

Digital and innovation reimagined with Sulina Connal and Mats O Eklund - Part 2

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Bradley Howard (BH): Welcome back to the *Tech Reimagined* podcast on digital innovation with Mats and Sulina. In this half, we'll get to know each of our guests a little better and look back over their careers to understand how they got to where they are today. Let's start with Sulina. Can you describe a little bit about your background?

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Sulina Connal (SC): Yeah. Thanks, Bradley. So, I'm half Indian and half Scottish. I was born and brought up in India. I finished school in Scotland and then went to Oxford, and I studied human sciences in Oxford and then did a law conversion in Bar School in London. I started working in London and have spent the last 12 years in Paris. So, variously my background is in negotiation jobs across the length of my career, whether it's as intellectual property litigator or as a VP of corporate development and latterly as partnerships. And I've worked in two industries in principle: telecoms and tech. And I moved from one role to another, and one industry another, really, by a desire to change, learn something else, try new things. And also due to a lot of luck.

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BH: And Sulina, at what point did you then transition into the tech industry?

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SC: It was via a whole bunch of very lucky encounters that I made and some decisions that I made which were trying to be more practical and adapt to the changes in my life. So, telecoms to tech was really to try and move out of the M&A environment into something that was very much more predictable because I was pregnant with twins and the travel and intensity of the workload in M&A didn't seem very feasible. So, I asked for a strategic partnership role and started to work with Amazon and Microsoft and of course, Google and Facebook, which led me to my last two roles. But it was the opportunities of working with those companies, getting interested in their DNA and the very different approach that I saw from these companies and the relationships I made during working with them that helped me get into tech.

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BH: And do you find some of the legal training still comes in useful from time to time?

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SC: Absolutely. It's been a – the core part of my whole career, it's been a sort of single thread that's led me through is negotiation and the approach that you learn as a litigator to negotiation, problem solving, how to read a contract, how to construct arguments, I learned all of those as a lawyer and I use them still today.

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BH: And on to your most recent role at Google. You actually joined during lockdown. What was that like?

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SC: So, it's been pretty challenging. The hardest thing I find about the role joining in lockdown is the fact that we don't have the energy and we don't have the sharing of ideas in the same fluid way. Google is going to stay locked down till next spring. At least that's the latest information. So,

what we're very focused on as a leadership team is to try and keep the energy, try and keep the community. The other thing I'm finding difficult is to structure my day and put routine in when you are at home. There's almost nothing to stop me from working. There's no lunch break. There's no moment to chat. There's no end of day. And so, I find that I'm working endlessly and I'm very conscious to not try and set unhealthy routines and unhealthy examples for the rest of my team. So, I think those are the two is the having to try and create an identity for the team in a sense of my place in the team remotely and also trying to control the working day. I don't know if you find the same.

[00:04:29]

BH: Absolutely. And Mats, how about your background?

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Mats O Eklund (ME): I'm Swedish. I live in Stockholm. I was born in Stockholm, but I've been working, I mean, a lot internationally over the last 20 years, I would say. But as my home base has always been Stockholm. I would say that I don't have a traditional career path, I mean, maybe for a senior executive, I actually started working already at 18, leaving secondary school. And it was really, I would say, a strange situation that occurred. We don't need to go into that, but I actually, I jumped on a temporary position actually at the Swedish Postal Services. I started there and I actually had – I know I had one-and-a-half year before I was doing my military service, and I actually started working. The reason I actually started working was I wasn't sure what I wanted my next step to be – university and next level of education. And my big interest was really sports. I was practicing every day. I was still doing a number of different sports, both football and a winter sport called bandy. That was my primary focus. So, I did my military service. Later, I was a platoon leader of a platoon. So, I had an officer's training for almost two years. I think both from the sports, but also from the military service, which was at that time mandatory in Sweden for all men, and that was really where my interest of leadership and leading teams and creating results came from. So, that was really my ambition. Really, leadership, a leadership role very early on. Then I actually started – I gave up the athlete career – then I started actually studying. So, I studied for three years in combination with the work. And it was really finance, IT development and strategy studies that I pursued. Then started to move also in positions. There was very huge organisation and there was a strategy team set up. So, I started working with strategy at around – I was 26, 27 years old. I started working in strategy for a company that was likely 75,000 companies across Sweden. We were doing IT consultation and rolling out distributed computing, I would say, to all offices across Sweden. And that was a huge transformational task on the really basic IT level. But after a couple of years there, I was offered with two years – and I think Sulina said there is opportunities will present themselves – and I was offered a management position merging eight regions of IT departments in two months, and also finding offices and buying cars for the service organisation was kind of on the task list. And I was set to do that in two months, and I jumped on that and it worked out quite well. I did that for three years. And then I moved into travel in the millennium, in the beginning of the millennium, starting to work, as – and there was another opportunity I started as the head of IT operations for the Nordic group within TUI. And after six months, my boss, or manager, came and said, I mean, who was the CIO, said that, "I'm going to leave, and I've recommended you to take over." So within, after nine months in the company, I was part of the board in the Nordic management team. And I worked from there. Four years after that I took over digital strategy for the business strategy of digital and started to shift the distribution in the Nordic domain of TUI. It's been, I think, been that kind of way all along. That's – there is something that comes up, you take the risk, you take the chance, and you jump on it. And I think my later part of my career has been a CIO and leader of digital development and innovation. And it's always been about trying to lead teams and organisations to start to deliver, I mean, digital services that really brings valuable financial and customer value. But I started in

operations, as I said, and so I'm actually equally interested in those things when it comes to efficiency and uptime and really strong, robust services. So, I think that combination has many times been quite good when it comes to actually bring change to the company, because I can bridge some gaps between different disciplines. I later, I studied, I mean, more advanced strategy at the Stockholm School of Economics and the Duke University, and IMD in Lausanne. Really, that's where I think my key interest is really how can we create value? How can we bring change in an efficient way to the business where I'm actually at the moment? And I think the core of my leader philosophy has always been all the years has been about coming from the sports and really thinking about how we as a team compete, how we deliver it to a common goal, how different competencies and roles are working together, achieving goals and winning and losing together, if you say so. And I think I'm very much a generalist and quite, I would say, a broad profile. But I'm trying to leverage, I mean, a good leadership to motivate people to drive change.

[00:10:47]

BH: Great. Thank you very much. Sulina, did you have mentors along the way and any pieces of advice that really stuck with you?

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SC: The first one I'm thinking of Anthony Lester, Lord Lester. So, he had just entered the House of Lords. I had just been sacked from Freshfields. So, I'd interrupted my studies as I needed to earn some money, and I was supposed to be logging a data room of documents, and it was incredibly soul destroying, but that's no excuse. I was really rubbish and was nicely asked to leave. So, I was newly sacked, and, on a recommendation, Anthony gave me a trial. I worked for him for a year on two major bills going through Parliament, in fact. Anthony died this summer. I'm so grateful for the opportunity that I had to learn from his commitment, from his humanity, his rigour, his argument, and I should add that he threw away the first piece of work I did for him. [LAUGHTER] He redid it and I watched what he did, and I learnt, and I did better second time around. But he was a very major part of my structuring me early on in my career. My other great piece of luck was being introduced to Tony Willoughby. So, I was introduced to him by the head of the chambers I was at where I was doing my pupillage, and Tony Willoughby had set up a niche intellectual property firm, where he was breaking away from the traditions of big firms. So, we had these industry leading clients, really all the big brand names. We did very innovative work and individually we were given masses of opportunity to stretch and try new areas. I mean, I was able to go to the EC – the European Court of Justice – the ECJ before I was 30, which was a pretty amazing experience. But mainly we had a huge amount of fun. So, it was very demanding, but hugely fun. And my whole view on the work pace, the energy, and the engagement, the questioning of status quo, being straightforward – Tony's incredibly straightforward, very respectful – and how to give opportunity to the people in my team, that really comes from him and that experience I had there. I should also add that he also threw away the first piece of work I did for him. [LAUGHTER]

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BH: There's definitely a theme going on here.

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SC: There is a theme going on, but it stops there. [LAUGHTER] By then, I learnt.

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BH: And nowadays, when you're looking for additional advice, do you have any mentors now?

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SC: I think I've got a little bit of a gap given some of the changes. There are a few people I talk to from time to time. Again, there are people who I've generally worked with closely and I take advice from, but it's nothing regular and formal. I was thinking about the fact that I'm ready for a mentor now. I'm ready for someone who's able to also give me some perspective on my opportunities and on my approach with whom I can exchange ideas freely. I am a mentor and I take that role very seriously with a lot of pride. I would like to continue doing more. I think it's especially important, what I lacked when I was starting off, was women role models and women mentors or even bosses. And I'm very glad to see that even though there aren't enough women around, there are certainly more. It's enormously important for me to work with a young woman in organisations that I'm in and also in other organisations.

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BH: And any more mentors?

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SC: Yes. The important ones at the later stage of my career was Sanjiv Ahuja and Damian Reid at Orange. So, they were the CEO and EVP of Strategy and Corporate Development, and I was having itchy feet as an intellectual property counsel at Orange and wanted to leave. They coached me, we talked about it, and they coached me into a new role as VP of Corporate Development, as I was curious about the companies and how they were structured. And I wanted to learn finance, so they sent me to business school, and I took the role. Why I think that was a really important moment and why I'm very grateful to them, it was vertiginous because I was in a senior role, and there was a huge amount I didn't know, but it was an incredible burst of energy and excitement having to learn. So, I don't think I slept for the first few weeks. I was really petrified of making a mistake. For example, on a huge 10-year business plan, in fact, I did make a mistake. And when I realised, I went to talk to Damian about it, and what he said is, "You know, if this is the worst mistake you ever make in your career, you're a very, very lucky woman." So, I'm grateful for the opportunity and I'm grateful . . . I think the important thing when you have these sorts of opportunities, is just hold your breath and hold your nose and jump and go for it.

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BH: That's definitely a consistent theme that we're hearing from lots of people who are coming onto the podcast, when there are very big opportunities, is being able to take that big stride forward and see how it goes.

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SC: Yeah. I couldn't agree more.

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BH: Mats, did you have any mentors along the way or any pieces of advice that really stuck with you through your career?

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ME: I have had both mentors as a part of more formal mentor programmes, and I also have been acting as a mentor for mentees. But I need to agree with Sulina. It's not there I've got the best, I would say, feedback and the best kind of advice that I'm carrying with me. I worked for Johan Lundgren, who is today the CEO of easyJet. He was the Nordic CEO for a number of years. And it's absolutely the best and greatest leader I have worked for so far. And he said one thing that I really tried to work with myself and also with the people reporting to me and my organisations that I lead is that, "You should always talk to the one you have concern with before escalating it to me". So, talk to the ones that the concern, if you have any feedback or concerns or negative

experiences before starting to escalate to management. And I think that's very – can seem to be a very basic and small thing, but it's quite hard to get the criticism to go in order there trying to take care of the different kind of friction that is in a management team or in the group of leaders or in an organisation by people actually addressing the people that it concerns. And I think that is very important because it also links back to thing I said about honest leadership and keeping it real that I mentioned earlier. I think it fosters the culture and I try really to live with that. Then I think my kids have given me actually a lot of mentoring, and they are really honest. And I have some great stories. We can't go into them today, but really, I try to be open to all kinds of feedback, and it comes sometimes from the most unsuspected places.

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BH: Once you have a culture of addressing your concern with a person you are going to escalate about, does that then generate less escalation? Do you deal with it by actually speaking to the person you have issue with?

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ME: Definitely it does. But it also starts to foster some kind of internal feedback loop with about, I would say, accountability within the different people themselves. To say, actually, “Is it actually him or her, or is it actually me?” and I think we all need sometimes to take a step back and think, “Is it I that have a problem, or is it someone else actually causing a problem for me?”, both in life, but also in professional organisations. So, it fosters, I would say, a good sense of cleansing unnecessary discussions or escalations.

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BH: Do you read any business books or listen to any podcasts? Except for *Tech Reimagined*, obviously.

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SC: Obviously. I, unfortunately, I don't read business books. I wish I did. I do listen to podcasts, but I don't read business books. I read a lot of newspapers. Now I make it my business to have a look at some of the newspapers from different parts of my scope, which is EMEA – Europe, Middle East, and Africa. So, I make sure that I have a quick look at what's going on for the country, but also for the messaging from the newspaper.

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BH: And Mats?

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ME: Yeah, not specifically podcasts. I like the vision part. I've been watching a lot of TED Talks, I would say, because I like the format when it's quite short and it addresses a specific topic, it's not kind of all over the place. And so, I like it packaged, if you say so, and I like the visual piece. But that's, I mean, that's from time to time. It's not something I do all the time. I carry one, actually, business book with me, which is I think you heard me talk a lot about culture and how you actually are delivering change and innovation and great services today. And I like the book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven Covey. It's an old classic, I know, but I think the thought of accountability for yourself and your performance, I mean, and also the wellbeing of yourself, I mean, to be able to create value together with others, I mean, it's really appealing when you're trying to be a good leader and trying to build fast-moving organisations. Then, I would say, I'm really so curious. Every day, I mean, I'm more like a detective of the Internet, I would say, because I learn some news, you know, I get the newsflash and I get interested. I Google things then and I read the Wikipedia, I read some kind of blogs or information pages about things, and I

track things and find relations between people, things, and moments. And so, I really, there is, if you're curious and kind of a little bit of, what do you say? Not the peeping Tom, I would say. [LAUGHTER] But really, it's so easy to access information, to learn things about, "Oh, actually, that's the way it's connected," and, "These people are owning this company and that's why they are saying this." I mean, it's a lot of transparency out there if you just follow some threads, yeah? So, I spend some time doing that.

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BH: And does your mind boggle about how everything feels like it's eventually linked to each other?

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ME: It's very still a very top driven world, I mean, when it comes to economic power. So, naturally, I mean, there is a lot of relation between things in big corporations and I would say investments. So, things are linked and happen at different moments, if you say so, or things that happen are usually, I mean, quite easy to find a course of cause and effect, if you say so. So, it's – yeah, I think it's very interesting to see, kind of try to find your own take on what's actually communicated more publicly. Yeah.

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BH: What do you think has changed between you starting your career and today's graduates?

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SC: Two things that jump out, and there have been many, but the two are the women at senior positions – again, there still aren't enough. In the last job I had, there were 27 people in the leadership team and in my area, and there were two women. And I didn't have women role models at the beginning of the career and I really would have liked that. Second, well, I think is the attitude of graduates. They have more – they expect, and they have more control over their careers and they're much more intentional about what they want to do, their expectations, their expectations of managers, the value of their input. And I thought this was – I find this is particularly so in tech companies – I think this makes for healthier and more respectful environments. It also allows the flow of ideas. It allows the flow of innovation. So, I think it's changed, and I think it's a really positive change.

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BH: And Mats, what were the key opportunities or stand out moments in your career?

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ME: I mentioned a little bit earlier about, I mean, taking on that first leadership role, really jumping on the task, I mean, setting up an organisation, trying to manage people, I mean, all people who are more or less older than me, and I was a very unexperienced manager trying to get everybody to accept that I would lead the team and we would work together. And they were, I mean, in eight different local IT teams trying to build a more service organisation. And I really, I was a terrible, terrible start, I would say. We had the lowest employee satisfaction score in the whole Swedish Post, but we managed to work together and create a very good environment, nevertheless. So that was, I think, for a key moment, try and just, you know, to jump out there and say, "Yeah, I want to try my abilities as a leader". Then when I got the chance, I said as I was joining the board and in after nine months in the travel industry on TUI Nordic and then leading the business transformation strategy across the Nordic Group for seven years, I mean, driving from like 13% online sales to almost 70% online sales of total sharable sales, that was a totally, I mean, transformation. That also meant that I needed to work with the managing directors of the sales

companies. And even if they had a P&L responsibility, I need to find a way as the CIO how we can join up and share accountability for actually implementing the strategy. And in 2007, they say it's a, I mean, achievements or moments that I really appreciate is that I became the CIO of the Year in Sweden. In 2007, I was really on the results of the business transformation in TUI Nordic, and that was, of course, something I'm very proud of and a great acknowledgment. I would say those things are the ones that stand out.

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BH: What do you think has changed between you starting your career and today's graduates?

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ME: I mean, you heard that I started my career when I was 18, so I think, I mean, somebody, you know, really not, you know, as a mature person from secondary school coming in and starting work like I did in a big corporation, that will not happen today. I mean, it's so much tougher competition today on that kind of journey, I think, since we are global today. I mean, it's totally different. I mean, competition on having roles that are in a development path, if you say so. I think that the general, I mean, skill level of the people coming out to start working in organisations are broader and deeper. And you still have to have the ability to act and convert, I mean, the knowledge that you have, I mean, really, I mean, the competencies, it's really about, I mean, taking that broader skill base and put it into action. I think that is still, I mean, a journey that people need to make. So, yeah. So, I think it's tougher, but I think some of the challenges are the same.

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BH: Excellent. And finally, what's your daily routine? Any tips that you can share with us, especially during this lockdown period?

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SC: I'm not a good example. As I say, it's difficult to control the day, then no natural breaks that divide you from home and work. And I'm finding that my work is trickling into every part of my day. So, I'm not the best example. So, I want to be more intentional, and I want to set a better example. [LAUGHTER]

[00:27:42]

BH: And Mats, what's your daily routine? Any tips that you can share with us? The answer is going to be bandy and golf, isn't it? [LAUGHTER]

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ME: No, no, it's going to be – I will surprise you, Bradley. It would be drink water, meditate, exercise, eat well, and be curious. [LAUGHTER] That's my tip. And that's what I'm trying to do every day. I have a fantastic wife. I have three kids. I have three dogs. So, I think routine is something that we have never had. It's kind of things in motion all the time and you need to kind of act on things happening. So, that's, I would say, in the private. On the job, I think I try to have short one-to-ones with my direct reports quite often. And I try to, I mean, really practice management by walking around, especially if you want to build an empowered team structure, a culture, I mean, you need to be visible and be accessible as a leader, even if you have a more senior role. So, that's what I'm doing in the professional place as a routine.

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BH: Thank you to Mats and Sulina for spending some time with us to reimagine the relationship between digital innovation and technology. I hope you will join us next time for another interesting



discussion on the *Tech Reimagined* podcast. Please remember to like this podcast and hit the subscribe button.