Meghan M. Biro: On this week's episode of WorkTrends, we're digging into some of the most important issues we're all facing at work, bias, diversity and inclusion. Welcome to the WorkTrends podcast from TalentCulture. I'm your host, Meghan M. Biro. Every week we interview interesting people who are reimagining work. Join us on Twitter every [00:00:30] Wednesday 1:30 p.m. Eastern using the #WorkTrends. Welcome back from the Memorial Day holiday. I know we here at TalentCulture needed a break. I hope everybody is back and feeling a bit refreshed. I know I'm getting into more heavy travel mode as we have the HR Tech Conference season's starting to ramp up. I've got some vacations planned with the family. I hope everyone's doing well. I am very excited about today's guest, who is quite the globe trotter. [00:01:00] Let's get to today's interview with our special guest.

Meghan M. Biro: Yassmin Abdel-Magied is a Sudanese-Australian writer, broadcaster, and award-winning social advocate. She trained as a mechanical engineer and worked on oil and gas rigs around Australia for almost half a decade before becoming a full-time writer and broadcaster in 2016. Welcome to WorkTrends, Yassmin.

Yassmin: [00:01:30] Thank you very much for having me, Meghan.

Meghan M. Biro: You travel extensively, so lay it on us. Where are you today? We can only take a wild guess. I don't even want to guess anymore. You and I have been literally, I just want the world to know. We have been trying to get this interview for ... Oh, I don't know, nine weeks now, so here we are.

Yassmin: We made it. Most of the time, I don't know what city I'm in to be perfectly honest. I'm really lucky to be at home [00:02:00] today in London. I just got back from a trip to Dubai. In a couple of days, I'll be heading up to Wales and then somewhere else in Europe. It's kind of a little over the shop by. I feel very grateful to be able to be sharing these messages all over the world.

Meghan M. Biro: No question about it. How do you like living in London?

Yassmin: I love London. I mean I am that person who constantly talks about how great London is despite the weather. I would write a love letter song to London if I had any singing ability. I think it's a place that, yes, it's the [00:02:30] bit mad and the weather is terrible, but you can be anyone you want to be in London. It's such a rich city with all sorts of layers of history that really complex, but I think that makes the city really wonderful.

Meghan M. Biro: Interesting. I felt the same way when I was in London. It was like a melting pot. The weather didn't bother me that much. I feel like I'm based out of Boston, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Honestly, we have the same soupy gray weather half the year, so I was okay with it. You get [00:03:00] desensitized to stuff like that when it's such a gorgeous, vibrant place to be.

Yassmin: What I will say is that ... I mean being from Australia, the CP gray weather definitely was a bit of a shock, but the one good thing is that you can always wear jackets. I'm a huge fan of jacket trends, so there's that.

Meghan M. Biro: That's so cool. I'm actually wearing a plaid jacket today. I thought of that. When I woke up, I was like, "I'm not wearing a blazers and jackets just kind of in a casual [00:03:30] way, you know what I'm saying?

Yassmin: Really? I'm glad to hear that. A jacket always makes anything look great.

Meghan M. Biro: Well, you are from Australia. I want to hear a little bit about your upbringing in a Sudanese family in Australia. I mean how was that experience different than how we think about diversity here in the states?

Yassmin: I think it is quite different. Although there are the similarities that we were a Black family from a racial point of view in a very White neighborhood. The context [00:04:00] in which that existed was very different. My family was from Sudan. My parents grew up in Sudan, probably instead of upper-middle class, it was middle class. They were well educated. They were part of an echelon in Sudan, which meant that they saw themselves as the majority, right? When we moved to Australia, I was around two years old. We were the second Sudanese family in my town of Brisbane, right? The next Sydney's family didn't come until 10 years later. We were definitely the odd ones and most people. This was in the early '90s. We didn't really have [00:04:30] access to the Internet.

Yassmin: Most people had no idea where Sudan was, right? We would definitely, this sort of aberration. The fact that there were that many Africans in Australia meant that there was a little bit of space there for us not to be bound by existing stereotypes. That meant that my parents could come in because they were quite fortunate to already speak English. My father already had a degree that he could use in Australia. My mom's degree wasn't accepted, but my father's was. That meant that we had some [00:05:00] space or some sort of platform from which to build a sort of migrant life in Australia. When we compare the experience of my "Black family" in Australia compared to a typical Black family in the US, we don't have the history of slavery that a lot of the families in the US do.

Yassmin: That history completely changes the way that you see yourself in a nation. My parents completely brought us up with this idea that we are now Australians. We belong there. We were migrants, but we were here to build and to be part of the fabric [00:05:30] of the country. Also, they never call themselves Black because, in Sudan, they weren't considered Black. It only was once I started to engage in issues of social justice and racial equality did I even conceive of the fact that we were of color. The main lens through which I saw myself with the fact that we are Muslim. That was a little bit more challenging because it was much more of a visual difference. They are very different I think from a US context.

Meghan M. Biro: Well, I just returned from Atlanta here in the US, which speaking of a history [00:06:00] of slavery, you feel it. You know that context when you're there. I feel, here in the US, we've complicated this issue quite a bit to your point.

Yassmin: Yeah, it's inescapable.

Meghan M. Biro: It's inescapable.

Yassmin: I think the analogy would be in Australia to the first nations people, the indigenous people in Australia. If you look at life expectancy and discrimination and so on, the numbers or the statistics around indigenous people in Australia are appalling. I think they're probably [00:06:30] analogists and the relationship that they have with the police, for example, to the US Black context. I don't think it means it was so different that there was nothing in common. But certainly, there's a little bit more nuanced there.

Meghan M. Biro: What was your first job as an engineer? Tell us what that was like.

Yassmin: It's not the typical job I think that people expect when they see me walking down the street. When I was in my first year uni, I had a vacation job, a holiday job as an engineering student. My first job was in a coal [00:07:00] mine, actually. It was 2008-2009. I was 17 years old. All I wanted to do was a, get a holiday job where I wouldn't have to be living at home. I was still living at Hampshire University. I wanted to spread my wings a little bit. And b, I wanted an adventure. I applied for it, and got this job as an engineering student or a baby engineer in a coal mine. I have to work with the engineers on site. I think I was maybe the only female engineer on site. There were a couple of other female roles, but [00:07:30] no other female engineers. I think many of the jobs I've done in engineering. I was just so different that people had no idea what to do. We were working out in Western Queensland, a very White part of Australia.

Yassmin: Also, a particular cultural part. We use the word [inaudible 00:00:07:51], which is kind of like ... There is a particular accent, a particular culture and so on that goes with that part of the world. I just came in. I was like, "Hey, folks. [00:08:00] How's it going? Can I get involved? There was like, "Where did you come from?"

Meghan M. Biro: In your case, how you were raised to feel like you could fit in anywhere. It's a mindset. It's your family. It's being open minded. So many of those things that we talk about when we say bias and diversity, it's just how willing are you to accept life at life's terms, culture, context, people, human, [00:08:30] et cetera, et cetera. It's just very interesting to me. Now you happen to be in a coal mine, is that right?

Yassmin: Yes.

Meghan M. Biro: That's wild.

Yassmin: It's quite interesting, of course, when you hear about the coal miners and so on. There's a particular image that comes to mind. Certainly, the image that people have is never someone that looks like me. Young Sudanese-Australian woman. I think it is interesting because while I was young, certainly, it was a lot easier to go into these spaces and to be like, "Take me on my own terms. Take me as [00:09:00] I am. I think it's a nuanced story because, quite often, I would go in and not realize or not really pay attention to the fact that I was any different. I truly believed that if I just worked hard and showed people that I was just as good an engineer, that would be all. I would vaguely hear stories about resident and discrimination and so on and be like, "You know, that doesn't apply to me."

Yassmin: Somehow, I am exempt. I think lots of people, especially ones [00:09:30] that are brought up with parents, who give them a view of the world that they can talk about anything. We go out into the world with this rosy idea that anything's possible. Then, at some point, you start to hit reality and it kind of hurt.

Meghan M. Biro: Tell us about your first reality check around bias.

Yassmin: I think I obviously had my first experience as a student in coal mines. Then when I graduated I'd wanted to work in motor sport, gotten into a motor sport master's and ended up needing to save money in order to [00:10:00] be able to get into this master's. It took a job as one does on an oil rig. My first job was in an oil and gas company. Then I did that for a couple of years and then got a job at another big oil major in a higher-up position. Obviously, when I came to negotiate the salary package and so on. I had like a couple of years' experience already and the experience that I'd had as I've worked through my degree. I had a number of years experience.

Yassmin: They sort said to me, "Look, there's [00:10:30] a very specific package that we offer." If you've got one year or two years or three experiences is what it looks like. I was like, "Great." They're like, "All right, we've deemed that you have one-year equivalent experience. This is the salary that you come in on." When I started working, I found little so hired another guy, a guy that I went to university with, who didn't do as well at university. I had come out with first class honors and he hasn't. I had done better at university. He also had come straight out of university and gotten this job. This is his first job, [00:11:00] but he had somehow managed to wrangle the same level of pay that I had, right? Despite me coming out of two years working experience in the same field.

Yassmin: I was like, "Okay, that's quite interesting." I went back to the HR folks. I was like, "Look, I've heard that somebody else had managed to convince you. You told me that there was no negotiation, but clearly there is." The lady, the HR lady essentially said to me. She was like, "It is completely inappropriate to you to be discussing pay with one of your colleagues." This is just the decision [00:11:30] we've made. There was no room for discussion. I don't mean being shocked because I was performing quite well. I thought that I'd actually been

headhunted into this position. I didn't even apply for the job in the typical manner. I was like, "Oh, surely. They'd want to treat me well."

Yassmin: Even with all of that, this guy who had performed not as well at university, and this was my first. This is graduate level. This isn't even people talk about salary packages at the C-suite. This is straight [00:12:00] out the gate. The male colleague was still getting a better deal than I was. Obviously, every year, that difference will accumulate. I thought to myself, "Wait a minute. This isn't how it's supposed to go." Right? Surely, even at the graduate level, equal pay is a thing. How can it possibly be? Then it becomes very difficult to pass what is discrimination and what is just the way that it is. Are you making a big fuss of something that's not that big of a deal? It becomes very difficult [00:12:30] to figure out, I think, what's true and what isn't.

Meghan M. Biro: Then you feel badly about yourself also in this process, which is, that brings up a lot of negativity around opening yourself up to a conversation to begin with, which doesn't help anybody, right?

Yassmin: Yeah, 100%. These are the challenges because it's a nuance, because it's so personal, because it's so uncomfortable. We don't end up having the deep, important discussions that we need to actually change the outcomes. We talk [00:13:00] about equal pay in. Every time we talk about equal pay in any country, folks are like, "Oh, well." It's not really people are not getting paid different. It's the fact that people take time off. You can always find an excuse when it's in a gray area, but the reality is, that was one of the first time that I thought, "Okay, the system isn't actually set up for me. Maybe who I am, the fact that I am a woman. That I am a person of color, and that people don't expect me to [00:13:30] be a good engineer when they look at me." Maybe that's having more of an impact than I have given it credit for.

Meghan M. Biro: I want to jump to 2014 when you did a TED Talk. Tell me about that talk. How it changed the course of your career?

Yassmin: It's funny, sometimes you do something and you don't quite realize how big a difference it's going to make to your life until well after the fact. I had been involved in youth organizing and social justice work for a long time, since I was about 13 or 14. The reason I'd been asked to do this [00:14:00] TED Talk is because people, I'd started youth organization called Youth Without Borders when I was about 16. I'd run that for some time. I was known in my area for that. I was asked to do a talk based on my experiences. I had ideas for this talk, to do with youth justice and youth organizing and these broad, grand ideas. Then one particular afternoon, I was on my way actually to meet the organizer of the TEDX [00:14:30] conference. That morning I'd left my house and I'd had my head scarf tied up in a little bit of a turban. I'd caught the bus. I'd gone and done some errands, and I'd come home.

Yassmin: Then I, on the way to meet this woman, the TedX woman, I've changed my headscarf style. That was the same scarf. I just changed it to the more traditional wrap that you associate with Muslim people. I've got on the same bus. I took the same route and pass the same shops. I think it was just the fact that I was wearing the same outfit, I noticed that people [00:15:00] treated me differently. The bus driver treated me differently. People on the bus and the shops that I walked past, they didn't smile at me. Despite the fact that they had done so just that morning. I got to this meeting and I was like, "Listen, I've got these great ideas for this talk, but let me just get something off my chest. I can't believe that I could walk down the same street. Just because my scarf is wrapped differently, people were treating differently."

Yassmin: The woman looks at me. She was like, "That's your talk." She was like, "I don't even want to hear about the other ideas. That's your talk." I was like, "Well, what are you talking about? It's not that big of a deal." [00:15:30] I genuinely, I was like, "That's just my daily life. It doesn't make that much. There isn't enough in it." She was like, "No, you are so well-positioned to tell this story because you are someone who dresses in so many different outfits and wear so many different headscarves so to speak that it's perfect." I sort of, "I thought about it." I was like, "Well, I guess you right. When I go to the mosque and the outfit that I wear then is quite different from when I go to work, people make different judgments every time." That's kind of where the talk came from. It came from this very real experience.

Yassmin: I had never [00:16:00] thought of myself as someone who would become well-known around the world for talking about unconscious bias. It was just something that felt so personal and so real. It was a message that I wanted to say to people, look beyond your initial biases. I did this talk. Then it got picked up by TED's, the main conference and put on the TED website. It was actually then picked one of the top 10 ideas of the year. I think it was just around the time that unconscious bias began to be aware that people heard of that. I got quite [00:16:30] lucky that I hit the psych test. The talk began being used all over the world. People started ringing me up from all over the world. I was like, "What is going on?"

Meghan M. Biro: You're like, well, sometimes just being yourself and being human makes all the difference and can truly bring people to a place of not just like, "Hey, this is really cool or different," but, "I'm inspired by this woman. I'm inspired to make a difference in the world." I think that's [00:17:00] awesome, by the way.

Yassmin: It's been really a humbling experience to see lots of people connect to it in such a real way.

Meghan M. Biro: How has the conversation changed since 2014? Bring us up to present day.

Yassmin: There has been a lot going on since 2014. I think when the topic of unconscious bias first hit the scene, the diversity and inclusion space in 2014. it was an idea

that was very new. Like, yes, cognitive and implicit bias had been talked about in the academic [00:17:30] circles for a while, but this was the first time the subject had come into the corporate space. Over the past couple of years, there have been many companies, many organizations and so on that have really latched onto this idea of unconscious bias because it's a really compelling idea that all of us have these biases that are unconscious. I think the challenge has been is when we have either a scene or unconscious biases, the conversation that we need to have it as the only conversation that we need to have. [00:18:00] People thinking that a little bit of unconscious bias training is going to fix all our problems. That's been, I think, something that I've started to see and is a little bit of a problem.

Meghan M. Biro: Of course, because we're human and many of us are lazy.

Yassmin: Yeah, exactly.

Meghan M. Biro: That's what this is. This is laziness.

Yassmin: Totally.

Meghan M. Biro: This is laziness. This is an inability to change and flex. Let's just get honest about the conversation. That's why we're needing to layer on all these fancy things on top of something that's just a very human-level [00:18:30] reaction to other people.

Yassmin: You're totally right, Meghan, [crosstalk 00:18:34]

Meghan M. Biro: I mean let's call BS where we see BS. I mean, come on. It's not that hard.

Yassmin: It's not rocket science.

Meghan M. Biro: That's what makes me laugh about technology at this point. You can't layer technology over a human experience that still kind of broken. We got to change people. We got to change culture. This is a mindset opportunity for each and every one of us.

Yassmin: [00:19:00] It's so good to hear you say that, Meghan, because I said this exact same thing to a group that I'm speaking to at Oxford recently. There was asking, what do I say to people who want to change or organizations and institutions. One of the first things I said is that nothing is a silver bullet. You're not going to fix the issue of diversity and inclusion by building an app. It's not going to be one training that's going to change everything, right, because the workplaces that we're in are reflections of the society that we're in, [00:19:30] right? Unless we challenge the underlying prejudice and racism and ableism and homophobia that exist in our society, that's not going to change.

Yassmin: Yes, I can talk to you about unconscious bias, but unless you're willing to do the internal work to challenge those biases, no amount of training is going to fix that, right? I think that's been the challenge. It's been, "Okay, great. Everyone's really passionate about this idea of unconscious bias now, but are they willing to do the work? [00:20:00] Are they willing really to dig beneath the superficial and to dig beneath the buzzwords and all of this sort of stuff to say, "Well, actually, we're going to do the hard work of becoming better people."

Meghan M. Biro: Thank you for saying that. If you're out there and you're listening to us right now, what are you doing today to be a better person? How are you treating yourself? How are you treating others? We can go back to nursery school or kindergarten for some of these lessons. [00:20:30] We're now adults with digital transformation and all this great AI technology. We're still going to level set with everybody and say, "You got to start there," and then use this really sexy technology to build culture, to reinforce culture because this is a culture conversation. This is all of you leaders out there, and I've been blogging for a decade about being a leader that is tuned into not only your talent but your culture, right? This is your moment.

Yassmin: [00:21:00] 100%, and I think we-

Meghan M. Biro: The time is now.

Yassmin: ... as a society, crying out for that leadership. I really believe that. I think we are very also able to see people who lead with authenticity. I believe that. I mean it's quite interesting. You just mentioned. You can go back to nursery and primary school with this stuff. I think it's so true. You can have really complex conversations around safe spaces and political correctness. But ultimately, it's the same lesson [00:21:30] as do you respect the people around you? Do you treat the people around you well? If somebody says, That hurts me. I don't like it." Well then, if you truly respect them, you're going to respect their wishes rather than engage in this intellect, pseudo-intellectual conversation around what one is or isn't allowed to do some document or some policy. Ultimately, do you care about the people around you? Do you want them to feel safe and to feel welcome, and to feel like they belong? Because [00:22:00] if they do, that's when they make their best work. That's when they're the most creative. That's when they're the most engaged. That's how you create the best teams. Ultimately, that's what it's about.

Meghan M. Biro: What's your best advice for leaders and people who want to reduce bias in their hiring and management processes?

Yassmin: I think there's two elements to it. One is the personal work that we have to do, every single one of us, myself included. Then the other is the professional or the more institutional. From a personal point of view, I often [00:22:30] say to leaders and to individuals interested in this, "You have to be willing to do the work on yourself. None of this, if I come into an organization. I meet someone

who's like, "Look, we really care about diversity and inclusion." We're doing all of these policies. That individual has not done any work on themselves in their own biases and prejudices, then it just becomes a lot less credible because then it becomes about, "Well, I'm here to tell all these other people what to do, but I'm not going to challenge myself."

Yassmin: The first thing is, start to make yourself uncomfortable [00:23:00] by reading things outside your general area. If the workers around racial staff and ableism and gender inequality and so on, there are so many books out there. You can read Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race by Reni Eddo-Lodge. You can read White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo to understand why it's really difficult for people to talk about this stuff. There are lots of other authors like Angela Davis and Bell Hooks and so on, that can give you an insight into some of these challenges. [00:23:30] Intersectionality is a concept that was created by Kimberlé Crenshaw a couple of years before I was born in 1989. That also gives you an idea of why Black women have a slightly different experience to Black men and to White women. Once you start to do that internally and sit with the discomfort of, "Okay, maybe I have been biased and prejudiced in my life, but I'm willing to do the work to change it."

Yassmin: That's a great start. Then you can go into your organization and say, "Hey, I've been doing this work." It's been hard for me, but I think it's important for [00:24:00] us as a community, as a workplace to do something about it. What you do then is you look at, "Okay, what are our processes, where biases being introduced? Is it promotions?" Something a really interesting report recently showed that we like to think of targets and quotas as the things that are going to fix everything. Say, for example, you have a shortlist for promotions. There are four people on the short list. You're like, "You know what? We want to include Black people. We want include women. I'm going to put one woman on the shortlist." Well, the research shows that if you put one woman [00:24:30] on the short list versus two women on the shortlist, statistically, you would double the chances of a woman being hired.

Yassmin: Actually, if you have two women on the shortlist, you are 79 times more likely to hire a woman, 79 times more likely to hire a woman simply because when you only have one woman on the short list, you're only focusing on the fact that she's a woman. Every time you think about her, all your biases about women are coming into play, right? A simple thing you can do is balance your shortlist. Put two women and two men, [00:25:00] put two people of color, the researchers, if you double the number of people of color on your short list, you're 194 times more likely to hire a person of color. Which means. on one hand, you're like, "Oh my god. That's terrible. I've got such really strong biases." But on the other hand, all it takes is you balancing your shortlist. Then all of a sudden you'd give people a much better chance, right? I think there are lots of things like that. You can balance your shortlist. You can make sure that you don't have identifiers on your resumes and so on like names and addresses and [00:25:30] even hobbies.

Yassmin: If somebody's hobby's rowing and somebody's hobby's hip hop, there are assumptions people make about these differences, right? As an organization you can have a look at those sorts of things. I guess the other thing that's really interesting and something I've recently started to talk about is, what is your complaint system? If people choose to put in a complaint, right, which often doesn't happen. The percentage of people who are marginalized, who actually put [00:26:00] in a complaint is very low. If people choose to put a complaint, what happens to that complaint? Is there any power behind that complaint process? Do things actually get better or does somebody get punished for that? If you think about a feedback system, if I'm going to put in a Google review, a bad Google review about a particular place. Then I'm going to get charged more money every time I go into that institution or every time I go into that shop because I put in a bad complaint, I'm never going to put a complaint in, right?

Yassmin: If you're somebody working somewhere. They put a complaint in. You'd get Loki punished for it, you're never going to want to [00:26:30] do that. There are all these ideas. The other really important thing is if you're running a business and you've got a D&I team, but the D&I team has no money. There's no career progression in the D&I space. Then why would your best and brightest people go into D&I? Because they're fighting a losing battle. How seriously are you taking this challenge of creating an inclusive culture? If it's not something you're putting any resources behind, have a look at all those different aspects and do a bit of work on yourself. I think then you've got a [00:27:00] good start.

Meghan M. Biro: Where do you think we're going to be in the next five to 10 years with all this?

Yassmin: I think we're at a really interesting time in society. I think we're at a point with this so much for hope. I mean there is great and representations that's getting even better on television I think and in books. I think slowly, slowly that is changing. There's certainly stuff on TV that wouldn't have happened three years ago, let alone 20 years ago when I was watching TV as a kid, right? I think the stuff that's happening in representation [00:27:30] is great. But on the other hand, I think politically and culturally, there are aspects of society that are more resistant to change and which one of these paths we go down. I think depends on how much energy and effort we, as a broader society, put in getting the result we want. If we are interested in an inclusive society and we put as much effort as those that are trying to divide our society are, then I think we've got a really good chance.

Yassmin: Honestly, that's the side [00:28:00] of the fence on which I fall, right? Because I think it is really easy to focus on how challenging things are. It's important to focus on how challenging things are. I'm definitely wide-eyed to those risks. I think those risks have always been there. I think we've always fought them in just different ways. What makes me happier is that we're able to talk about these things in ways that we may not have always been able to talk about them. We're having conversations and using words like White fragility, and supremacy, and intersectionality. [00:28:30] What's really, 10-20 years ago were considered

radical, which I think gives me a little bit of hope because at least, we're able to talk about what's going on a little bit better. Hopefully, that means we then have the tools to continue to challenge it.

Meghan M. Biro: Wow. What a great conversation. Thank you so much for stopping by and sharing your story with us, Yassmin.

Yassmin: Thank you for having me, Meghan

Meghan M. Biro: Let's keep [00:29:00] the conversation now moving. Join us for our WorkTrends' Twitter chat. We are going to be on the twitters with Yassmin Abdel-Magied on Wednesday, June 5th, at 1:30 p.m. Eastern, 10:30 a.m. Pacific, and wherever you are around the globe. Join us to talk about how work is changing around you. We want to hear your thoughts, your feelings, your ideas. If you'd like to get our Twitter chat questions in advance, sign up for our newsletter@talentculture.com. [00:29:30] Thanks for listening to WorkTrends from TalentCulture. Join us every Wednesday at 1:30 p.m. Eastern for a live Twitter chat with our podcast guests. To learn more about guests featured on today's show, visit the show notes for this episode at talentculture.com and help us spread the word. Subscribe to WorkTrends wherever you listen to podcast. Leave us a rating, review in iTunes. Share WorkTrends with your coworkers, [00:30:00] your friends. Look forward to it. See you next time.