

## Transcript - In Conversation with Simon Fanshawe OBE - What is the value of a diverse workforce?

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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 writer and broadcaster Simon Fanshawe. Winner of the prestigious Perrier Award in 1989, Simon first came to prominence as a comedian before progressing into broadcasting. He's made programmes for both BBC Radio and Television, and his writing has appeared in The Sunday Times and The Observer.

Tom 00:39

A fervent member of campaigning and advocacy groups, he was a founding member of the LGBT charity Stonewall. Through his consultancy, Diversity by Design, Simon now works with businesses and organisations on answering strategic business questions through diversity.

Tom 00:56

In this podcast, I asked Simon about his approach to his constantly evolving career, why a diverse workforce is key to answering strategic business questions, and the role technology plays in addressing unconscious bias.

Tom 01:09

Well, hi Simon. Thanks so much for speaking with us today. I thought we could start with a brief introduction to you and your career, your journey from being a Perrier award-winning comedian to an author, broadcaster, and now a consultant.

Simon 01:23

Yes, I haven't really ever had a job. That's the thing I should start off saying. I've literally never been employed. I mean, I've had contracts and I've done all that kind of thing, but, and I fell into that by accident.

Simon 01:33

And the days in which I fell into it, it was relatively unusual, but of course it's not now. And he's, you know, one of the main ways in people, in which people work. And I find that when I look back over things, I'm a bit like a clock really.

Simon 01:46

You know, when you can see that a clock has changed, but you don't necessarily see the hour hand going around. I find that every time I look at my life after about six or seven years, I appear to be something different.

Simon 01:56

So I've gone through that phase. I was a community worker. Then I was a standup for 10 years. And then that overlapped with a lot of radio. And then I wrote for the Sunday Times, Culture Section and other newspapers.

Simon 02:07

I did that for about 15 years. And now all that in a way has sort of come together, I suppose. So, and there's a sort of theme that runs through it for me, which is really about advocacy and change, I suppose.

Tom 02:20

And so you touched on it briefly there that it was kind of almost an unconscious thing that you kind of moved through these different stages of your career, but people are going to have to start looking at their career more as a portfolio, more as a constantly evolving thing.

Tom 02:32

So what is your approach to learning new skills or a new role?

Simon 02:40

One of the dangers, I suppose, is that to start with you don't learn consciously and what I think is more helpful is to be more conscious about what you learn. So that's one of the things I've learnt, if you like, over the time.

Simon 02:52

I think that the key thing, though, is that if you grab opportunities, if you create luck and then make something of it, you sort of have to learn new skills by necessity. That requires you to be open to the idea that things are changing and it requires you to embrace the notion of change.

Simon 03:09

And what's interesting, I think, is when you look at what the shape of work looks like into the future, there will be people who do jobs for quite a long time and that will carry on. They'll just do them in a different kind of way, but then there'll be lots of other people who will move every two years or so.

Simon 03:28

And I think where the real question becomes, it's not so much whether individuals can learn, because individuals, in a sense, thrust, as I say, into situations, we then have to pick up new skills and we draw on things that we didn't realise we'd drawn before and we find new skills.

Simon 03:44

But the difficulties for organisations to learn, so they will spend a lot of time saying things like, well, you know, how do we retain people and stop losing all that knowledge out of the business? Well, if the reality is going to be that people are going to, certainly in their 20s and 30s at least, churn every, say, three or four years or whatever, then organisations are going to find a way of constantly capturing the way in which people are learning about the job that's done.

Simon 04:12

So it's the organisation, in a way, that's got to learn more quickly and be more flexible and more adaptable. So it's going to have to adapt to the shape of work and so on and so forth. So a classic will be maternity and paternity leave and working flexibly.

Simon 04:27

You know, organisations are simply going to have to work and use technology and use their intelligence. To construct work in such a way that people are able to give of their best at the same time as either caring for kids or caring for their parents or pursuing other careers or whatever.

Simon 04:45

And I know that a long time ago, actually somebody I know who used to live around the corner actually, works at American Express. And the best team he had was, they were inevitably called the A team, they were the people to whom all the most difficult customers are escalated.

Simon 05:00

And so he ran this call centre, so there was them and then there was the others. And one of the things he built into the process was he allowed, you know, they enabled people to take six, nine months off, go travelling and come back into their job.

Simon 05:11

And the reason they did that was that if they didn't do that, they'd lose them forever because that was the sort of job it was. So that was an intelligent way, I think, of learning for the organisation about how people are working.

Tom 05:22

So, for an organisation it's about reacting to what people are, how people are learning themselves and creating an environment where they can do that in their own way.

Simon 05:32

I think not just reacting, but I think being proactive and thinking how do we get the best out of people? So if you, for instance, if you look at the NHS, I mean, there is a bonkers system there where nurses will go into agency work rather than join the NHS bank, despite the fact that if they stay in the NHS, they get a better pension arrangement, but largely they don't do it because the bank doesn't offer them the flexibility that they need.

Simon 05:59

And yet the NHS is an organisation that runs on shift. Everybody in the NHS does shifts, basically. And yet somehow it

cannot get itself quite to adapt the offer, the level of flexibility that it needs.

Simon 06:12

Now that's mad because it's costing it a fortune and it's not deploying people to the best that they can work. So you know, organisations have got to stop having huge preconceptions. If you want to keep a call centre running 24/7, fine.

Simon 06:26

But you can still do that was shift work and flexibility. You just have to be cunning and clever about it.

Tom 06:32

And I'd just like to touch on your work as a consultant on diversity. So what role, and I think you briefly touched on it there, but what role does diversity play in answering strategic business questions?

Simon 06:44

Well it's a good way to frame the question because for a long time there's been a huge amount of money invested in diversity and time and energy and effort and actually sincerity. People have really meant what they've said but the reality is it hasn't changed much.

Simon 07:02

It's been a bit of change but not very much either in speed or in quantity. So the question has to be asked what's gone wrong in a sense or what are we not doing that we should and could be doing. So that's where we started when we put the business together was from that question.

Simon 07:18

What are we not doing? What could we do better? What could we do crucially differently? What needs to change in order to do this and achieve better results? So the first thing I think is that diversity has to stop being a thing on its own.

Simon 07:30

I once got very bored at a conference and I tweeted diversity is not a thing you do, it's a way you do things. It's not a separate thing, it's an approach to talent to achieve certain goals. So the first thing where it contributes is it asks the question of organisation, what combination of difference do you need to achieve the goals you've set yourself?

Simon 07:53

So organisation X, is it moving into new markets? Is it changing the format and the way in which it works? Is it trying to shift for instance, I mean 78 or whatever it is percent of purchasing decisions are made by women of all size, from cars and houses right the way through to thimbles and pins.

Simon 08:12

If you're trying an organisation that recognises that and he's trying to reorient yourself around female decision making in retail, does that require a different combination of people in it, etc, etc, etc.

Simon 08:23

So specifically finding out what combination of talent you need in your organisation, that's got to be the starting point, because that's all diversity is. It's unlocking the blocks to certain groups of people.

Simon 08:35

And we do have certain groups of people, anybody listening, just turn to the person if you're near anybody and look them in the eye and say, this is as far as you're going in your career, try it, because that's what organisations are doing to people whole sways of people are being told, that's it actually, you stop here.

Simon 08:56

So we've got to unlock that. But once we've unlocked it, then what's the dividend and that's about combining difference.

Tom 09:01

Mmm, that's not a good way of improving office morale though, is it?

Simon 09:06

Well it's not, but... But I know, and it's very funny when I do it in sort of conferences and things and groups, the reaction is always the same. People do one of two things. They always laugh because it's so embarrassing.

Simon 09:16

And the other thing, I did it yesterday and something, and something went, no, I'm not saying that to anybody. Exactly. And I don't want them to do it. I just want them to feel how terrible it is because literally, I mean, again, the marvellous NHS, people are being fantastic on the ward level, they're using their ethnicity and their sex orientation, and the fact that they're female or male, all that, they're using it brilliantly to help patients improve their health and get better care.

Simon 09:46

As you go up the organisation, it just gets more and more white and more and more male. There is absolutely a ceiling round about grade five, six, seven for large numbers of black and Asian people.

Simon 09:58

It just is, and women. And so that's terrible. It's a waste of talent.

Tom 10:02

So I'd like to touch on that, the report that you worked on for the NHS, because a lot of the conversation around the NHS at the moment is framed around the benefits of the different people who were within it, you know, you hear a lot about, we're going to lose vast amounts of nursing and doctors.

Tom 10:20

So what is, what were your findings in that NHS report? Where is the ceiling? You mentioned the grade six or seven, could you explain that for our audience?

Simon 10:30

So what you, as I say, what you find in the NHS is that people understand really well and put this into operation really well, that the research, all the research and practice that tells you that if you can represent the population that you're providing a health service to in the providers of the service, you get better penetration of the service to the patients and the patients of the service.

Simon 10:57

So we know that and that works. So for instance, if you put gay men in a sexual health clinic and you tell other gay men, more of us go, we have more honest conversations, more testing happens, better health outcomes.

Simon 11:09

So we know that that's true and people are doing that brilliantly and that's, you know, they're using languages and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So all that's working really well. What's not happening is as people rise up, the ceiling comes at senior management.

Simon 11:23

So the service is not being run and designed and hospitals and trusts are not being run by a diverse group of people. Now, they're very brilliant, many of these people, but the question in the report says, okay, there are two ways of thinking about diversity, both of which are important.

Simon 11:40

One of the deficits, which are the ceilings, the blocks to people's career, what's happening to them? And the second is once you unlock those, how do you get this dividend? So the question of the report says, look, we get what's happening at the ward level, at the coal phase, but let's now concentrate on what dividends would the NHS get by having a much more diverse management and board?

Simon 12:01

What would happen if it did that? And how would that improve patient health, staff wellbeing and innovation in design and delivery of service? So that's the challenge. And of course, if you think about the way in which you design services, they're delivered, as I say, at ward level or clinic level by people.

Simon 12:21

But actually, if you think of the design of services, it needs the input, the real different insights at a senior level when you're designing, when you're allocating resources and so on and so forth, because you then get a different set of insights into the challenges which the service is designed to meet.

Simon 12:38

So it's challenging people really to do that. And that six or seven is the sort of the senior manager level. That's where the blockage appears.

Tom 12:47

And I just, as you were speaking there, all I could think of was we know that there are benefits to you having a diverse workforce that is something that has been largely proven, but you're more likely to find a CFO or a CEO or a COO called John or David than you are a woman or someone from the Bain community.

Tom 13:07

So what needs to be done in the C-suite to address the lack of diversity at the very top?

Simon 13:14

Well, I count them every quarter. I count the people in the top 300 jobs of the FTSE 100, which is the chair, the chief exec, and the chief finance officer. And it's still true the last time I counted that there are more men called John David and Andrew than there are women and black and Asian people.

Simon 13:33

So there's clearly a block there. And the thing about it is that it's not that there's anything wrong with those people. I'm sure they're all individually very brilliant. What's peculiar is that statistically, just a bit odd, that all that one group end up in charge.

Simon 13:46

So what's happening? Clearly, we are not enabling the talent. I mean, you either say, well, women and black and Asian people just not good enough. This can't do it, you know, which I sort of think is unlikely.

Simon 13:58

So what you then have to say is, well, what blocks are we putting in their way to stop them flowering? So what needs to be done is we need to understand in quite specific ways it will differ from industry to industry sector, to sector company to company.

Simon 14:14

The particularity of it is very important because if you really have to understand the problem, if you're really gonna create a solution for it. So specifically what's happening in particular organisations.

Simon 14:26

So for instance, one law firm that we came across, they had more partners called David than they did women. So 14% of their partners were David and 11% of their partners were women. What was happening?

Simon 14:40

So we first of all asked them, what makes a great partner? And we said, nominate three partners who are great. So all the men nominated themselves. Despite the fact that 11% of the partners are women, only 3% of those nominated is great, but women.

Simon 14:56

So number one, there's a conception of leadership here. Second question, which is interesting, that we looked at the people before partnership. And the question was 50, 50 men and women actually aspiring to be partners, but it turned out that the men were more ambitious than the women.

Simon 15:12

Well, again, there's only two possibilities there. Either women are less ambitious than men or something, where would the ambitious women gone? Sure enough, when you went down, you realised ambitious women were leaving.

Simon 15:22

So the specific question there was not just a kind of bias or a preference at the top, it was a retention strategy and keeping those women and saying, actually, I know you're looking at the top of the moment and thinking I'm not called David, so I'm going, but actually we're going to make sure that you have the opportunities.

Simon 15:38

So the specifics are very, very important. So your question is what needs to be done? Well, number one, we need to frame what we need in those jobs in terms of a combination of people, not just in single people.

Simon 15:49

What you need in an exec team is a combination of people who bring a different set of insights and abilities and technical abilities to the piece. Number one, so always recruit relatively, not just individually.

Simon 16:03

Secondly, be prepared to find a way of recruiting. We've got one which enables you to look at the evidence people are actually bringing to what you need rather than what you're using as your own proxies for your own preferences.

Simon 16:16

Doesn't matter where they went to university, doesn't matter whether they worked in that sector. There's lots of things which people use as evidence of experience, which actually isn't evidence of experience.

Simon 16:28

So we really interrogate that process. And then we famously, we called it putting the curtain in because of the famous example of musicians being auditioned for orchestras. And if you put the curtain in, then actually get a much diverse bunch of, you recruit a much more diverse bunch of musicians because you actually can listen to how they play rather than be thrown by the fact that they're men or women or whatever.

Simon 16:51

So you need to have a process that enables you really to focus on what people can offer. You need to encourage them really to bring what they can offer. So for instance, if women go off and have babies, or whatever, and then they come back to organisations, organisations tend to ask them, what have you forgotten?

Simon 17:10

Well, organisations should ask them, what have you learned? Because having a baby, I understand, is massively life-changing. You change who you are. And I've never met a woman who ran an organisation or a department who didn't talk about how she managed a family in terms of how she manages her work.

Simon 17:30

These women bring that to work. So that's something you should value in women. Don't dismiss it, don't say, what have you forgotten? That's a ludicrous question. What have you learned? So you're always looking for what people can bring through who they are.

Simon 17:41

So the answer to your question is people need to change the way in which they recruit to enable them really, if I can extend the metaphor to hear our applicants play, and put together diverse groups of people at the top, because that will give them a better set of insights into the challenges that they need to meet.

Tom 17:57

So at the Future Talent Conference, you will be talking about bias. There have been a lot of instances where AI and the processing of data have effectively regurgitated entrenched bias within a recruitment process.

Tom 18:14

So a bit of a provocative question, is it all snake oil?

Simon 18:18

Well, it's not all snake oil, but it's in danger of being snake oil. I mean, beware the system that promises you it can debias the results. Because as we know with technology, what technology does depends on what you ask it to do.

Simon 18:32

And it depends on the values or the preferences that you bake in at the beginning if you like. So if you bake in it, if you put in a bias at the beginning, the technology will reinforce it, solidify it and carry it on.

Simon 18:48

And it's far harder actually to unbiased the machine. So the question is, if you don't get it right in the first place, then once you automate it using technology, you're not going to get it even more right.

Simon 19:00

What you can do is use technology obviously to understand things. So big data and AI gives you a phenomenal ability to understand people's preferences. You know that terrible thing that Google apparently knows women are pregnant before they do, because of the choices they make and the searches they make and so on and so forth.

Simon 19:19

I mean, this is, you know, slightly worrying on one level, absolutely terrifying, you know. But on the other hand, if you can get insight into the process, but that will not take out the bias unless you yourself have tackled in a structural way and in a change way, the bias that you're putting into the first place, you've got to get an understanding of how bias operates and how we all operate our preferences.

Simon 19:48

Once you understand that and you've started to remove that, then you can use technology once you've removed as much bias in the first place. But the technology itself won't necessarily remove the bias.

Tom 20:00

So how do you get people at a personal level to maybe address the biases that they have?

Simon 20:06

Well, the big thing about biases, which is so difficult is we've spent so long learning these things. And by the way, unconscious bias is fantastically helpful in certain situations. I mean, you know, our unthinking learned response to traffic is precisely what stops us stepping out in front of moving cars.

Simon 20:24

Terrific unconscious bias about not being killed. This is a good thing, right? So unconscious bias is just learned automatic unthinking reactions. But it's not so good when it comes to assessing people, because we think, Oh, well, you know, he's got a posh voice, he must be doing this, that and the other.

Simon 20:40

Oh, he's got a working class voice, he must not be able to do this, that and the other. I've said he twice here. And so it goes on. So we can't unlearn the biases, you know, we can't sort of train ourselves out of them.

Simon 20:53

What we have to do is put ourselves into different situations. I'll give you a good example of this is civil partnerships. And it's not just I've got one, but it's, a useful example of social change.

Simon 21:05

So when we thought up civil partnerships, the reason we did it was we wanted to get all the rights and responsibilities for lesbians and gays. But we knew that if we called it marriage, the church thinks it owns marriage, so they'd block it in the house at all.

Simon 21:17

So we came up with a civil partnership idea. That was a good idea. But I said at the time, everybody will call them weddings, you know, everybody say I'm going to send such wedding the other day, and they did.

Simon 21:27

And they do. And it's great. Now, I've got a friend called, called Frank, and Frank grew up Catholic. And he was gloriously gay when he was drunk, and gloriously guilty in the morning when he was sober.

Simon 21:41

And his mum, you know, Wendy, on his shoulder, you know, very difficult. Anyway, eventually meets Michael, Michael managed to get under the trip, why we don't know how Michael and Frank get married, decide to get married.

Simon 21:56

So how to tell mum. So various things, put photographs of them all over the house, ask around, do all that business. Anyway,

eventually, they do have the ceremony. There, she's in the front row. The key thing about the question is, it's no longer does she like gays.

Simon 22:11

That's not the question. The question is, is Frank happy? In other words, we've created a set of norms, which enable us to change our behavior. And that gives us something we get all engaged in. So the way we change our behavior is by engaging ourselves in different situations.

Simon 22:27

If you're white, and you don't know any black people, your sense of what racism is about will be fundamentally different. I mean, Liam Neeson, a while back, made this extraordinary confession. But he didn't seem to understand that in saying what he said, he racialised the situation in a way that he wouldn't have dreamt of saying, I don't really recall the incident.

Simon 22:50

But he said, my friend was raped. She said the rapist was black. So I wanted to go out and kill a black person. If she'd said they were white, would he really have said I want to go out and kill a white person?

Simon 23:00

I doubt it. I doubt it. So in other words, he didn't understand for some reason, that when in making that rather curiously extraordinary confession, which on one level could have been very powerful, what he did was illustrate the extent to which but he didn't understand what he was illustrating when he was illustrating it.

Simon 23:20

Yeah. He couldn't see that from a black person's point of view. Now, white people can't see that from a black person's point of view. But what you have to do to change your own biases is to start putting yourself next door to people who experience them.

Simon 23:33

I don't think you can walk in other people's shoes. I just don't think you can. But I think you can walk alongside them. So you're white, I'm white, we'll never know what it's like to be a black person, look in the rear view mirror and see the flashing blue light here in red light in America.

Simon 23:45

We'll never know what that feels like. But what we can do is listen when black people tell us what it feels like. And what we can also do is say, do you know what, I want to be treated by the police fairly as well.

Simon 23:55

So you and I, you black person, me white person, we can join together in demanding of the police that they treat citizens decently. So that's what we do. We have to put ourselves in different situations the whole time.

Simon 24:07

When men and women are in offices together, listen, if you're a man, listen to the women. Listen to what they think is a compliment. And if it's not about their clothes, don't talk about that clothes.

Simon 24:20

Listen to what women want to have said to them and not what they don't want to have said to them. That's the, it's always a question of listening, I think, and then making a judgment. You don't want to abandon judgment.

Simon 24:31

But, but listen and evaluate based on your listening. Don't just charge in there with your own way of seeing the world.

Tom 24:39

So it's based on being empathetic in a way.

Simon 24:44

Empathy and solidarity are important. I mean, I'm married to somebody who's black and I find one of the things that's the best peculiar is that it seemed to almost take the lid off the pressure cooker.

Simon 24:57



And I find myself, all those socialized thoughts that I've had in my mind suddenly seems have erupted. It's really peculiar. So I see a black guy in a really smart car and I think, I wonder who he is.

Simon 25:09

I see a white guy in a really smart car. I think, oh, smart car. And all that stuff is floating around in my brain. So don't punish yourself about it. Just think about it and work it through.

Tom 25:18

And once you think about it and work it through, how can you then bake that into your processes as an organisation?

Simon 25:26

Simply stated, it's about seeing difference, valuing it, and then combining it joyfully. In other words, always recruit because of people's difference. Always bring into the group the difference that you think you need to achieve what you're trying to do.

Simon 25:41

So don't ever, when next time you go to party, next time you sit down in the office, don't talk to people about what you have in common. Pretty boring. Talk about what you don't have in common. Talk about what you don't know about each other.

Simon 25:51

Because the thing about human beings is, the only thing that makes us all the same is that we're all different. You'll never understand another human being. So looking for the difference and trying to understand that is actually the only journey that's worth going on.

Simon 26:03

So constant and doing it in such a way that you realise you'll never get to the end of that journey. So how you bake it into organisations is into your appraisal process, your recruitment process, your promotion process, is you're always looking for the difference that people can bring through who they are because everybody brings something different and formalise that in the process.

Simon 26:23

Tell your staff that's what you value in them.

Tom 26:26

Um, throughout the course of the conversation, the one thing that I carry on thinking about is that especially in reference to the earlier discussion we had about technology is that the most important thing is to just recognise the humanity of the people who you're working with appreciate their differences and look at people for what they are and what you are and interact with them accordingly often, and we touched on it earlier with the question about, you know, technology being a snake oil is in light of recent technological changes, it's seen as a magic bullet.

Tom 26:58

So how do people make sure that they're putting the people that work for them first and not sacrifice them, uh, and their role to the advent of new technologies.

Simon 27:10

Well, I think what you have to do is if you're going to use technologies, you have to use technology to understand people as individuals as much as averages are the enemy of understanding. No one is average.

Simon 27:26

So when you understand your staff, one of the things that technology often does is give you an overall picture. So it kind of collectivises everything into a big single average. So you find people say, oh, it's marks 70 percent staff satisfaction rate.

Simon 27:41

Well, I'm not entirely sure what that tells you apart from the fact that 30 percent of your staff aren't satisfied. That might be worrying. But people, what does that tell you?

Tom 27:49

Well, one person might have given it a one out of 10. One person might have given it a 10 out of 10.

Simon 27:53

Technology has to be used to create personalised understanding, I think that's one thing. It's also got to be friendly. So people have got to feel that when you're giving them technology to use, it's actually something that is valuing them.

Simon 28:07

So you've got to build that humanity somehow into the technology. There's an interesting company that I came across recently, it's got this thing called We Thrive. And what that does is it asks staff to make an assessment on 16 points about how they feel about working in teams and whether they feel they know what the team's doing, whether the team knows what it's doing, whether they've got enough space to think and all this kind of stuff.

Simon 28:26

And what's interesting is the way it feeds back results, because it feeds back an average to the manager of the team. But then it disaggregates the average to each individual person. And it gives that individual score back to the person.

Simon 28:39

So the manager and the person can then have a conversation about what they feel strong about and what they feel unstrong about or unconfident about. And that's a really good use of technology because it's getting down to a personal understanding.

Tom 28:51

Simon, thank you so much for your time today. It's been a pleasure. Thank you very much.

Host 29:00

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