

TRANSCRIPT: More Talent Untapped

EPISODE 2 - Ahmed Abukar

AK: This program is brought to you by RBC. In order to speak up for inclusion, we need to speak about inclusion.

AK: I'm Anna-Karina Tabuñar and this is More Talent Untapped. Conversations about unconventional, sometimes underestimated talent... and the differences that connect us.

Ahmed: Creativity. Creativity. I have a lifetime experience of dealing with different problems, because this society is not built for a person with a visual impairment, right. So you constantly are having to innovate using your creativity. That's what you got to keep doing.

AK: I first met Ahmed Abukar at a job fair in 2015. He was having a hard time getting recruiters to look past his white cane. Ahmed was born with a rare eye disease that's led to severe vision loss, and stubborn ingenuity and determination. That determination helped him land his first job. When we first reconnected, he was proud to report that he is now a certified Chartered Public Accountant, a CPA. And he's quickly moving up at work at Canada's largest bank.

Ahmed: So what happened was, I got an internship at RBC and started out my career as an intern. I completed my internship in 2016. I was hired as a full-time, permanent role as a fund accountant. I was there for two years and in 2018 I moved on to the CFO team at RBC as a financial analyst in enterprise accounting. And now I'm dealing with the finances of RBC and looking at how their various entities are doing in their financial performance.

AK: So you're crunching numbers throughout the day?

Ahmed: Definitely.

AK: Can you give me an idea, how do you do that with your vision impairment?

Ahmed: People tell me that accounting is very visual, but I found a way to make it work for me. It's just understanding how things work. It's creating that visual image in your mind.

AK: Is it numbers that you visualize in your mind and numbers that you memorize and then crunch?

Ahmed: No, it's not about memorizing. It's about understanding, finding a way that works for you. It's like, so I use a lot of Excel. It's all about using formulas, and setting up formulas in ways that you don't need to memorize it. You know where everything is at. You go there. You do your calculations. You're done. I just use a regular keyboard. It's just that I have a software, a screen reading software which reads me what's on the screen. As you navigate the screen, it'll tell you what you're on. So basically you're controlling it, telling it to read to you what's on the screen. Excel is my best friend. I don't know where I would be without Excel. I use it for most of my day. And it's a very powerful tool.

AK: Isn't it amazing how we can use technology to break down barriers?

Ahmed: Oh definitely. I don't think I would have the same ability that I have today without the advancement of technology. I don't know how people before used to get through what they used to get through with their challenges that we face without the technology that we currently have. So I cannot just imagine having to use, do all this work in braille. It's not going to be easy.

AK: No kidding.

Ahmed: And we just gotta keep working at it, and to just make that road smoother for the next person and make it easier for them. We made this much progress but we can't stop here. We just keep at it. Keep at it until, you know what, that people having different challenges, it's not gonna be an issue. That regardless of what you have, it's going to be easy for you to do whatever you desire.

AK: And that's what innovation is all about.

Ahmed: And how does innovation come through? Creativity, right. Creativity. And I have a lifetime experience of dealing with different problems, because this society is not built for a person with a visual impairment, right. So you constantly are having to innovate using your creativity, right. That's what you got to keep doing.

Ahmed: So when I've joined the various teams I've joined, the systems were not accessible. However, this didn't stop them. They were like, you know what, we will do whatever it takes to make things accessible for you. And so what they did was made investments and made sure the systems that were required for me were accessible with the screen reading software that I use. It showed them that whatever challenges that get put in our way, that we can overcome it. And it shows them, just to give an example, when I joined my team, and I don't blame them, and I would do the same thing if I were in their situation. There's an uncertainty of, we're getting someone with a visual impairment. Is he going to be able to complete his work? But when I joined the team, and I showed them that I'm able to complete my work just like anybody, they come to rely on me just like everybody else. And like the times I've left my previous team, they went from being uncertain when I joined them to not wanting me to leave them.

AK: In addition to your screen reading software, what are some of the other ways you've learned to adjust the way you work?

Ahmed: That's a very good question. It's just being more efficient and using my time more effectively. And always trying to think of creative ways that I can make my life easier. It's just constantly thinking, how can I make this easier for me and just be more efficient.

AK: I know the last time we spoke, you talked about mentorship. And how one day you would want to be a mentor to somebody else. What role has mentorship played in your career?

Ahmed: Mentorship has played a significant role and I've constantly sought out mentors who've supported me. And I've sought out sponsors to support me in making progress in my career. So they have made a significant difference. And in turn, what I do is – I'm part of a marginalized community – I always try to give back to the community, and speak to the youth and show them that, you know whatever challenge gets put in our way, that we can overcome it. It's just all about the determination and the hard work that we put in.

AK: Since Covid, we've seen a lot of cracks in the systems, in our workplaces, in society in general for our most vulnerable and under-represented populations, how has Covid and physical distancing affected you?

Ahmed: How has it affected me? In terms of general society, it's just people are more hesitant to help out, I've found. People are just more concerned about getting COVID-19, rather than assisting people if they need help. I guess that would be my experience.

AK: Do you find people are avoiding you?

Ahmed: Yeah because they would worry about if you got Covid or not. So they would not be more willing to assist if they see you around.

AK: Often times there are these decals or stickers on the floor that mark what direction you're supposed to go in. But if you're blind, you don't have that as a guidance. So what guides you for physical distancing?

Ahmed: So these are not accessible. So what would be necessary would be for people to be willing to assist you. For instance, if you're not blind, say, "Hey people moved up." But people are hesitant to help out because they're concerned, right. So it's just made things more difficult. And if I am in line, I just say, "You know what, these decals are not accessible. If you can tell me, if you can just direct me with your voice, like when I can move up, that would be great."

AK: Are you taking public transit?

Ahmed: Yes I am. And the thing is with public transit, it hasn't been that bad because less people are using it. And so, it's just made it easier, I guess.

AK: Do you find people are helpful? Will they proactively ask you for assistance?

Ahmed: No, not as before. Because people are more concerned about you spreading anything to them, so. That's what I meant about people being more concerned. People before would be very willing to ask. But now it's just decreased because of people's concern.

AK: How does it make you feel?

Ahmed: Well, you appreciate the ones that come and ask you because you know what, they're more concerned about helping you rather than being concerned about the Covid. And you appreciate more of them.

AK: How does the thought of you possibly catching Covid, how does that sit with you?

Ahmed: To be honest, I just be careful as best as I can. Just try to wash my hands as frequently as I can. Wear my mask. And be as cautious as I can. And that's all I can do.

AK: So it's not something that's constantly playing in your mind?

Ahmed: No. Not at all. You could do your best and whatever is meant to happen will happen, and that is what I believe.

AK: So you're working from home.

Ahmed: Yes, that's correct.

AK: How are you finding it?

Ahmed: It's been great. I enjoy it. It's good to work from home and not have to go through a long commute daily. But I also miss the in-person interaction with my colleagues. It's just not the same working from home and interacting electronically with them. That's a big difference.

AK: And so how do you build community outside of work in this strange era of Covid and physical distancing, on top of having a vision impairment?

Ahmed: I guess the best thing to do was to pick up the phone and call people. Talking to each other through the phone is what makes a big difference. It's not the same when you text each other, or when you just send email to each other. What makes the difference is picking up that call and hearing that person's voice.

AK: Are you doing that more often? Or are you trying to build that within your day?

Ahmed: Yes. Definitely. That's the best way given the circumstances that we're facing. That would be the best way.

AK: Old-fashioned phone call.

Ahmed: Definitely. Old habits are being brought back. (Laughs)

AK: Can we shift gears a little bit? So along with Covid, physical distancing, we're hearing a lot about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial equality, racial equity. How has that affected you?

Ahmed: In life I would say that it's affected me like a triple whammy, you know. Being black, being Muslim and having a disability. So you're constantly, you're constantly being challenged about that. It's just a perception that people have of you. It's just people looking at you differently just because you come from that background, and you have those challenges in life. It's constantly having to deal with those challenges of perceptions that people may have.

AK: And how do you deal with that?

Ahmed: Just avoiding dealing with it negatively. Just think of it in a positive way. For instance, let me give you an example. So a lot of the time when people see my visual impairment, they wonder if I contribute to society. And when I tell them I'm working, it's like they get shocked.

AK: They think that you're unemployed?

Ahmed: Yeah, and then when I tell them I work for RBC, they ask do you work at the call center? I'm like no. Not only do I work in the finance department, I work on the CFO team. And it's complete silence. It's like, you know...

AK: You've just shocked them. You have floored them and blown away all they're misperceptions.

Ahmed: Yeah. I don't fight with them. I don't argue with them. I just answer their question in a way that completely changes their perception. That silence just tells you a lot. They basically discriminated against you without telling you. So it's all these indirect discrimination that you face.

AK: Yes I understand what you mean. It's these subtleties right, that you face every day. And I have to say, I really love your approach. It's the silent facts. And you're letting your performance speak for itself.

Ahmed: Exactly. Being negative about it, I feel is not going to change it. I think it's important to speak out. But speak out in a positive way, without any violence. Violence doesn't solve any issue. Speak out. Create awareness. Creating awareness is important. So you create awareness by not causing damage. You create awareness by speaking out in a positive way. That's the way you change people's perspectives. When violence comes into the equation. It just ruins everything that you're trying to strive for.

AK: Have you faced violence because of your race, religion or your disability?

Ahmed: No. It's always been subtle. It's always been subtle.

AK: So over the years, all these subtle, let's call them micro-aggressions, or subtle behaviours or comments, what impact does that have on you, the way you perceive yourself?

Ahmed: To be honest, I'm confident in who I am. I am confident in what I can bring to the table. So I don't let people's perceptions get to me. It's just, it's their perception of me. The only way I can change their perception of me is showing them who I am, not letting their perception of me dictate my perception of me. I have control over it by showing them what I'm about.

AK: Ahmed, that is such a mature and evolved self-perception because I think a lot of us have managed to let – and I'm speaking for myself. My own self-perception over the years has been very greatly formed by what other people tell me, or how I think they look at me. And so when I hear you talking about how you're comfortable with the way you see yourself, how did you get there?

Ahmed: It's a lifelong experience. Remember, I've had to deal with this challenge from a young age, right. From a young age, kids are taught that we should all be the same, right. And you're constantly dealing with you being different from them, right. So it's that lifelong experience of having to

deal with that challenge. And I don't expect that to change. I know I'm going to be dealing with this for the rest of my life. So it's just a matter of accepting it. And you know what, working with it. Not working against it.

AK: Working with it, not working against it. Yes. Absolutely.

AK: So Ahmed what's next for you?

Ahmed: What is next for me is continuing working my way up at RBC and one day becoming an executive at RBC. As I previously mentioned to you in our previous interaction. And that goal hasn't changed. It's continuing that way up.

AK: So one of these days, you envision yourself 'Senior Vice President, Executive Vice President Ahmed Abukar.' What do you think that's going to do for other people with disabilities to see you in that position?

Ahmed: It will show them that, you know what, that you are capable of doing what we can, what we want to, regardless of how many times we get put down, how many times that we're told we can not do that. Regardless of how many times people tell us, you know what, it may not be the right role for us. It's just all about, it's not a matter of how many times we get knocked down. It's, are we standing at the end of the day.

AK: That was Ahmed Abukar. What I learned from him is perspective - not the kind that comes with eyesight, but the perspective that dwells within our own identity and the confidence in our abilities. That is the perspective that helps us rise above these strange and stressful times.

More Talent Untapped is a sequel to the documentary Talent Untapped. If you're interested in a special screening of the original film, send me a note through my website annakarinatabunar.com.

More Talent Untapped is made possible by our sponsors RBC and EARN – the Employment Accessibility Resource Network, an initiative of United Way East Ontario.

The people who helped put together this show are: Lindsey Vodarek, Howard Sonnenberg, Ashley Wright, Colin Van Hattem and me, Anna-Karina Tabuñar.

I'm back in two weeks with another episode of More Talent Untapped.

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