

Transcript - In Conversation with Hashi Mohamed - Exploring inequality, social mobility and workplace diversity

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Host 00:07

Welcome to Future Talent Learning's In Conversation podcast series, where we talk to business leaders and thinkers to uncover their perspectives about the changing world of work. This episode is hosted by Future Talent Learning's Tom Ritchie.

Tom 00:22

Today I'm joined by barrister and broadcaster Hashi Mohamed. Hashi came to the UK from Kenya at the age of nine with his brothers and sisters after his father died. Growing up in some of the most deprived areas of the UK, Hashi would go on to qualify as a planning barrister in 2010.

Tom 00:37

He has presented a number of radio documentaries for the BBC, including Adventures in Social Mobility, in which he describes his life and career and examines the possibilities of children living in deprived areas.

Tom 00:49

In this podcast, Hashi talks about his journey from Kenya to the UK and beyond, why any debate around social mobility must consider inequality and how business leaders can address diversity in their workforce.

Tom 01:02

Hi Hashi, thanks for agreeing to speak with us today. I thought we could start by just you kind of introducing us to your life story when you came to the UK and how it came to be that you were qualified as a barrister.

Hashi 01:15

I came to the UK when I was nine years old as a young unaccompanied child refugee without my parents. I came here not understanding much about the culture, much about the country, what I was doing here, trying to make sense of the world.

Hashi 01:31

And my father had just died recently in a car crash in Kenya right before we came. And we found ourselves trying to make sense of a world in very difficult circumstances and 24, 25 years later, I found myself sitting where I am now as a barrister, qualified, having gone through part of the education system in very, very poor performing schools, but some of it also in very good top universities like Oxford and the bar course at City University.

Hashi 02:06

And I've been qualified since 2012 when I became a fully fledged planning barrister, which is what I practise in predominantly now and also a little bit in commercial litigation.

Tom 02:24

And in 2017, you worked on a radio documentary called Adventures in Social Mobility. I guess before we move on, I'd just like to ask you what that term actually means to you.

Hashi 02:37

The term social mobility means different things to different people. And if we, for example, start with the academic definition in terms of sociological terms, it's broken down in what's called relative social mobility and absolute social mobility.

Hashi 02:56

In relative social mobility is the idea in relative terms, you are now doing better than your parents. So if, for example, you were born to a mother who was a dinner lady and a father who was postman, and you then became a professional in one of the top professions, let's say an accountant or a lawyer or a doctor, in relative terms, you have become what we would term to be socially mobile.

Hashi 03:23

But there are other ways of measuring it as well, whether that be in comparison to your wealth, in comparison to whether or not you're earning a certain amount of money, or even indeed whether you own your own property, for example, is another

measure by which social mobility and in particular relative social mobility is measured.

Hashi 03:41

But then when we look at absolute mobility, it's the question about looking at the issue of social mobility in absolute terms and beyond the individual, but society as a whole. So in other words, how have we made progress as a society to ensure that we've created more space at the top, in some ways, in the, you've literally created more professional opportunities and posts at the top so that people can fill into that.

Hashi 04:14

And in absolute terms, we haven't really made that much progress simply because it's only after that post-war period when a lot of people had perished in the war and the country was rebuilding from scratch, did we genuinely actually make much more space in professional terms for people to fill in.

Hashi 04:39

And in absolute terms, we made a huge amount of progress right after the post-World War, but we've not really hit the mark in that sense since. What does it mean to me is a little bit different beyond those two academic qualifications.

Hashi 04:55

What it means to me is actually at its heart, it's this idea in the way in which people look at it is to say, well, actually, if you work hard and you do the right thing, you're gonna succeed. When in reality, that's just nonsense because so much of your starting point and your own destiny is determined by the people to whom you are born.

Hashi 05:21

The circumstances in which you grow up in, the kind of schools you go into, and quite frankly, something that we don't talk about enough, how much luck you had. And so in those terms, social mobility actually is a really a crass term to me anyway, my view, that seeks to sort of simplify what is a series of things that are happening at the same time, a series of variables that come together that kind of decide whether or not you're going to be socially mobile.

Hashi 05:56

And then the other thing that often people don't talk about, which I think is also a key interest to me, is social mobility, it's almost like nobody can disagree with that, right? How can you disagree with the simple idea that if you work hard and you do the right thing and you study and you ensure that you are pushing yourself as much as you can, you can be whatever you want to be.

Hashi 06:20

Nobody can disagree with that basic idea. But let's be honest, for that idea to be true in the terms that I've just explained in the sense that in absolute terms, we haven't made much progress, for this idea to be true, there's something else that we need to confront and we never talk about.

Hashi 06:40

And that's the idea of downward mobility. So in other words, if people want to go up and the positions at the top are so limited,

Tom 06:52

Somebody's got to go down.

Hashi 06:53

Somebody's got to go down. And so for me, that's the other concept about social mobility that a lot of people don't want to address. And so what then happens is that middle-class parents in particular, or relatively wealthy parents, or parents who just have the resources, the energy, the tenacity and the focus will create what we now know to be what's called a glass floor.

Hashi 07:20

So in other words, my kid was born middle-class. He may not be the sharpest tool in the box. He may not get into Oxbridge, but I've given him the best education possible. But guess what? I'm going to make sure that he does not go below a certain level in his lifetime.

Hashi 07:38

And we see that all the time. We see that parents doing that. Whether it's through the education they provide for them, whether it's through the introductions that they make, they want to make sure that they basically hog up opportunity at the top.

Hashi 07:52

And that's another matter that most politicians don't want to talk about. So my view is simple, really. If we're serious about having a proper conversation about social mobility, then we need to have a fuller conversation.

Hashi 08:04

And that fuller conversation involves having a discussion that a dull, not so bright kid who's born into very, very particular circumstances, very privileged particular circumstances, frankly still has a better chance than a very clever kid growing up in very poor circumstances.

Tom 08:23

And that's in addressing imbalances in education or inequality in catchment areas that's the first kind of step isn't it?

Hashi 08:31

Absolutely. Early learning, schools, mentoring, confidence, opportunity, employment.

Tom 08:42

There was something that you mentioned in the documentary *Adventures in Social Mobility* that I wanted to touch on. They said you didn't have a particularly strong work ethic when you were younger. Now people would look at you now and say that's not possible to get where you've got to.

Tom 08:57

So when did that all click into place for you?

Hashi 09:00

It's a good question. I mean, in one way, I had a particular work ethic, not a particularly strong one that would have got me to where I am now. But I had a particular work ethic and that was particularly focused on wanting to be a footballer.

Hashi 09:15

Exactly. And I was obsessed with becoming a footballer. I dreamt about becoming a footballer. I wanted to become a footballer. I was ready to die to become a footballer. Turns out that I didn't have the talents for it to match the ambition.

Hashi 09:27

But I was OK. And so I had a different type of work ethic in that sense for the first 10 years that I was in this country focused on attempting to become a semi professional. And I did get far, to be fair, but not far enough.

Hashi 09:41

Where that changed was it 10 years after having come to the United Kingdom, I became a British national and I went back to Kenya and I went back to Kenya where I was born and where I had lived for the first nine years of my life, where my father was buried.

Hashi 09:57

And I thought to myself, one of the things that, one of the issues that people who are recent immigrants who come to this country face, in addition to a whole host of other issues, is this idea that you tell your children that they're going to go back. That you shouldn't really fully settle here, that, you know, this is not a country for you, they're not going to fully accept you, blah, blah, blah.

Hashi 10:21

And so what then that tends to happen is then a lot of kids neither fully embrace, engage and commit to the now. And they're being told about a world back home that actually they don't know anything about.

Hashi 10:37

If we're honest, I didn't know much about that world because I left so young. And then they get stuck in this no man land in the middle where you are neither here fully nor there at all. And that's where you fall short when it comes to a level of work ethic.

Hashi 10:56

And the reason why I focused more on football and was obsessed with it was simply because it's the only thing that you often think is quite meritocratic, right? Because if you're good, you're going to make it.

Hashi 11:05

If you're not, you won't. Everything else doesn't seem like that because everything else seems that meritocracy is only part of the picture, not the whole picture. And so when I went back to Kenya for the first time in 10 years, it really dawned on me two things, really one that I was never going to go back.

Hashi 11:22

Like I didn't understand why my family was so obsessed about going back. And so for me, in that sense, it was a case of actually, no, thank you. And then secondly, I thought, gosh, I have effectively wasted 10 years playing football.

Hashi 11:38

Of course, it wasn't wasted because it kept me off the streets and it kept me healthy. And it meant that I was very lucky with my health and I'm able to work all sorts of hours now without getting sick or hospitalised or whatever it is.

Hashi 11:48

And I'm convinced there's a direct link between how much I'm able to push myself physically now and the 10 years that I put in. Basically, not drinking, not smoking, but sleeping and playing football day and night, I don't I'm sure that there is a direct link between the two.

Hashi 12:05

And so for me, that trip back to Kenya in 2003, 10 years after arriving in the UK was a real eye opener, and it meant that when I came back, I was just literally focused on nothing else but becoming a barrister, becoming a professional, doing what I'm doing now.

Tom 12:21

And I just wanted to touch on something else that you mentioned in in the documentary quite a lot was that you mentioned your ability to adapt. So we speak to a lot of people who say that you should never wear a mask to work and you should bring your whole self.

Tom 12:38

Is this need for people who come from a background similar to yours to adapt? Are those two contradictory ideas?

Hashi 12:47

Good question. I mean, what do we mean by the idea of adapting yourself? If you are somebody who I would consider to be in the majority, namely that you do not stand out because of your name, that you might be called John Smith.

Hashi 13:02

Namely that you do not stand out because you're of your color of your skin, i.e. you're not black. Namely that you're not a woman or a woman who's black and a woman who's Muslim or a woman, God forbid, that you're visibly a minority by wearing a headscarf.

Hashi 13:18

The reality is that by literally not doing a single thing, you stand out. You stand out because you're just different by virtue of being. When I talked about the question of adapting in the documentary, it was in particular in relation to this idea that if you've grown up in a particular set of circumstances where you might use the English language in a different way by, for example, speaking in slang, the idea that that way of speaking is appropriate for every set of circumstances.

Hashi 13:50

It's just not possible. And a lot of the kids that I deal with and I'm helping all the time, it's very difficult to explain to them that by virtue of either being working class or from a deprived background or speaking a certain way, people are going to make judgments about you, and therefore you need to adapt the way you speak to fit the set of circumstances.

Hashi 14:11

It's always very interesting to me because the people who always advise be yourself, don't put on a mask, are almost certainly the John Smiths and the, you know, Amanda Watson's who do not understand at all what it feels like to be an

outsider, who simply do not understand what it's like to be somebody who isn't a minority.

Hashi 14:40

And also when we ask ourselves, what does this mean not to sort of be yourself? The idea that somehow, because you're adapting to your set of circumstances, that you're not being your true self is also poisonous.

Hashi 14:52

When you think about you, you don't talk to your partner the same way you talk to your mother. No, you don't talk to your boss the same way you are going to talk to me. You're not going to talk to a child the same way you're going to talk to your grandmother.

Hashi 15:06

So are you telling me that when you're talking to a child, the way you talk is different and the way you talk to your grandmother is different and somehow you're not the same person? Well, of course not.

Hashi 15:15

It's nonsensical. So why is it therefore that telling somebody if you're hanging out with your mates and you're using slang English, that's not going to be appropriate for a boardroom environment in the law firm like where we are now, that somehow that involves compromising who you are.

Hashi 15:34

That's poisonous. And that's what people use to keep certain environments sterile and most people out because certain environments work for what we often refer to as the dominant culture. And that dominant culture is almost certainly, as the case may be, white middle class, privately educated, Oxbridge types.

Hashi 15:59

And anybody else who's outside of that has to either desperately try hard to fit in or will stand out by virtue of being there. And so when I talked about adapting yourself, learning about your environment, being a chameleon, quite frankly, is what the words I used in the documentary.

Hashi 16:18

The fact that that somehow means it means to a lot of people that you're not being yourself is probably one of the most insidious ideas that is keeping us from making any real progress.

Tom 16:32

So in your experiences of making radio documentaries is there a story or an interview that's particularly stuck with you and has it has any of the work that you've done changed the perspective on your life and your career?

Hashi 16:46

There was a lot of the people I met in the documentary have really taught me a great deal, but probably what stuck with me most is the kids. It's always the kids because I find that talking to kids really re-energizes me in ways that I never really fully comprehend to begin with, simply because they are so full of hope.

Hashi 17:06

They're so full of hope, they're full of ambition, they're full of drive, they're full of this amazing idea, which is at that stage in their lives still quite cute to see, this amazing idea that they're entering an equal and neutral world, which is not true.

Hashi 17:27

They're not entering a neutral world, they're not entering an equal world, they're entering a society that is profoundly unequal and they need to adjust themselves to try and understand that and ready themselves and prepare themselves for what that looks like.

Hashi 17:43

And so I really enjoy meeting them and part of that documentary was also just interviewing them and hearing them say, okay, I hear you and I relate to you and thank you for saying what you're saying and that means a lot to me and that always impacts me every time I do it.

Tom 17:59

I mean, you've touched on this throughout the interview thus far, but I just wanted to ask it more explicitly. You know, it would be remiss of us not to actually cover it explicitly, I think, is that on a lot of these questions of social mobility, they're obviously tied up in questions of diversity.

Tom 18:18

So there aren't many journalists that aren't white and middle class. Same for barristers, really, judges, politicians. It's the question not only around social mobility, but also inequality across class and ethnicities.

Tom 18:35

Because I've found sometimes that people use social mobility, and in this instance it would mainly be politicians, they use social mobility kind of as a plaster over addressing what I would consider to be rank inequalities.

Hashi 18:50

Absolutely. I completely agree. And the question of social mobility is synonymous with and is forever tied next to the questions of inequality across the board. And that inequalities, those inequalities rather, involve, for example, lack of housing.

Hashi 19:11

Those inequalities involve lack of proper education system that is properly funded. It involves the lack of teacher retention in most of our state schools. It involves the lack of community centers. It involves the lack of play areas, football pitches, lack of opportunities, lack of employment, lack of hope in some of these communities.

Hashi 19:36

So it is impossible, in my judgment, to realistically and seriously tackle the question of social mobility if you ignore inequalities. Now, inequalities across classes and ethnicities is also important, but you have to also untangle that because things overlay each other in very specific ways.

Hashi 20:04

This is the often referred to idea of intersectionality. If you are white working class, things and problems affect you in a particular way, in a particular environment. But you could also be working class black woman, and already you're facing a number of other layers in addition to both your class, your gender, and your race.

Hashi 20:32

And then, of course, if it gets even deeper than that and you're faced with a situation where your class environment that you grew up in, the schools you went to, the kind of homes you grew up in, the kind of communities that you grew up in, already disadvantaged you.

Hashi 20:48

And then you're going out into this world as a black woman, for example, with a foreign name. You can already see how many layers of deprivation you're facing that is impossible to measure, but actually doesn't necessarily mean is unequal to a white working class boy growing up in Thames Mead.

Hashi 21:11

He has his own challenges too, of course. But oftentimes we're finding situations where people are constantly having arguments about, is this more worthy than the other? Well, no, because if you find a way of dealing with better schooling, better health care, better housing, you're going to actually massively impact the lives of both those groups without necessarily having to choose between one or the other.

Hashi 21:39

And if you try and change society's mindsets and say somebody called John Smith is just as worthy as Peter, whatever, like another name that's foreign to you, then we need to find a way of doing that.

Hashi 21:51

And so the question of social mobility is forever linked with inequality. And we cannot simply try and mask the rank inequalities that exist in our society by simply saying to everybody, look over there, there's the issue of social mobility because that's just not the answer.

Tom 22:08

Yeah, so how can leaders make sure that they are engaging people who are from outside their typical talent pool?

Hashi 22:15

This is a very difficult question. There are multiple layers of issues that they face. On the one hand, there may be the genuine intention of a HR department and a HR manager who's desperately trying to widen the pool of people that they recruit, but they also have to be careful to follow all the processes that are in place because otherwise you're going to be creating that kind of environment that allows the nepotism that we don't necessarily want to exist.

Hashi 22:43

So on the one hand, you're saying, guys, you need to help us and you need to make sure that you're actually increasing the diversity of the workforce, more women, more minorities, etc. But at the same time, by the way, you've got to do it fairly and you can't be seen to be discriminating against other people.

Hashi 23:02

And so on the one hand, we want them to be flexible and we want them to take risks, but at the same time we're saying to them, whoa, whoa, whoa, be careful, don't go too far outside the norm because otherwise how are we going to be sure that you're not just perpetuating the problem that we're trying to resolve.

Hashi 23:20

And then there's the extra layer of issues that most HR communities face, which is I'd hire this guy, but I can't put him or her in front of the clients, which is another thing that I often hear as I was doing research for my book on this, is HR people say, look, Hashi, I don't mind hiring the chap from the public school, not the kid from the, but I don't mind hiring the kid who went to the comprehensive school because he's great.

Hashi 23:45

He's clever. He's got the qualifications, but he just doesn't have the polish. You know, how do I put him in front of the clients? He's not smooth. He's not, you know, how do I deal with that? You know, and you're like, then you need to get better clients.

Hashi 23:59

You need to find more open-minded clients.

Tom 24:02

People who don't care....

Hashi 24:02

People who don't care what you look like as long as you produce the results. If you're telling me the person is not competent, if you're telling me the person is not gonna produce the goods, if you're telling me the person can't do the job properly, then hell no, don't hire that person.

Hashi 24:17

Don't hire that person. Why would I be able to hand on heart force you to hire somebody who is not going to produce the best bottom dollar for you? That's just ridiculous. But if you're genuinely telling me that the person meets your KPIs as they do in their HR language, and then yet you're not going to hire them simply because they don't meet that sort of arbitrary, subjective, crazy metrics then we've got a lot to do.

Hashi 24:51

And we can't put that problem simply at the door of the HR community. It's too easy to do that. It's much harder to get them to challenge their employers, to challenge their clients, to challenge everybody's mindsets.

Hashi 25:07

Because that's another way in which we need to make more progress. More about that in my book.

Tom 25:13

Good plug. So once you, the mindset has kind of changed and then the kid from the local comprehensive school who might not have the polish is actually accepted. You found better clients and everybody's relatively on the same page.

Tom 25:28

How do you then get that person to flourish when they might feel like they are other still within an organisation?

Hashi 25:35

The question that you asked there is actually, so the answer to this question is so profoundly sad that I don't know how best to answer it. If you are somebody from a relatively poor background with all the disadvantages that you might have faced and then you find yourself in a work environment that you're in a top profession for example, all the data and the evidence suggests that apparently within five to six years of being in the profession, your public school educated colleague who has the same qualifications as you will be earning seven to ten percent more than you.

Hashi 26:20

So just think about that you've got two eminently well qualified individuals one went to a state school one went to a private school both end up say for example at Oxford University or Durham both get the same course the same classification in their degree the same profession.

Hashi 26:39

In five to six years the kid from the public school is going to be earning a lot more, and this is recent research by Sam Friedman at the London School of Economics in his book called The Class Ceiling, in which he explains that actually the challenges that we face are simply not even at the early learning stage. But actually they continue to persist all the way to the employment, and nobody quite knows why that is apart from the fact that some people for the reasons you've already highlighted seem much more comfortable in that environment.

Hashi 27:14

Because it is obvious that being able to be in the job being able to do the job is just about half the picture now. It's about being able to walk the talk, talk the talk, being able to mix with people, go to the clubs, rub shoulders, wink wink nudge nudge, look at the tie I'm wearing. Don't you recognize the same tie from the same public school that you went to? How about you see me as a partner in the future?

Hashi 27:41

The chap from the working class background who may have got all the talent doesn't necessarily understand this game, or doesn't want to play this game, and as a result they're facing these difficulties.

Hashi 27:53

Overlaying that is often something that I find fascinating I get invited to to a lot of events now to speak at a conference. So for example I was recently invited to speak at a big conference for a big bank that shall remain nameless, and it's fascinating because I love it, what they do is they always set me up on a panel, and it's always the same you couldn't make it up.

Hashi 28:19

You'll find the white middle-aged guy who's like the fund manager who's right at the top of the food chain, and then you'll find these like the women who've recently been taken on, and the women and the young people who are like the recent recruits are quite diverse you know, a white working class girl, a black girl, a young black guy, you know the LGBTQ guy, like they're all there right?

Hashi 28:42

But the top of the food chain who's like sitting is the white middle class male guy who's like completely out of touch of the real world right? And and so the panel then is literally sitting there and they're looking at these, they're bloody kids let's be honest, they're kids, he will come on stage, he'll introduce them and then get back into the audience. And then the idea is simply to say so what's the answer? And that's another insidious point that I've discovered during this process, because if you are somebody like those young people of all races and of all genders who have worked so hard against the odds to be there, isn't it ironic and in some ways profoundly sad that once you are in you're asked to solve the most intractable problem when in fact you should be just focusing on getting on.

Hashi 29:37

So you've worked so hard to get in and now it's time for you to focus on getting on, and you're then dumped with this massive massive issue that you will never resolve and in some ways it's setting you up for failure, and your counterpart who's the privileged public school educated maybe Oxbridge guy he's upstairs making money working hard because nobody wants to see them on the stage because that's not good PR, but they're concentrating on getting on.

Hashi 30:15

And is it any wonder therefore in seven years, eight years time, they're earning nine, 10% more. So this is the kind of issues that we're dealing with now that in so many ways we've made progress in tackling entry level, but actually now we're faced with a situation where entry level, the question is, is retention good enough?

Hashi 30:40

And if it isn't, why isn't it? And now we know the reason why it isn't because most of these young people who should just be focusing on doing a great job are not only being expected to do a great job, but they're having to face the intractable problem of having to solve one of the most difficult questions of our time.

Hashi 31:00

And again, more about that in the book.

Tom 31:04

So hopefully as the workplace changes and it becomes more diverse, how do you anticipate our working lives changing? Will we need to be more flexible, more receptive to new ideas? And in turn therefore being more willing to learn and appreciate each other's differences I guess.

Hashi 31:21

It is obvious to me that we're going to have to fundamentally shift the way we think, the way we do work, the way we work with each other, the way we focus on ensuring that you know we will be working with people with whom we may not have much of a connection to begin with but actually we have more in common than we realise and that's going to be a big big challenge for a lot of us in the near future and it's definitely going to change the way we think, it's going to change the way we were willing to learn and it's going to change the way we see each other and I think that can only be good for the better.

Tom 32:00

And just to finish on what's been a fascinating conversation, I'd just like to ask your advice as someone that is going to study for their postgraduate law degree that might feel out of place because of their background, what would your one piece of advice be to someone like that?

Hashi 32:15

My one piece of advice is, is you have got to settle the question of who you are as early as possible and as quickly as possible. And by that, I mean, ultimately, if you are somebody who is, who's working hard, who's gone to university, who studied a degree that you've actually wanted to study and you've got good qualifications, I really do not see why you should feel out of place because of your background.

Hashi 32:52

And I say that because I think that if you're somebody who's beaten the odds and you're sitting in the same desk, the same office as somebody who had it all or most of it handed it to them, that should make you stand taller, not shorter.

Hashi 33:09

That should make you more proud, not less. And the reason why you might have an insecurity about it, which is entirely normal and entirely human is because you have genuinely not had an opportunity to have a proper introspection with yourself, to think very carefully about why you are here, who you are, what you're doing and for what purpose you're doing it.

Hashi 33:34

It's got nothing to do with your talents. It's got nothing to do with your abilities. It's got nothing to do with whether you deserve to be there because if you didn't have the talent, you wouldn't have got that degree and you wouldn't have got this job.

Hashi 33:47

The reason why you're feeling out of place is something much, much deeper and that something has to be settled a lot, lot sooner and a lot earlier than when you get into that environment. Because if you haven't, it's going to bubble up and it's going to consume you.

Hashi 34:04

And before you know it, you're going to give up. So have a plan, but also ask yourself deeply before you think about why you're out of place, you need to ask yourself, why are you even there? Before you ask yourself, why am I out of place?

Hashi 34:21

Ask yourself, why are you even there? Because if you ask yourself, why are you even there? The question of whether or not you're out of place just simply doesn't arise.

Tom 34:32

Hashi, thanks so much. That's been a really interesting conversation. Thank you very much.

Host 34:39

You've been listening to Future Talent Learning's In Conversation podcast. Thank you for joining us. If you've enjoyed this episode, please check out the other conversations we're having with leaders and thinkers about the changing world of work.