We Are Vodafone - Episode 7

Transcript

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HOST
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GUESTS
Dr Karen Smit, Rubi Kaur

Tim Samuels 00:06
Welcome to the second series of We Are Vodafone, a podcast that's about people who work at Vodafone. But that's for everyone to listen to. I'm Tim Samuels, a documentary maker and broadcaster bringing you a series all about your stories. It's about diving into the lives, passions, fears, successes and opinions of people from all parts of the organisation. The passions this week are around fairness, and inclusivity. And the crucial role that technology can play in creating a world without barriers; something that my two guests this week are very much at the forefront of. Rubi Kaur is the Technology Strategy Manager at Vodafone technology, and also the chair of Vodafone Women in Tech Network and from South Africa, Dr. Karen Smit, a principal specialist at Vodacom, who's developing products for disabled and elderly users, and is a leading figure across Africa, in driving digital inclusion. I began by asking Karen, where her passion for inclusion came from, long before companies were thinking about this sort of thing.

Dr Karen Smit 01:21
When I was four years old, I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, and that left me quite deformed; so all my joints in my body's affected and it left me with a mobility impairment. So especially after school, going into the adult world, having to find a job. That's when I realised that the world, it wasn't built for me. I realised that inclusion is something that I need to advocate for. That is where I developed my passion is around my own lived experience, and seeing how other people are struggling, and then wanting to make a difference, not just for myself, but for other people.

Tim Samuels 02:06
What were the obstacles? Put ourselves back in your shoes at the time, you know, what were some of the obstacles we might not even think about?

Dr Karen Smit 02:13
I went to study and I got my master's degree, and even with having a degree, it was difficult for me to find a job. Companies, they are not really focused on employing people with a disability, so even as a graduate, I was still at a disadvantage. People just found it very hard to look past your disability, and just to see your ability.

Tim Samuels 02:37
So that's that's kind of why your interest, so lived experience and seeing people around you, Karen came from. Rubi, where does your passion, where does your empathy for this area come from?

Rubi Kaur 02:47
It's firstly, from a place where I believe that we need to have full participation of everyone in society to be able to use all the digital technologies that we have out there. With Disability, people are in a minority, the world is not absolutely built for people with disabilities. And I guess on a personal experience coming from

an ethnic minority, myself, and also a woman working in technology, I noticed that we're always in the minority. And therefore we have to be able to make sure that we do have technologies that we can all participate with. For example, up till about the 1950s, when we started looking at car crash dummies, there were no female crash dummies, and that's very important because anatomically, we're built differently, and therefore chest injuries will be totally different. And then we started to see universal car seat belts being built for both male and female. And then we can look at AI bias. If we don't be representative in technology of diverse groups, then we're really going to start missing out. We need to have equal and fair society. And if I can help build that, that's where my empathy and that's where my compassion is being driven from.

Tim Samuels 04:00
And you both reach senior positions where you can put these passions into practice. Karen you work for Vodacom. It's an African connectivity, digital and financial services company with mobile networks covering more than 300 million people. You began there as a call centre agent?

Dr Karen Smit 04:17
That's right. So, I literally went from being a social worker to a call centre agent. It was the most amazing decision that I've taken in my life. I could use the skills, the problem solving skills, the caring about people; I could apply it in the call centre position. Knowing and understanding how the company works because that is why call centre agents are critical piece to any corporate. And today I head up accessibility for the Vodacom group and I lead to disability inclusion across all our markets in Africa. And that's really been a great journey and for the CEO to support inclusion, because if you don't have that support from the top, then things won't really progress. They must be visible in the company, it must appear in reports, because else if it's just hidden and it's not visible, it will be very difficult for everybody in the company to buy into that.

Tim Samuels 05:22
So, is it fair to say, Karen, that your recommendations are acted upon?

Dr Karen Smit 05:27
I would say it is. Our CEO Shameel Joosub, has given me that platform and if it's not for him, that trusted me and believe that I could do it, and being authentic about it. So, if the CEO says Karen, you've got the platform, that gives me the confidence to make my voice heard. It's not always easy, but at least I've got the platform. In the disability world, there's a slogan that says nothing about us without us. People with disabilities, they want to speak for themselves. Often you are being spoken for, often people speak over you. But in this case, management is saying bring your barriers, and we co-create inclusive solutions, so that the workplace can become barrier free, and then you carry that over to your customer. Does our products and services meet the needs of our consumers with disabilities? Just from CEOs giving the platform, you can see the powerful impact within the organization. I think the magic truly is that it's authentic, really, ingraining inclusion into our culture,

Tim Samuels 06:46
It sounds like you've really embedded yourself in a position where you, you can do that and affect a company that spans multiple countries and with hundreds of millions of consumers and Rubi you're in the UK, enjoying a rare day of sunshine. You work for Vodafone Group, you've described yourself as a tech activist, how come?

Rubi Kaur 07:07
All of us have that very small streak of activism within us. That ability to want to rage against the system to affect the status quo. So, we all have it to some extent. When I see people being disadvantaged, when I see that there are people that cannot participate, that's when I want to rage against the system. And what can I do? Now we're at the point where we've got that wonderful intersection between humanity and

technology and it's a very intersection where we need to rage against the system. We cannot just dish out technologies and more technologies, we've got to see who are our recipients of this technology. And we cannot do a one size fits all. To Karen's point about embedding, it into the design, that's where I start to make myself vocal because I mean, I have been a designer, I've been a technical architect, I work in strategy now.

Tim Samuels 07:57
Rubi, let's drill into that a bit more because for those of us who aren't in the kind of inclusion world, it can sound a bit like one of those buzzwords that companies like to sort of tick a box with, but what does it actually mean? Perhaps just kind of bring this to life by describing a product that you have made more accessible.

Rubi Kaur 08:15
One of the products that Vodafone sells to small businesses is called the Operator Console. It basically is a very simple digital switchboard. And its mouse controlled; drag and drop. Very visual, very easy to understand. Not so good if you're a visually impaired, low vision sighted person, because one, they don't use mice and also, many Braille devices are not integrated into these products. Lots of visually impaired people don't want to use Braille devices as well. They want to use integrated products that everyone uses. They don't want to be separated out. I was the designer on this product of Operator Console. At the same time in parallel, I was studying for an MBA at Henley and lo and behold, on the first day, I sat next to a guy, Barry, who was registered blind with his guide dog. I was totally blown away by how he navigated the entire environment with digital apps, with his mobile phone, with his watch, with screen readers. Never once did he fall behind, during the whole of the course. I managed to bring Barry into our project, a real end user a lived experience to Karen's point, and we started retrofitting our Operator Console to allow for accessibility of visually impaired users. And at the end, we managed to have a system that looked and felt the same, but it now had the ability to toggle on and off accessibility features. What really happened was a culture shift. We were working with a visually impaired user. We were absolutely blown away by his ability to teach us things that we had not known before. When we design any kind of Vodafone products and services, accessibility needs to be at the very forefront.

Tim Samuels 10:02
And the impact means that people who are visually impaired can do jobs that they otherwise might have been excluded from?

Rubi Kaur 10:09
Exactly. It's all about participation, participation, finding jobs, being able to take part running society, and up till then we're totally eliminated to that group of very important people.

Dr Karen Smit 10:21
Rubi, you will remember before the smart phones, we had to load the accessibility software, separately on two devices. When smart phones became available in 2012, the handset manufacturers came to the party, and they embedded the accessibility features into the devices. We want technology to suit people with different capabilities, smartphones are there, it's accessible, it's got the features for people with different disabilities, visually impaired, hearing impaired, people with mobility impairments. But still, there is a need for big button phones, for example, for the elderly, you get a group of elderly persons that grew up without technology. We realised that we need to cater for this group of people and you know what, we never ever looked back; we can't sell enough of those devices. Besides that group, some people with certain physical disabilities can't navigate a touchscreen phones. It's really about looking at sub-segments of disabilities. It's not one size fits all. And you then develop and you design products and services according to those needs. For who are we designing? Designers play a big role in terms of getting accessibility upfront.

Tim Samuels 11:47
And in terms of deaf users, I believe you've helped push up an emergency services app. Can you talk me through how that works?

Dr Karen Smit 11:54
So, we actually developed two emergency services. The one is the SMS service. And the one is an app. In most countries globally, how do you contact emergency services? You have to call them. I know in the UK now, they've also got the tech space. We never had it in South Africa, our Deaf community complained and they said, "can you please look into this?". We then developed the Emergency Services App. For the first time, it allows deaf users to chat to an emergency contact centre agent. For the first time emergency services can be contacted and used by Deaf persons.

Tim Samuels 12:35
Which is a huge breakthrough. Rubi, as you said, and as Karen has said, it's important not to see everyone as once kind of one homogenous group, who would you say has been overlooked still which sub-sect needs most thought?

Rubi Kaur 12:48
I feel so it's the neurodiverse group at the moment. People who are on that Autism spectrum. I think at the moment, we don't fully understand how we can embed people with neurodiversity into the workplace easily; Autistic people, Asperger Syndrome, Dyslexics, they have so much to offer. We need to capitalise on all that talent, and also see what kind of products we need to create that serves that group of people. I don't think we're there yet. I'd be interested to hear what Karen has to say.

Dr Karen Smit 13:20
Rubi, I totally agree with you. I think the neurodiverse, there still needs to be a lot of attention focusing on the needs. And then besides the technology, that devices, it's also the experiences when they go online, or especially when they go in store. Stores can be very noisy. I know in one of the Vodafone markets, they are very good, where they actually adapted a store for people with sensory conditions. So that's very good. But you won't find that often. I agree with you neurodiverse people, the technology, the purchase behaviours, all of that needs quite a lot of attention still.

Tim Samuels 14:00
And you've talked about how the products are an extension of the culture within the company, the products aren't going to change unless the culture has changed. Karen, it sounds like you've got there, you've got the top table listening to you. And how difficult has it been though, to get people to intentionally focus on disabilities and what have you had to overcome to get to this point?

Dr Karen Smit 14:23
Often when people don't understand disability, it's not because they don't want to. I honestly just think that they haven't been exposed to it. So yes, obviously, there is a lot of challenges. You could often feel like you're a lone voice just advocating and pushing for this and like you're going against the stream sometimes. I think some of the challenges that I had is our business is very busy. It's very competitive. There's lots of things going on, and you also want your products and services to receive priority. And then also remember, within a business, you work with different people, everybody's level of awareness is different. So the CEO and the senior leadership team might be on board. But at the end of the day, I don't work with them, I work with my colleagues, and I'm dependent on them. I'm dependent on a designer, I'm dependent on a developer, on a programmer to bring accessibility in. You can't do this without being an activist, or an advocate, you just need to push forward and make your voice heard. Yes, they are challenges. But you know, I've been in this environment so long, and data on you understand what you need to do to influence people showing them, if we make this accessible, how many people we would reach, you would reach a greater market, because customers today, they don't just want to buy your

product, they want to see what does this company stand for? They want to see your values, not on a piece of paper somewhere, they want to see it in society. You've got to continuously educate people and not get tired about that and see the bigger picture.

Tim Samuels 16:17
On that nuts and bolts level Rubi, how do you embed this into the design culture? Do you have certain golden rules that you lay down for developers?

Rubi Kaur 16:30
Indeed, yeah, so I work in the group that's responsible for the technology strategy. Underpinning that technology strategy are these golden rules, as we call them. These are the behaviours, these are the guardrails, that say to every engineer, every designer, every architect, anyone who works in technology, the guidance on how they need to build for inclusion. How they need to build for accessibility. How they need to build ethical products and services as well. Ingraining this in the culture within the technology strategy. And then to Karen's point, it's no good just putting that in a slide and then say, "woo", there you go. We can't do that. I also lead the technology strategy adoption area as well, strategy, adoption and communication of that strategy. It's got to be an embedding of people being able to realise and understand why they're using these golden rules in terms of the behaviours we want people to be able to adopt. And so it's an absolute journey that we're on here. But listening to the lived experiences, knowing what it means to our customers, knowing what it would mean to our customers, if we did not do this. I talked to a lot of graduates who join Vodafone, and they are marking companies that they want to join by the environmental credentials by the fact of them being inclusive to women, inclusive to disability groups. It's not just a case of how much am I going to be paid anymore.

Tim Samuels 18:02
And for the young women, perhaps joining the company, presumably they're entering a very different world to when you joined, do you feel that that battle has been won?

Rubi Kaur 18:11
The battle has not been won yet. Yet here. That's the operative word. I've always worked as a technical designer or architect within technology from 20 years ago. And in those days, we used to see very few women in technical roles. You know, I was in a cohort of about 100, I was just the one female. Every technical meeting I went to, I was the only woman there. I was vocal. But I know that is not everyone's experience, women will start to leave the industry, if they don't feel they can participate or feel welcome into the workplace. Even now, if you go to any primary school, ask them to draw a picture of a person that works in tech, invariably, they will draw a picture of a scruffy man with a beard. And that's what they see as a person working in tech; we have to change that image, that stereotype. We've got an employee network at the moment Women's Employee Network for Technology, it's welcomed to all men as well. And we see it as a pressure group to say that we are visible, we are vocal, we want to draw attention to it. If we are not representative of the societies that we're serving, the products we build are not going to be to the needs of those people. So, we need true inclusion, we need diversity. We also have the hashtag in our group #VisibleTechWomen. That's homage to Caroline Criado Perez, who wrote the book all about Invisible Women. And it was a liturgy of all the mistakes that have been made when women are not included in the design, the development, concept stages of making products.

Tim Samuels 19:49
Looking ahead to the future. What really strikes me is how tech which is in some ways, being quite damaging to society and make people withdraw. But in terms of things like disabilities and inclusion it's been an amazing leveller to break down barriers and to allow people to communicate. And you know, there must be people who feel so much more part of society and so less lonely as a result of tech. Karen, what excites you, that might be coming our way in the future, which will make people feel even more included?

Dr Karen Smit 20:21
One example that I can think of is self-driving cars. I've got a colleague that is visually impaired, and he's so excited about that option. And he said, "imagine Karen, when we go out, I can say to you, Karen, I'm going to pick you up Friday evening at seven o'clock". People with visual impairments, people with physical disabilities, just to have that sense of that freedom, that independence of being able to get around on your own. Another development, IoT devices in your home, internet of things where you can give instructions via your voice. So, if you have IoT devices, for your TV, for your fan, for your lights, then you can merely say "switch on TV", or you can say "close the blinds". That's already there, I mean, we've got all of these devices that you can speak to, for people with disabilities, especially those with mobility impairments, that is going to make a huge difference if you've got that tech available.

Tim Samuels 21:28
And Rubi in terms of future breakthroughs, what makes you optimistic?

Rubi Kaur 21:33
What we're going to be seeing in the near future, of course, is web 3.0. Web 3.0 is the next incarnation of a wonderful internet. And it's meant to be, meant to be because it's not arrived yet, it's meant to be a fully immersive spatial experience. Parallel to that is something that we call the metaverse. So, this is more of a 3D, fully immersive experience, augmented by virtual reality. We're able to buy things, experience things, make friends, and, it sounds brilliant, but my big question is, how accessible will that be? We talk about technology as being the great leveller. But the first thing is being given the keys to be able to get into that environment, it's fine when you're in there, but how do you get into there? And my other big question, and this comes back to equality is, is it free? And is it going to exasperate our digital divide? When it's a case of those who can, can participate, those who cannot, will not participate, and will fall further and further behind into the chasm of that digital divide.

Tim Samuels 22:37
We might have some very senior ears listening to this podcast across various parts of the groups and companies. If you had one wish for something that you'd like the company to do, what would it be?

Dr Karen Smit 22:51
Up till now, the one thing that I've been advocating for is that before you launch a product and service to market, you check for Inclusive Design, and for accessibility, so that you ask the question, before you launch to market. We've now developed the My Vodacom app, and you should then ask the question, will blind people be able to use this app? How will it integrate with a screen reader software on the small devices? About a month ago, we've had the process changed, whereby, that question has been put in as a measure. No product will go to market, if that question hasn't been answered. And you don't only make a change when you get complaints, because ultimately, it's got to be about systemic inclusion, and not an afterthought.

Tim Samuels 23:51
And Rubi, what would your dream action by the company be?

Rubi Kaur 23:55
We want to be a technology company that's there for the future. We have to listen to our customers, we have to listen to our employees that are saying we understand that we need responsible design, which is inclusive, ethical, and accessible.

Tim Samuels 24:13
Just before we kind of wrap up, is there anything you you'd want to say to each other?

Dr Karen Smit 24:17
I just want to say to Rubi, thank you so much for advocating for women in technology. I think it's so relevant and necessary because the ICT world is so male dominant. Often, I sit in meetings, I'm the only female there's unconscious bias, men talking over you or speaking about something excluding you, without them really knowing that they are excluding you. For me, women are natural at leading, getting teams to work well together and all those beautiful things. I want to encourage you make your voice heard, we are seeing what you're doing and we need women like you to be that authentic voice, because you also have the lived experience and the interest to keep on driving that forward.

Rubi Kaur 25:08
That's really kind of thank you so much. I'm going to repay the compliment, of course, and also to say to Karen, absolutely wonderful to work with you in the bigger environment. And you are a constant reminder to us to keep on asking those questions. Are we doing enough? Are we building the right technologies? And your voice is that prominent voice that we must hear, because despite having the golden rules, we do need the end user input into all of this as well, so thank you so much.

Tim Samuels 25:40
I just wanted to thank you both for everything that you've done, and also for your time today, and you both got lots of writings out there as well, if people want to look up the work of I should say, Dr. Karen Smit, you've done a PhD into your own job as well, which is a whole other topic conversation and Rubi Kaur. Thank you both very much, it's been a real honour.

Many thanks again to Rubi and Karen for sharing their stories, achievements, and an exciting sense of what tech will be dishing up for us in the future. And I guess it's a reminder that although inclusion might sometimes sound like a bit of a buzzword, it really can profoundly impact lives, allowing people to stay in touch, or do jobs on an equal footing. This has been We Are Vodafone, a podcast series, brought to you by Vodafone, for Vodafone, and other people. You too can be involved in building the inclusive and innovative team at Vodafone, especially as they're looking to add around 7,000 software engineers by 2025 to develop more of their own digital services across Europe and Africa. If you want to find out more about this or anything mentioned in the episode, do look at the resources in the show notes below.