+1 Podcast
Season 1: Episode 3
Susan Ainsworth

Medo Pournader:

Hello and welcome to the +1 Podcast where we discuss diversity and inclusion in our workplaces at the University of Melbourne. I'm your host, Medo Pournader, Senior Lecturer in Management and Marketing at the Faculty of Business of Economics, University of Melbourne. In this episode we host Susan Ainsworth, Professor in Organisational Studies. I talk to Susan about her work on people with disability, ageism and gender equity. Susan also shares a brief history of diversity and inclusion in organisations in Australia and her experiences with it as a professional and later on as an academic.

This episode was recorded on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. I hope you enjoy the conversation. Alrighty. Hello, Susan. How are you?

Susan Ainsworth:
Hello, Medo. I'm fine.

Medo Pournader:
How has your day been so far? Although it's 11am.

Susan Ainsworth:
It's okay. The drive was fine. I drive in from outside of Melbourne into uni, so it can vary.

Medo Pournader:
Do you visit campus often, or...

Susan Ainsworth:
Um...

Medo Pournader:

Oops.

Susan Ainsworth:

Do I visit? Do I visit my workplace often? It depends what's going on. It depends what's going on.

Medo Pournader:

Fair enough. Yeah, I mean, I live close by, so I'm here every day. But, yeah, I understand, especially after COVID, people prefer to work from home most of the time, especially if you live out in the suburbs, I totally get it. Sometimes it's just more convenient. But how are you? How's your week been?

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah, my week's been okay. I'm trying to think what's happened. I think I've got short-term memory loss because all the days blend into one, to be honest. Just this normal sort of academic stuff of working on a revision to a paper and wondering how we're going to get it done by the deadline, that sort of thing.

Medo Pournader:

I have one of those, too. It's just so stressful, but good luck with it.

Susan Ainsworth:

Thank you.

Medo Pournader:

So, Susan, tell me and our audience a bit about yourself, your line of work, how you have become interested in your line of work, anything that you would like to share about your work.

Susan Ainsworth:

One of the things that I teach at Melbourne Uni is a subject called Managing Diversity, and I've been teaching that for about 10 years, or a bit over 10 years. But before I became an academic, I worked in organisations and I was remembering, after you asked me on to the show, that one of my first real jobs was actually in what used to be called EEO, so it was equal employment opportunity. So I worked in that in, would you believe, 1990, which is a very long time ago. And it's just interesting how things come full circle. I worked in organisations and I actually did my first managing diversity project or program in 1996.

Susan Ainsworth:

And one of the things reflecting on all of this that that gives me, is a sense of perspective over time, of the trends we see in diversity and inclusion. A few years ago, maybe about seven now, time seems to merge into itself and the years go by, but it was probably about seven years ago. There tends to be interest in diversity and inclusion. It waxes and wanes. I remember people talking about how diversity and inclusion had become all of a sudden this fashion, and I'm sitting there thinking, "Well, no, it actually was first coined as a term in 1989, 1990." Anyway, so that's one of the things that I can bring to it, is actually having lived through the whole thing in Australia.

Medo Pournader:

That's pretty cool. I mean, what were the trends back in 1990s, if you don't mind me asking, for diversity and inclusion?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, it wasn't called diversity and inclusion in Australia. It was called things like equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. And in the late 1980s, we were still trying to convince people that equal employment opportunity and affirmative action was not going to mean that merit was compromised. So we're still trying to convince people that it was a good idea, that it wasn't going to be threatening. And what's also interesting, I remember we distinguished ourselves from the American approach because we used to make quite a point of saying, you know, "It's about equal opportunity to compete. It's not about quotas. That's how the Americans do it. We don't do it like that." And then about 2012, I noted that in the press, in particular, there started to be this sort of criticism emerged that, "Oh, hang on a minute, the merit principle doesn't work."

Susan Ainsworth:

So what we've been applying all the way saying, it's really just about allowing people to compete on merit, on an equal footing. Suddenly there was this public consciousness that, yeah, merit doesn't cut it because we actually haven't seen any progress in, for example, the number of women in certain occupations or professions, or getting into senior leadership roles. And again, I thought that was really interesting to reflect on. When I think about my young self of 1990, trying to convince people that it's really just merit at work, of course, merit, it's a gendered, it's a racialized concept, so trying to unpack that. How do we conflate things like the ideal worker with a certain conception of merit that ends up excluding a lot of different kinds of people.

Medo Pournader:

That's pretty interesting. You would think that it works, right? Because I'm not familiar with the discourse that has been happening since 1990s. Why do you think that merit didn't work? And also, have we moved back to quotas for assigning some certain roles to some more minority groups to make sure they have got it? Or, how does it work these days?

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah. So, why merit doesn't work is because people's judgement of merit is influenced by everything they bring to that. So, the sort of conflation of having to do things in a certain way or achieve certain things in a certain way with being a certain sort of person. And what tends to happen is that organisations, there's social systems. Social systems left to their own devices without intervention reproduce themselves. And so you get people looking at job candidates, for example, and saying, "Oh, that person deserves this job. They're the best candidate." And not consciously, but thinking, "They remind me of myself."

Medo Pournader:

So basically we define merit based on the previous patterns that we have, and those previous patterns are kind of biassed against the majority groups.

Susan Ainsworth:

Which are still ironically called minority groups. Yeah, there's a lot of irony going on in the whole area, and certain ideas of what merit should look like and the form comes in, become institutionalised and

they just don't become questioned. So we get that sort of reproducing itself as well. And I forgot that your second question. Merit.

Medo Pournader:

Do we have these days? So what is-

Susan Ainsworth:

Oh, yes.

Medo Pournader:

... the approach today for diversity?

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah. So I noted this in about... I'm trying to think. It was 2010 or 2012. I remember the front cover of the newspaper because it had Quentin Bryce, the Governor-General, and another female political leader on the front page. And the headline was something like, about, merit doesn't work. So what we've seen is that different organisations, governments, have been trying to introduce, not... Sometimes quotas, sometimes soft targets.

Susan Ainsworth:

So trying to actually make it much more concrete about what the expectations are. So things like the Australian Stock Exchange or bringing in certain requirements that there'll be a certain percentage of women, for example, on boards, or organisations requiring that if there's going to be a selection panel for a position, there needs to be 50% female candidates on the shortlist. Organisations and government have done various things. We're still very resistant to actually bringing in hard quotas, and it's an area of debate.

Medo Pournader:

Oh, yeah. I have so many questions. So, how would everyone else perceive that approach? I mean, firstly, if I'm a woman, which I am, and just some clarification-

Susan Ainsworth:

Just a thought experiment.

Medo Pournader:

... and then I know that, for example, I have been recruited because I was a woman, not necessarily because of my merits. How would I react to that understanding?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, I think there are different mechanisms for doing it. Certainly there is some experimentation with making positions targeted as, this is actually a position that's set aside for a person from a particular group to fill. I think that's different than saying, "We need to have a diverse shortlist to recruit from, so that there'd be 50% of female candidates and 50% male candidates." That doesn't mean that a female candidate will be selected as getting the job.

Susan Ainsworth:

That just means that you're not ruling people out from actually being interviewed. So, yeah, I mean there's a lot of criticism of those sorts of measures for various reasons. People find it difficult to comply with those sort of directions or guidelines. And people face things like entrenched gender segregation in certain professions where they struggle to find female candidates.

Medo Pournader:

But then again, females, to me, are much easier, the female demographic compared to, I'm not sure, LGBTQI demographic or religious minority groups. Or has there been any advancement on those? Or have they entered the discourse as well for diversity and inclusion and equal opportunities? Or is it still those...

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah, yeah. No, certainly, to varying degrees. So I think the religious minority has not really got a lot of airtime in Australia. Certainly other groups, but I think the one that led the area has been gender. And so it's a really unfortunate trend that diversity groups seem to end up competing for the same amount of airtime. So you get that sort of internal competition, or people thinking, "Well, if we do it for this group, then we're going to have to do it for every other group." So I think there's a lot of complexity there and recognising that there's intersections as well, there is-

Medo Pournader:

So back to you and your background. So you were in the corporate world, and then you started your work on diversity and inclusion in 1990s. And tell us a bit more. What happened after that? What was the trajectory that got you to this point here today? And then we'll get to what you do today.

Susan Ainsworth:

So you really want me to talk about my career?

Medo Pournader:

If you like.

Susan Ainsworth:

Okay.. Well, it's always like, you can make it make sense in hindsight. You can make a story hang together with the benefit of hindsight, but at the time it doesn't seem like that. Yeah. Well, I worked in organisations and did the sort of people-related stuff in organisations, that sort of thing. I had a very love-hate relationship with universities, so a bit of a recidivist student. I kept enrolling in things part-time.

Susan Ainsworth:

So I was working full-time and studying part-time and collecting graduate diplomas and enrolling the masters and thinking, "Oh, I might do a PhD one day," but couldn't quite come around to that. So it took me about two years to get my head around that. Eventually I ended up enrolling in a PhD because I could get a scholarship to do it. So I left my full-time work to take up a scholarship and become a full-time PhD student, which was a shock to me at the time.

Medo Pournader:

Why?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, because I hadn't really had a lot to do with universities except being a student. I didn't really know how it all worked. I didn't know how PhDs worked, and I was just a bit shocked as well about how the sort of hierarchy that worked, and I wasn't particularly used to It. So I probably caused a little bit of a ruckus about that because, by that stage, I was in my, I don't know, early 30s, early to mid-30s, and it's like, "Hmm, don't be treating me like I'm 18 years old. I'm an adult. I've given up things to come back here, and I have my own particular research interests, and I've got a right to have a say about things," all of which was not necessarily how things were done. Oh, dear, I shouldn't be talking about this stuff.

Medo Pournader:

I mean, it's only the truth, right? So, yeah, when you start your PhD, there is... I don't know how it is these days. I mean, I have got only one PhD student, not even from our own faculty, but he's quite senior in industry. So, I mean, he basically has got freedom to explore different topics based on his own experience. So I would personally, and that might be my style to consider, to supervise that student in a way to give them a bit of freedom to a good extent to explore, but also be there to just guide the research and research methodology in a sound way. But has it changed? Has that hierarchical perspective or hierarchical modelling of universities changed, do you think since then? Has it improved?

Susan Ainsworth:

From my perspective?

Medo Pournader:

Yeah.

Susan Ainsworth:

No.

Medo Pournader:

Okay. Tell us more.

Susan Ainsworth:

But I think that demonstrates, well, no, and I think the sort of hierarchies we have, the social hierarchies, professional hierarchies we have, I don't feel have changed. But I think it also demonstrates one of the great, as I say, dangerous myths in the diversity and inclusion area, which is the belief that somehow progress is inevitable. And that's not been borne out by evidence, if we think about the progress that's been made in gender segregation or representation of people from different ethnic backgrounds at senior leadership positions. So, similarly, again, left to their own devices, institutions and organisations tend to reproduce themselves, or just keep doing the same thing. And I think we've done that, too.

Medo Pournader:

That's a fascinating point, and the fact that you mentioned the myth that progress is inevitable, not necessarily all the time. I have lived through the living example of that in Iran. I was born after the

revolution in Iran, and before the revolution there was a completely different system, very much inclined toward the West. I'm not saying it was a good system or a bad system, but the progress... So Iran back then came out of really, really dark times towards a bit of progress, and then there was the revolution and everything again went back.

Medo Pournader:

That's why we believe, I personally believe that, for example, rights like marriage equality, LGBTQI rights, minority rights, if not taken care of, if not celebrated, they might actually get reversed. And what you mentioned here is really true. I believe in that. But with respect to hierarchy in academia, and if you like, a bit elaborate on it, what is that hierarchy? How does it manifest? How does it show itself in a way that... If you like to talk about it. If not, we can move on to another topic.

Susan Ainsworth:

How does hierarchy manifest in our universities?

Medo Pournader:

Is it, for example, a supervisor and a student? Is it between different roles in academia? For example, professors, associate professors, senior lecturers, lecturers? Is it that hierarchy, or is it hierarchy between academics and professional staff? How do you see it? Where does it manifest? Or is it all of them?

Susan Ainsworth:

I think it's all of them. I mean, I was talking specifically about coming into the PhD program. So, I suppose for me, just staying with that example, I see that it replicated. So, I started my PhD in 1999, so what are we? 24 years later? 24 years later. It may even have gotten a little worse in that... I think there's a danger that students are infantilized by the system. And I think better things happen when we assume that students are adults and can make decisions for themselves, and actually own their own research project, and have a right to have a voice. I'm not saying they shouldn't be guided. Of course that's the role of a supervisor in a PhD, but that it's... I am trying to think of a diplomatic way to say this.

Medo Pournader:

Sure.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah, I don't think I can.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, no, it's all good. But back to diversity and inclusion. So your journey, you were in industry and then you were going back and forth whether to do PhD or not, and then you were introduced to this whole new world of doing a PhD, which was a tough thing for you because you were coming back from industry and you had some experience and then literally have been told what to do and what not to do like a child, which... And how did you manage eventually?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, I don't think I did for at least the first year, 18 months. Some people might say longer. I was a bit in denial that I was doing a PhD for quite some time. So people would ask me what I did and I'd just say, "Oh, I'm doing some research, or, dah, dah, dah." Yeah, I couldn't quite get my head around it, and I never intended to become an academic.

Medo Pournader:

That's amazing.

Susan Ainsworth:

I know. So this is really true confessions time, but I enrolled in the PhD. I was interested in my research topic, but I also wanted to buy myself some time because I wanted to work out what I wanted to do next, not thinking that it would actually be academia. So, anyway, but that's how it rolled on. But I think the thing I'd highlight there is, the reason I never thought about becoming an academic is because I was never socialised to expect that that was even a possibility for me.

Susan Ainsworth:

So I think I'm always mindful of people's aspirations, reflecting others' expectations of them and whether or not they think something is possible. So, just because someone doesn't aspire to something doesn't mean they're not capable of it. It might be that they haven't been brought up in an environment where they actually even think that that's possible or attainable for them.

Medo Pournader:

Sure. That's also a really good point. Believing in people, and that is a problem sometimes I have in academia. I think to me, at least, it is possible for everyone to publish really high quality research if shown the right way of doing it. Not to mention, we all know that academia sometimes is very friends and family, but that's a discussion for another time, not probably for diversity and inclusion podcast, but the fact that everyone with a reasonable mental capability and know-how can do a really good quality research. And sometimes in academia, speaking of hierarchy, I've noticed that that hierarchy takes out our self-confidence, or people are biased. And diversity and inclusion in academia, also in editorial boards of journals, how women or minority groups or international researchers not from the Western world are perceived or discriminated against in top journals.

Medo Pournader:

Specifically, I think from personal experience in American journals, I might be a bit biased or wrong myself, but that is also a point of people not believing in people, other people not belonging in their own tribe, not being capable of doing good enough research, which is, to me, a personal experience of being excluded sometimes. But I have managed to some extent to enter that world, which is a very exclusive world, and I don't like it very much because of its exclusion of many other people. But, yeah, I totally agree with you that all of us are capable of doing if being believed in and if just shown the path of doing it. And that gets into the whole diversity and inclusion part. So what happened after the PhD and then moving on to what you're doing today?

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah. So I actually did my PhD on older workers. I did it on age, which is a diversity group. At that point I wasn't part of that group, but I am now, which is one of the funny things.

Medo Pournader:

Come on, Susan, you're young.

Susan Ainsworth:

No, no, no, I'm serious. So it's really interesting for me to have, over time, become part of the group that I was studying, and also people's reactions to that research topic. People did not embrace it. They thought, "Why would you want to study older people?" And I had one chapter of my thesis, I remember, was on older women workers, and I remember an older woman who was a feminist at a conference saying to me, "Why would you want to look at that?" with some distaste in her voice. And I'm thinking, "Oh, wow, this is a moment I'm going to remember, that you are reflecting to me that actually studying this group of people is distasteful or not very interesting." Anyway, so that as well as gender from early on has been part of the recurring themes of my work.

Susan Ainsworth:

So, I mean, I got a job. I moved to Sydney. I got a job as a lecturer, which was a tenurable position at the time. I was also looking overseas and I'd gone for interviews in other countries because that's what you were supposed to do. You were supposed to leave Australia if you wanted to be an international proper academic. And I thought about it and I thought, "Yeah, nah, I'm not going to do that." And I remember saying at one interview panel about, "Well, if it is about being an international academic, why can't you do that from Australia? What does international mean in the Northern Hemisphere? Why does it mean in the UK or America?"

Medo Pournader:

It's so different from Australia.

Susan Ainsworth:

I know, right? I know, I know. But that was the sort of... So I'm also someone who is very grounded in the local context. And one of the things that I try to do in my teaching is talk about every country, for example, having its own diversity story, talking about Australia's diversity story in terms of culture. And the two big things for us are immigration and Indigenous people.

Susan Ainsworth:

And using that, even if we have a high proportion of international students, being able to understand the diversity and inclusion issues in one national context gives you a framework for then being able to reflect on your own. So, taking that and thinking about, "Okay, so how does that maybe play out differently in my own country, in my own context?" Yeah. So, yes, I didn't ever work overseas. I've only ever worked in Australia, which I'm not embarrassed about, but it's interesting because I'm probably in the minority at Melbourne Uni in our faculty of never having worked anywhere else.

Medo Pournader:

No, I'm the same, but I hear you. Look, I've been reading this book for a few nights now, and then it's about organisation theory, probably you've heard of it, by Mary Jo Hatch and Cunliffe who visited us-

Susan Ainsworth:

Yes. Yes, yes.

Medo Pournader:

... a few weeks ago. And then, in the preface, Mary talks about her being in the United States and in the United States back in 1990s, I think. She was talking about in 1980s and 1990s, when she got her position, most of the methodologies were really objective methodologies, positivist methodologies, and then she went to Denmark and Copenhagen Business School. And then the methodologies there were more interpretive, if I'm not mistaken, or-

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah. Qualitative.

Medo Pournader:

... qualitative.

Susan Ainsworth:

Interpretive. Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah. Interpretive.

Susan Ainsworth:

That's my people.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, I love that, actually. But it gave her that insight. But then again, we are living in the age of internet, obviously, and ChatGPT recently, and then you can go to conferences here and there and talk to people. So I'm not sure how living physically in another country would enrich research these days or your perspective, although to me it would be fun. So, I would personally take a sabbatical in Europe or something. But, yeah, I mean, I think it is a bold move when everyone is doing something and you decide not to do it. You just don't get into that peer pressure. And how do you reflect on that decision in hindsight?

Susan Ainsworth:

Oh, look, I think I probably... It's hard to say really. I mean, you can't speculate about how things might've gone. I think I probably would've been a higher profile academic if I'd gone overseas. I might've been quite unhappy, though. And, yeah, I don't know. I don't know. I mean, I'm Australian, for good and bad, and I'm based here. I like to reflect critically on being an Australian and talk about that in the classroom as well. And I've always had an interest in other cultures and other countries, and I think that's what we should be doing in Australia.

Medo Pournader:

That makes perfect sense. So speaking of diversity and inclusion, what are you working on these days? And what are some of the stuff that you want to share with me and the audience about the topics of your research, the topic of your service leadership? Please, let us know.

Susan Ainsworth:

Okay. So there's a few things I'm working on at the moment, and they actually probably all fall into the disability area in various ways. So, I've got a research project at the moment. It's actually being led by Dr Peter Ghin, who's a Research Fellow at FBE, part of the Future of Work Lab, but it's a project on chronic illness and about whether leaders in particular, how comfortable they feel declaring their chronic health conditions. I've also been involved in interdisciplinary work on disability, so with people like Keith McVilly and others. So that's some of the stuff that I'm doing at the moment.

Susan Ainsworth:

In terms of teaching... So, I do stuff other than diversity and inclusion, but it's always all about work in some form. So it's either work and policy, it's work and organisations. And the other thing that I notice about universities is, we so rarely reflect on them as organisations. So for someone like me who teaches about work and organisations, it doesn't seem to be very common that academics in this sort of area would reflect on the university is also a place of work and an organisation, and is managed and has managers. And let's think about what we're teaching and the gaps between that and what we're doing.

Medo Pournader:

Well, that's always true, isn't it?

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah. But some of the things that I'd like to see is that people, particularly when there's a change at work or an organisation, they actually think about what that might mean to people who belong to different diversity groups. Is that going to impact them to a greater degree? Is it going to disadvantage people? There was a study done about a decade ago by someone who looked at people that were managers with a disability and how they responded to organisational change, and also the extent to which they wanted to move up or experience different jobs, either laterally. And I think that the term she used was glass partitions. So it's a sort of riff off glass ceiling and for gender.

Susan Ainsworth:

And that people were really anxious about any sort of organisational change because they had been able to somehow negotiate a set of conditions that worked for them, or a relationship with their manager where they might have been able to get what they need, the adjustments they needed or the flexibility. And now that was suddenly up in the air and it was not guaranteed that they would get that again. And that's the sort of thing, I think, we need to think seriously about in organisations and also universities as organisations when we make these blanket policies about things like needing to return to campus and not being able to work flexibly.

Susan Ainsworth:

Let's apply a diversity and inclusion lens to that and think about who that might exclude. The other thing is, people talk a lot about inclusion, and that can be defined in various ways. I think of it like empowerment. You can't actually empower someone else. The issue is, do you feel included or not? So, for me, it is necessarily a subjective thing. I can try and foster the conditions in which people might feel a

sense of inclusion, but the ultimate test is, do they feel included? Do they feel like they belong and are accepted for who they are, both in their own work group, but in their organisation as well, more broadly?

Medo Pournader:

That's very interesting because most of these policies are really top-down, the inclusion policies. But it's like someone having a depression and telling them, "Don't be sad." I mean, how does that is going to help someone? But how do you genuinely make someone... For example, a disability minority group, how do you make them feel included within the organisation setting?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, yeah, I mean, you can't actually make them feel included. The issue is whether they experience it as inclusive or not. But you can start with things like actually finding out how they experience the organisation, and that takes an open spirit of inquiry and being willing to find out that things are not positive from their point of view. So, how difficult is it to navigate the environment that they're in, allowing mechanisms for their voices to be heard. So actually trying to find out genuinely how they experience it and being able to think about, "Well, what could we do that might help with that?"

Susan Ainsworth:

And being able to show that there's a response to that. So I mean, it's not rocket science. It's this whole thing about people think, "Oh, that's just common sense." Well, that's great, but why is it not common then? I mean, common sense isn't very common, right? So some of those things like making people or giving people a sense of psychological safety and freedom to voice when things aren't working for them, feeling brave enough that they can speak up to say, "Well, this is what I need in order to be able to do the job," or, "I can do the job, but I need to do it in a slightly different way than everyone else."

Susan Ainsworth:

And that shouldn't be seen as problematic, or, "I'm a problem because I'm asking for something." Most of the adjustments, the reasonable adjustments that people get or ask for to cope with disability are usually things like flexible work. And if they are, any sort of modification, they're usually very low cost. So it doesn't take a lot, but it does take that someone actually thinks about it and is willing to actually go and inquire and ask and listen and then make some sort of response, you know, genuine response to that.

Medo Pournader:

Do organisations ask about it? Or have they started asking about what different groups of minorities in this specific case, disability, disabled populations in organisations need, and then trying to facilitate that need? What is your perspective from your line of research so far?

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah, I mean, I think it's a bit similar to other sorts of issues with work and organisations. There are islands of excellence and then there's the rest. There's a very big tail. I don't think it's done very well, and I think there are some leaders and there are some really good examples. But if I think about it over time, and again, that's because I've been doing this for so long, you can say, "Well, yeah, but I was hearing about that 10 years ago. It doesn't really seem like there's a lot new that's going on." And I think disability is one of the areas where we actually haven't made a lot of material progress.

Medo Pournader:

So I was asking how we can make the voice of disability groups being heard and actioned on. In our faculty I remember one of our colleagues actually made a video of accessibility of different areas within the faculty and how hard it is. Sometimes, for example, if you are on a wheelchair to open a classroom using your security key and then opening that really heavy door, get in with a wheelchair, and because the moment that she tapped on her card, it opened and then-

Susan Ainsworth:

She didn't have time.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah. Didn't have time to get to the handle.

Susan Ainsworth:

Get to the door.

Medo Pournader:

Again, it locked, which was pretty frustrating. And that was one instance of it. And I remember when the video was aired, everyone was super emotional about how hard it is. If you live that experience, it is absolutely tough to get by.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah, it is.

Medo Pournader:

And it's a reminder every day-

Susan Ainsworth:

Yes, it is.

Medo Pournader:

... that you are disabled.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yes, yes, it is. And, yes. And people say, "Well, can't you just tell your manager that you've got these restrictions or you need X and Y?" And you can do that. Of course you can do that. But I think it's different to understand the daily negotiation that has to go on with the environment, and also with people around you that have different expectations that expect that you'll be able to turn up here at a certain time, or you'll be able to, for example, get across campus, the other side of campus for a meeting, that it's going to take you 30 minutes to walk what should be a five-minute walk, and that sort of thing. And I think that constantly having to ask for things to remind people, it is exhausting and I can see why people just give up or just try to stay low and not attract attention.

Medo Pournader:

With the new diversity and inclusion strategic plan that we have at the university level, do you think the disability issues have been addressed sufficiently in it or at all?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, I know there's a disability action plan. I think one of the disappointments for me has been that there hasn't been enough attention given to disability in the university, disability of staff. So there's been a lot of attention to, or maybe not a lot, but much more attention to disability and equity for students. But for staff, it's quite a different thing. So even something so simple as you know, you've acquired a disability and you might need adjustments. Who do you tell? Is there someone to declare this to so it goes down in some record so that you don't then have to raise it in every conversation with every person, every time you talk to, if somebody asks you to do it?

Susan Ainsworth:

Because there are systems like that. Companies have a disability passport. It goes on your record, and then every time there's something comes up, it comes up with your information. But we don't seem to have done anything like that. So, again, it's putting people in the position where they have to constantly ask for things, negotiate things, explain things to people who are not their supervisor, but maybe they just work with or, whatever else, negotiate expectations. And I don't think it's necessary. I think there is a better way of doing that.

Medo Pournader:

What is a better way for our university and for organisations out there? What do you think?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, I think having a clear system for if you have a particular condition, this is the system. This is the process that you go through. This is the people you can talk to about it. This is the possibilities for what can be done for you. This is the people you can contact if things aren't working for you, that sort of thing. Again, it's not rocket science, but we haven't had that to date, and I can say that from my own personal experience.

Medo Pournader:

That is mind-blowing. And I thought we might... For example, if you have got a certain disability, that makes movement really hard for you. And then, as you mentioned, for example, you have a meeting at the centre of a campus at the Chancellery, for example, building, that you have to get to. It's an in-person meeting. There is no one you can call and tell them, "Can you please come and help me," or nothing.

Susan Ainsworth:

Not to my knowledge. And I mean, I'm not wanting to single our university out because I worked for another university and I was on crutches and had an injury and I'd arranged for the campus drivers to take me to tutorials because it was a very, very big campus. And I couldn't get from tutorial to tutorial because they were on the other side of campus from each other. They're back-to-back the hour, and it would take me 25 minutes. And they didn't show up to pick me up from the building.

Susan Ainsworth:

And I rang and they said, "Well, we're not here to do that for you." So I ended up being late to the tutorial every week because I was on crutches. And I've been on crutches probably about four or five times now in my life, but, yeah. I mean, and it's not just physical disability. There's a whole raft of invisible disabilities people have that have their own sort of challenges and people not believing that you actually have some sort of restriction because they can't see it.

Medo Pournader:

That is a really good point. Specifically the, not disability, but mental health issues that are sometimes permanent or temporarily, either way, that really slows you down in some aspects. As far as I know, we have one day per year, which is called, R U OK? And then everything becomes yellow and black and everyone asks, "Oh, are you okay?" Yeah but pretty much 364 other days in a year, we do not ask each other, "Are you okay?"

Medo Pournader:

Or as you mentioned, there aren't any mechanisms or systems that... Yeah, we have got psychologists or consulting services, and yes, we are talking about university because we work at a university, we're familiar with the systems. I mean, it can be probably extrapolated to other systems and organisations, but we don't have that, right? So if I've got any kind of mental disability or any kind of mental health issues, there's literally nothing.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah. And if you say, "Are you okay?" and someone says no, what do you do? Right? I tried that one year.

Medo Pournader:

What happened? Were you the respondent, or-

Susan Ainsworth:

They just didn't. Yeah, no, I said, "No, I'm not. Of course I'm not." I mean, it was during COVID and everything else, but, yeah. Look, actually mental health and mental illness is one of the things that I focus on in my teaching when I'm trying to illustrate disability because I think that students can certainly relate to that because they might think, "Well, people with physical disabilities, that's that. Those group over there, I'm not. I'm never going to be part of that."

Susan Ainsworth:

But I think it is actually something that most people can relate to because they'll know someone or they might experience themselves, and we need to take that seriously. There's a lot of professions, I think, that have higher rates of mental health issues and mental illness than others. Lawyers, for example, where we're recording this in the Melbourne Law School.

Medo Pournader:

Oops.

Susan Ainsworth:

Oops. I think the thing is, is for that group, like the profession or the university, to reflect on, what is it about our systems of work, our ways of working, our culture, our expectations of what employees should be able to do that creates the conditions in which people are becoming unwell? So, okay, people might come to an organisation with a preexisting condition, righty-o, but those conditions or people who didn't start off with a condition might actually develop one over time. And we need to think about, "Okay, how did the organisation and work actually contribute to that?"

Susan Ainsworth:

I mean, we get into, okay, health and safety and wellbeing, but it all sort of interconnects. And I'm actually quite passionate about that because behind all of this is a real desire to make work just more humane, and to think, critically, about our own workplaces and the ways that we work and questioning some of those assumptions. For example, in academia, I'm calling it a culture of overwork. That's the label I'm putting on it, because you have to name it in order for it to be recognised.

Medo Pournader:

Tell me.

Susan Ainsworth:

Okay. Yeah. So it's culture of overwork. It's celebrated, it's valorized, it's romanticised. You have to dedicate your entire life to this because it's your vocation, and I don't want to fight people on that. But at the same time, are the performance standards reasonable? If the majority of people have to work so many hours and dedicate their entire life to actually coming close to achieving them, maybe it's time to revisit the performance standards. Maybe it's time to think about, is this actually reasonable or not? And how are we perhaps contributing to some of the problems that we're seeing that aren't going to be fixed with sort of little wellbeing measures that the organisation might do?

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, academia, from personal experience... Because the wider you cast your net, the more fish you get, right? Especially for more junior academics, like a senior lecturer that is me and you want to get a promotion to associate professor. And then the criteria, at least for a research-intensive university like our university, is to be a thought leader in your field of work. That means interpreted into publishing in journals that have got 99% rejection rate. And that means, in addition to teaching, service and leadership, and all other projects and impact and engagement projects that might come up every now and then, you have to work all the time.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah, because you don't know what's going to pay off and what isn't. So you just do everything, because you're trying to cover all bases and you're being told you need to do some engagement as well as leadership. So you end up spreading yourself across all sorts of things, too anxious to say no. And in a system where, I would say, a lot of people feel like nothing they do is ever good enough. They don't get a lot of positive feedback. They have to deal with a lot of rejection. The payoffs are very long-term, if at all. The hours of work are very long. And if you just took out the university bit and you described that to someone and said, "Would you like this job? Would you aspire to do this?" Who's going to sign up for it? Think about it like that.

Medo Pournader:

That is so true. And speaking of mental health and rejections that you get in academia, you get rejected for most of your papers. You get rejected for grant applications. You sometimes might get, unless you're a super teacher, really harsh critiques from your students. So literally everyone is sending you a signal that, "I'm so sorry, that you suck."

Susan Ainsworth:

You suck. You suck. Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

And it's really hard to not take that personally.

Susan Ainsworth:

Absolutely. And I think part of the socialisation and the growing of being an academic is developing a thicker skin, but some of us are never going to have a very thick skin. We might have slightly thicker than when we started off with. And I think it pays to remember that when you're dealing with more junior people or students or PhD students, whatever, that they possibly haven't developed that thick skin. That that's something that is going to come over time and you know, you're going to feel it. You feel that rejection. It stings, right?

Susan Ainsworth:

And we have to be very bloody-minded to keep going under these conditions. And, I mean, I don't want to make out like academia doesn't have any benefits or any rewards. It's a privilege to be able to research the things that you're interested in. But, yeah, I think it behoves us to be critical, critically reflexive about our own workplaces and organisations and try to improve them, as well, particularly if we're teaching that to our students and actually working on it as part of our research.

Medo Pournader:

Absolutely. So these days you are working on disability groups, and then you work on mental health, so different types of disabilities, either physical or mental, or mental health issues and how that would interpret in the workplace situation. Is there any other topic that you work on, on diversity and inclusion that you would like to share with us?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, I have a long-standing interest in age because, going back to when I was young, so I do touch on that from time to time, come back to it, because I do find it fascinating of all the social identities or categories around. The thing with age is, it has a fluidity and a contingency that is built into it. So, it's unlikely that most people are going to, over a period of time, they're unlikely to change. It's not impossible, but it's unlikely they're going to change racial groups, or they might acquire a disability, but it's probably far less often. But there's a normative fluidity to age, which means you will be younger, then you will be middle-aged, then you'll be older or whatever category, whatever name we're going to come up to make it more palatable to be older.

Medo Pournader:

Seniors.

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, whatever. Yeah. And I think that's unique about age, and I think the points at which we draw the boundaries to those categories are highly arbitrary. So, people consider older workers to be those aged 45 and above. Sometimes it's 54 and above.

Medo Pournader:

Jesus.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

45 to me is so young.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah, well, that's the thing. There is no objective thing underlying this. It's a cultural construction, but for certain... Talking about intersection between different diversity groups, if I go back to gender and age, women are considered older at younger ages than men. There was a paper sometime ago called Never the Right Age, because it's like women went from being patted on the head because they were seen as young and wouldn't know what they were talking about, to sort of having maybe a glory year where they were the right age, and then flipping into being considered too old.

Susan Ainsworth:

In different professions, people are considered too old at different points in time at different ages. So, for me, age is interesting in that perspective. And it also seems like it's one of the last acceptable isms, the last acceptable prejudices that a lot of people hold or are able to declare in a way they probably wouldn't with race and gender and other things.

Medo Pournader:

So, ageism is a real thing in organisation setting and-.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

Do you have a personal experience, or from research, do you have any insights into, as we age as women, do we get treated differently or do we get discriminated against differently? And if so, how does that work or how does it show itself?

Susan Ainsworth:

Okay, so in the case of older women, if you like, I think there are various stereotypes that come into play. I mean, everybody talks about the greater invisibility of older women, so we just sort of tune out when older women are talking about things, and discount what they say or don't consider them for leadership positions because we think that they're too old, or we assume that they're more interested in

family than they are in career. It could be a whole range of things. I mean, I'm interested in ageism against younger people, too.

Susan Ainsworth:

And I think that is fascinating and the way that that has evolved over time and an entire industry has sprung up around managing multiple generations at work, and particularly managing younger people because somehow they're a big problem. And I just, oh, don't get me started. I just want to tear that limb from limb. And talking to students about what's their experience of ageism, of people writing them off because they can consider them too young, about the derogatory labels that circulate in different countries about being young. Yeah. So, I don't know. I think age is a diversity category that just keeps giving, but maybe I'm biased.

Medo Pournader:

I didn't know in older ages you experience similar biases against you than you do in younger ages. In some of the meetings that I've been with older male colleagues of mine, what I have personally experienced was that when I express an idea, it has been taken, sometimes, not always, less seriously, less intellectually valuable compared to my male colleagues who are also a bit older. So gender and age. And it's fascinating that probably men are considered to have more wisdom when they're ageing and their ideas and opinions matter more due to 'more experience' compared to females of similar age or females of a younger age.

Medo Pournader:

Not to add that being also from an international background or look differently. And one might say that, "Yeah, no, I'm trying to be really fair," but it's kind of unconscious bias that we have. I think there was a study showing that students tend to evaluate male professors, especially middle-aged male professors, who're like more professor-ish, which is a typical stereotype of having a beard and glasses, better and higher compared to all other demographics.

Susan Ainsworth:

Because they conform to the stereotype of what an academic is supposed to be. So men seem to gain some gravitas depending on the occupation they're in. So if they were in advertising, that would be judged very differently. But in academia, it seems to go that being an older man is, I would say, an advantage in terms of being credible, being taken seriously, both by colleagues and being looked on favourably by students. And not quite sure what to do with that. But that's been my observation.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah. Sometimes I feel like talking about it will raise some awareness for people to have that in the back of their mind as much as they can, but when we are in a meeting, completely irrelevant topic, you cannot say anything because it doesn't go well with the context, right? Like, guys, take me seriously. I have got an opinion and I've got a brain to think, so but, yeah.

Susan Ainsworth:

Well then what happens is, your reaction to it becomes the problem, right?

Medo Pournader:

Yes. She's too emotional or she's too... Yeah.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah. And I've heard it's called a tonne of feathers. So, that's how you drown or that's how you sink under the weight of a tonne of feathers. It's no one thing that does you in. It's the repetition of very small, seemingly minor incidents that if you called anyone out, you'd be seen as overreacting. But if that's your life and that's what you experience over time, then it has a weight to it.

Medo Pournader:

And the interesting manifestation of that in societies that they call women who express themselves, Karens, if you have heard of that name?

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah.

Medo Pournader:

They call her, "She's a Karen." But do we have a male equivalent of that?

Susan Ainsworth:

No.

Medo Pournader:

No. Anyway, interesting times. How does the future look, Susan?

Susan Ainsworth:

Oh, how does the future look? Well, I'd like to see us radically rethink what makes up a job and how we can do it, and think about the redistribution of work. That's a very long-term sort of project and probably fairly idealistic, but I think so many of the things that we've been doing for so long aren't working that maybe it's time to actually start to rethink those basic things about, what do we think of as a job? Can we decouple things and put them back together in different ways? Can we redistribute work between people in a way that makes it both more flexible, more sustainable for the people involved? Yeah, it depends what direction you really want to go in there.

Susan Ainsworth:

If we think about ageing, people staying in the workforce for longer for all sorts of reasons, both particularly financial, so we've been talking about that for 30 years, 40 years. And ageism against older workers is still entrenched, particularly if they find themselves out of the workforce, they have a very hard time getting back in. And that doesn't seem to have changed at all. So I sort of come back to my original point, is that left to their own devices, social systems reproduce themselves. So there needs to be some sort of concerted intervention for things to change.

Medo Pournader:

And what would that intervention look like?

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, it depends which group we're talking about.

Medo Pournader:

For ageism, for example, for older groups in the workforce.

Susan Ainsworth:

Well, I think it depends on... See, I mean, it's hard to compel people, and we are in a society where we don't like to overly regulate organisations, and regulation and legislation is probably the last point. It's probably the least effective. So making things, age discrimination and stuff like that, it's notoriously hard to prove some of these things and it requires the individual to actually come forward and make a complaint. So it puts the onus on the individual again to do a lot of the work. Yeah, I don't have any easy answers.

Medo Pournader:

So we are about to... I think we actually went over time as well. I think the discussion has been really interesting. Any final remarks for the podcast? And we would love to have you again, by the way.

Susan Ainsworth:

I think I've been a bit too honest.

Medo Pournader:

I love that. That's the whole point of the podcast.

Susan Ainsworth:

Yeah, I know, but... Well, I didn't know whether it was or it wasn't. But, look, I think I joke sometimes that I'm an accidental academic and now I'm an accidental professor, and people meet me and they go, "You're a professor? You're an academic? You don't seem like one." And I think, "Listen, no one is more surprised than me. No one is more surprised to me that I have ended up here. You asked me how I did it? I don't know. I actually don't know." I think it would help a lot of us to actually acknowledge the role of timing and luck in our, perhaps, our career success, because that certainly was the case for me. I know there was hard work involved too, but...

Medo Pournader:

Cool. Thank you so much, Susan.

Susan Ainsworth:

Thank you.

Medo Pournader:

Well.

Susan Ainsworth:

Thanks.

Medo Pournader:

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