact's considered rude. But I do think that the wheels are moving and even though it, it seems grindingly slow, I've definitely noticed a very perceptible change in attitudes even since when I was a kid. Like I remember growing up thinking, the best thing I can aspire to now, the best thing I can hope for is that I will be tolerated in society. Whereas in the past five years since I've gotten a bit more



accepting of my diagnosis and things like that, I've seen that not only are people like me being tolerated, we're actually being accepted and even in some spaces, celebrated for being who we are. And that was not even remotely fathomable to me when I was in say, even secondary school and so there definitely has been a change. It can be frustrating because most kinds of meaningful change are incremental. And it can be hard when you're impatient for things to move along, especially when you can see the end goal, but there's so many hurdles you have to jump over to get there. The change is coming, we just have to keep pushing for it.

Cara McGoogan 23:10

And hopefully, conversations like this can be a part of that and having people like you Mel, in the position that you're in, definitely offer, that kind of inspiration.

Mel Mooney 23:20

Thanks. I do try. This has been a really credible and insightful conversation. I've been really inspired by your perspective in particular Caroline, that as a parent.

Caroline Southall 23:32

Absolutely likewise Mel, honestly you have given me great hope.

Mel Mooney 23:37

No, Reuben is lucky to have you and I wish him all the best.

Caroline Southall 23:40

Would you mind telling him that if ever you see him and speak to him Mel? I promise you, he doesn't see it that way some days I can promise you that.

Mel Mooney 23:49

No, but that's why it's so important that they see future versions of themselves and know that, it will be okay.

Caroline Southall 23:56

Absolutely. It's been an absolute joy meeting you Mel. Thank you so much.

Mel Mooney 24:00

Likewise.

Cara McGoogan 24:07

Huge thanks to Mel and Caroline for bringing us that really honest, moving and inspiring discussion. I hope hearing firsthand stories like these can get us all thinking about the assumptions we make and the ways we can be more welcoming to neurodiverse colleagues. This has been We Are Vodafone, a podcast series brought to you by Vodafone for Vodafone people. If you want to find out more, head to the resources in the show notes below.