

Interview with Fiona Jackson, Radius Consultant, and Keela Shackell-Smith MBE, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Cabinet Office

Names	Commentary
FJ	Right, so, thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed today, Keela. Really interested in hearing what you're doing at the Cabinet Office and how you use networks. So, can we start ... would you tell me a little bit about why you have networks and what the value of them is to you there?
KSS	So, I would say just a bit of background about me – I do love a network so I did co-found two networks. I co-founded the Women's Network; I co-founded the Cross-Government Women's Network; I headed up the LGBT network so I'm ... I've come from that network side and now I'm working in the diversity inclusion side in HR. So it's ... I've got this bit of an insight into the value of networks because I see the value from the network members' point of view. So I remember what it was like to be a network member and actually I really needed the LGBT network at that time so I see the value from a staff perspective; I see the value as I headed up a network as well because of actually ... a network working with HR really, really well is gold ... and now I'm in the Diversity & Inclusion world in HR it's so now I'm like Wow, networks are the voice of staff. I need to know the voice of staff. Surveys are one thing but networks you get a really rich ... voice and knowledge as to how it really, really feels to work in that department so I just ... I just feel that networks are absolutely invaluable because it's the voice of staff but also they ... they support individuals as well because they're passionate about it so ... so it's about voice; it's about support and also about, you know, raising issues that might not come through in a survey.
FJ	And so do you actually also use them to inform HR policy and D&I strategy and, you know, are you actually, you know, working and using those voices really to strongly influence, is that something that happens?
KSS	Oh incredibly. I rely on that. I need to know ... what it feels like to work in this department so absolutely ... so the Parental Support Network at the moment are raising questions about policies on annual leave because, of course, school holidays are coming up and what happens with Covid, school holidays, worried about special leave so, yeah, absolutely. That's ... the networks is where I actually hear all of this to then go to my HR policy colleagues to go Look, this is what networks are asking at the moment ... but also it's the other way round too. So HR policy go to networks and say What do you think about this? For example, one thing they've done recently is our flexible working policy. They've said Right, this is the policy; we're updating it; what do you think about it? So it's a great kind of consultation group as well.
FJ	Oh, OK, so it's interesting that you mentioned two different ones there in terms of what's needed ... from a parental perspective and also what we might do ... what you might do change your flexible working policy. Have you got any more examples of how networks have really had that sort of impact and that voice that are actively changing how your department works?
KSS	This isn't in the organisation I'm in now but, in my previous one, something that us, as a women's network, were really crying out for was the Compressed Hours policy so, in my previous organisation, we ... we didn't have a policy for compressed hours – it wasn't something that was liked actually. We worked with HR to actually get that embedded and we achieved that ... but I would say it was very much a networks, HR, trade unions all working together to get that policy ... in place ... and it worked so it's probably the Compressed Hours ... policy is another example.
FJ	So making a real change ... yeah. Really changing how an organisation works. And ... and what resources do you give to your networks to help them carry out this ... vital role?

KSS A few different things. So the first one is dedicated time so I think a lot of organisations are a lot more awake to this now. I must admit early on, when I was co-founding the Women's Network, protected network time for you to spend on networks was not talked about. It was something that you did, like, in the margins of your day job ... or at the weekend or evenings which I didn't condone ... but it's talked about so much more now so we do have dedicated time ... that individuals can use. I would say that it varies because, of course, it still relies on your line manager actually understanding the value of that contribution as well but it is written in our business deal between networks and the organisation that network time is allowed and it should be in your objectives and you should be praised and ... and it should be part of your appraisal conversation. So dedicated time. Budget as well. We've got a flexible budget so it's ... it's a figure but, you know, it's flexible so each network knows that they've got a budget that they could dip into but I would say we're not rigid on that – right, once you get to that you're not allowed any more budget ... it's very much a flexible budget and, yeah ... so those are the main resources ... and obviously from the D&I world, away from time and money, I link up with other Government departments as well so ... so that's a kind of resource in itself too that actually it's D&I time to link up to other Government departments ... yeah.

FJ So, in doing that, do you find and share best practice ideas that you bring back with the networks and work through?

KSS Definitely. I love borrowing best practice. I do not like reinventing the wheel (laughs) at all ... so, certainly from my Cross-Government Women's Network work, that's what we did. We shared best practice across all Government departments because we're pretty similar in the way ... there are differences obviously in all the departments but actually most networks talk about mentoring programmes, sponsorship programmes, networking events. All of those things all networks are talking about so let's go ... let's nab it (laughs) from another department and use it so I just don't like reinventing the wheel at all. So we've got a lot of cross-Government networks that we tap into as well. So ... for example, actually I've just had a call just now with our South Asia network which is a cross-Government network so us, as a Cabinet Office, we dip into that cross-Government network ... and we do that ... there are lots of cross-Government networks that we tap into.

FJ So you have a local infrastructure and then you have the wider Government-wide infrastructure and you can link in and have conversations and access to members at all those different levels?

KSS Yeah, exactly.

FJ Sort of a matrix structure of networks?

KSS Yeah, it is. It really is. So, for example, the LGBT Network is a Cabinet Office network but, at the moment, it's ... we're ... we're talking about Pride and the cross-Government LGBT Network are doing a lot of events so we have our own events, we tap into their events ... so, yeah, it really ... it really does work well.

FJ And ... what challenges do you think your networks face in general and how are they overcoming them?

KSS The ... the first thing that always comes to mind when networks talk to me about their challenges is time. Always it's the first thing that people say it's time; that they really, really struggle for time or their line manager ... doesn't carve out that time in their work programme for them to do it so then they're doing it, you know, in their own time. So, so time is definitely the one that I hear all the time. The other one I hear about a lot are networks who aren't set up in ... in fact, actually, when I did the Radius Leadership Programme, this is something that I really, really benefited from was really looking at the networks like a business in a way. So it's a bit like we're a business unit so we've got to think about action planning; we've got to think about how we praise our volunteers; we've got to think about reward and things like that ...

so, it was very much a turning point for me because I kept hearing that Oh, I don't have time to do it and people felt like they couldn't leave their position on the committee and I'm like A position on the committee is not a position for life; I would much rather you told me you don't have time for this, step back and let someone else step up ... and I really changed my ... what I kept saying to the committees actually, after the Leadership Programme that I did, by saying No, it's not a job for life; think of it for a year because that's a real issue that I find with the networks. It's ... it's fatigue so people volunteer, they're in that role and they don't feel they can leave it; then they feel really guilty. I'm asking them to do stuff, they don't have the time and then I get Oh, please do it ... so I hear that quite a lot as well. But I think network fatigue is a very real thing.

FJ Yeah ... yeah ... I ... I see that. I've seen that too as well. I wanted to just delve a little bit more about time ... and what ideas, advice or support do you offer your network leads to help unblock that? What would you recommend that they should be doing to ... to help with ... you know, to deal with that?

KSS So ... a few things. Like, I don't ... I would never, ever want to go down the route of saying to somebody Well, if your line manager won't carve out time then talk to me and I'll talk to the most senior person and they will speak to your line manager and get you ... I don't want to do that; it just ... it doesn't feel right. So, what I usually say is Let's go back and think about how you've recruited people. What are you actually asking people to do? So, for example, and this is when I led the Women's Network, we always had roles that were non-elected so it was based on passion. It wasn't ... we didn't have an election process where we ... people stood up and told you what they did and stuff like that. It just felt too corporate ... we just said Right, who's got passion for this? And so you were recruited based on your passion (laughs) because, if you've got passion, you will actually get that time and you will be very protective over that time and you will fight for that time with your line manager to make sure it's not squashed. So I think you've got to go back to how you're set up. So, with network leads on my committee, I said it was a role for a year so don't think of that role to be over a year because, I don't know about you but, I can only really focus my energy on something for about a year. After that, I've kind of lost that energy and it needs to go to somebody else and ... a good leader recognises that dip in the energy and steps off that space. So I think, for me, it's about ... you've got to think about how you've actually set up in the first place. What's the messages you're giving to your committee? I was always very conscious of reward and recognition as well so, with my leads, in the Women's Network, I did nominate them for World garden parties; I ... nominated people for honours; I also nominated them in ... and oh, sometimes it was a letter ... I asked the Chief Exec for some letters to praise people in the ... in the committee and a letter goes a really, really long way because it gave them that boost to keep going so ... so we do keep hearing about Actually it is hard and I do ... I know ... I know it's hard to keep going when you're going through network fatigue and sometimes it's just really, really hard but ... you've got to think about how you are rewarding and recognising, you know, going over and above the day job and I was always very keen to focus in on that.

FJ Yeah, no, those are some really good ideas ... and I love the idea of getting an invite to the garden party. I mean ...

KSS Yeah – that was really successful. So I did nominate someone and she went as well and she was really, really shocked and ... so I've ... I've also got an MBE and the reason why I've got the MBE is because people ... in the network nominated me and that's just phenomenal. I ... like, it's giving me goosebumps just saying it so these are volunteers in the network actually took their time out to actually write a nomination for me. I just find that really, really bizarre in my head so ... but I think that's a cultural thing – in your network as well, that culture of reward and recognition I think needs to be built into networks but, yeah, the honour thing is ... I still don't believe it happened (laughs) so ... yeah ...

- FJ Lovely ... and ... how do you measure the value that networks are adding to your organisation? It's always a challenge, isn't it? How do you do it?
- KSS Yeah ... it really, really is ... so a few different ... so I'm going to flip-flop between Cabinet Office and my other organisation as well. How I ... I feel it's best practice ... is by ... I used to do a survey every year of the network and the survey had specific questions every single year which was measuring impact. So I was ... I would be asking questions about ... how, you know, how many people have used some of the ... initiatives that we rolled out? How has the network impacted your career? And so we had ... we worked with market research actually on some specific questions to measure the impact of the network ... and we actually ran those questions every single year so we could compare each year and then I could see a change over the year so that was my ... that was how I showed the network was having an impact. So we always ran the survey. We always fed that back in our annual report as well so, as a network, we did produce an annual report – all about the successes – and that used to go out to the top and all of the directors ... as well as cascading it out throughout the organisation as well so we used to tell people (laughs) how good we are. But I would say the survey was key and having some really good questions on impact is ... is vital. And I guess from the other side about measuring impact ... people vote with their feet so people join networks if they're going to get something out of it and, if they're leaving, that sends you a pretty interesting sign so something I used to - this sounds really awful but it wasn't in an awful way – but, if anyone ever left the Women's Network, I did used to just send them ... drop them an email saying Is there anything we could have done differently? And, I know it sounds a bit weird like YOU MUST NOT LEAVE THIS NETWORK! It wasn't that at all. I just ... I got quite keyed on on the valuation so I wanted to know, like, what were they expecting? What did they not get out of it? And you can't really do that ...like people do that in exit interviews in, like, your day job but, in the network, you don't have an exit interview of why people left ... so people vote with their feet so if ... if membership's going up, you might be doing a pretty good job (laughs) you know ... so that's one way. But, yeah, I think it's that combination.
- FJ I like the idea that you sort of introduced informal exit interviews really.
- KSS I did, yeah! No, I did. Some people just ignored me and ... and that was absolutely fine; there was no pressure to like YOU MUST TELL ME WHY YOU LEFT THE NETWORK! But it was just ... just to have that conversation as to ... to why ... what they were expecting, what they didn't get ... and some of it was as simple as There's too many emails, there's too many requests, I ... I've got too much in the day job at the minute but it was ... it was really valuable insight for me.
- FJ Yeah, yeah, from that perspective. And you mention that you actually went on the course years ago.
- KSS Yeah, I think it was like one of the very first courses ...
- FJ OK
- KSS ... actually, when it was first launched.
- FJ You ... you mention some of the impact. It made you ... look at running your network like a business. You know, are there things you are still using from that course now that you're in a sort of D&I lead role and how do you think that's benefited the organisations that you've been in?
- KSS Yeah ... do you know the thing that really sticks in my head ... and you know when you ... when you can see yourself in that seat and you can see yourself in that room? I can see myself in the room when, on the course, we were talking about how networks, how HR, how organisations and champions all fit together. Like, this is confession time now but, at the time, I would say there was friction and I ... I would be shocked if anyone ever ... anyone ... any network feed ever said there's not

friction between what a network does, what an organisation does, what trade unions do. All of those ... actually it's hard to actually all work together ... so, in that moment when we were talking about a network and an organisation working effectively together and embedding what they're hearing from networks into diversity strategies for organisations and making it ... making it a business activity, that's what stuck into my head. That's what I brought into my Diversity & Inclusion role in Cabinet Office of how do you work together and how do you put that into those business-led actions because, otherwise, networks become islands ... and networks shouldn't be islands. They were meant to be all working in parallel so, yeah, that bit of the course really does stick in my head.

FJ Wonderful. The whole ... and that's all about stakeholders, isn't it? That's something that came in the stakeholders' session where you're sort of all looking at who ... who is it and how do you work together and who's important to go and engage with and ... and who can bring the business so it's really handy that that's ... really interesting, sorry, to hear that that's continued through, you know, and had a long-lasting impact with you. So, let's think a little bit now about how things are changing since lockdown. So, what has been the impact of lockdown and Covid-19 on ... on your networks and on your relationship with those networks as the D&I lead?

KSS We have gone into a bit more of an adapting phase at the minute, they're individuals for one. So, they will be going through the change curve individually. Then ... they've got their day job and some people we work with in Cabinet Office move to roles that are specifically looking at teams as well so they've been moved roles and working in very high pressured roles at the moment and they've got their network job as well where people are asking them for support and advice of network leads right now. So I've just been really conscious of my asks of them and keeping them to a minimum actually ... and supporting them where I can. So I wouldn't, as a Diversity & Inclusion Manager, usually get involved in Pride month, into the nitty-gritty of organising it, because that's network's, but I'm also conscious that, actually, this is my role; I'm still in this role; I can help them right now so I have been going across the line and going Look, give me a task. I will help you during this time because I know you need to offer one to one support to your members right now and that's what I would prefer you to focus on (laughs) in a way. So, it ... it has changed. It's changed ... and we're adapting so much ... every network has adapted so, so well.

FJ Tell me more about those adaptations then. What sort of things have you seen happen?

KSS The ... well, firstly, like, I would say that networks ... and actually this came out of the Leadership Programme when I did it, was love ... love events. Every network does events, events, events and that's very much how they used to operate. And, of course, now they can't; they don't focus on events. But what they have done is become super, super targeted so, for example, our Parental Support Network, I would say that they've ... they've changed the most and they changed incredibly quickly so they got really targeted. Right from the beginning they were like OK we're getting all of these requests and ... from parents and this feedback – what do we do? They were Like, right – so they set up a buddy scheme pretty much overnight to match parent buddies together. They set up age specific groups as well because, very early on, when it came to lockdown and schools shutting, they said there's a massive difference between a parent of a toddler, a parent of primary age and then parent of secondary age ... let's get targeted coffee chats; let's talk to each other; let's offer advice. It's not just coming back to the leadership but just like supporting each other. So they set up those. They set up some check ins. They produced a newsletter really, really quickly and all of this actually came about after lockdown so they ... they were a network beforehand ... but the need just escalated it so quickly and they had to think ... right, how do we support people? But it's not all coming back to the leadership. It's about others supporting each other. So they've changed immensely.

FJ Sounds like a really good innovation, you know, through need sometimes you just, don't know what we were going to do but this is what's needed so, yeah, just react and respond really quickly.

KSS I agree.

FJ Very, very positive. So ... just to ... we've got a minute left in ...

KSS Oh sorry (laughs)

FJ ... very nearly ... so what do you see as the future of networks looking like in this, sort of, new – I hate saying new normal – personal hatred of the same – in the way we're going to be working in the future, what do you see networks looking like?

KSS Yeah ... I was ... I would like to go back to that innovation word because ... I always felt that ... I never used to have a budget actually for the Women's Network because I thought that actually budget stifles innovation. And now, in this world, I'm just seeing such amount of innovation and I'm really pleased by that. So networks are becoming super targeted. Networks are listening to so much more voices now because we can get people ... we can get a lot more people in these virtual spaces. We can listen to so many more voices now and ... a lot of our networks now are talking about intersectionality and doing hosting combined events so our Race Equality Network are ... are combining with our LGBT+ Network and doing an event next week. So, we're listening to more voices so I ... I like that. I like that it's not, you know, silo; it's not just one network. We're listening to more ... and ... and actually we've gone to, if I could talk about practical inclusion as well, I would say that – this is my observation – that inclusion's talked about but we've got ... we've become really practical about inclusion now. So, for example, we've been talking about induction. How do we get people inducted into our organisation in a virtual space? And, instead of actually talking about it, we're just going and doing it. So, we're like OK, so we're not going to have somebody talk about why inclusion is important – let's talk about practical inclusion. I found that, in the past, we've been ... we've got into this kind of spiral of talking about inclusion. I quite like learning by doing so something we've been talking about is our induction process and how do we actually get people in the organisation and actually their first ... their first view of the organisation is online. And actually I don't want to just tell people about inclusion so how about we look at this practically? Is there something about changing our screens so you know we put Powerpoint slides up? My brother ... has got dyslexia and ... he uses yellow paper. Is there something about changing our background of our induction materials? Not telling anybody but actually just putting it on there and a note at the bottom to say why you've actually done that. So there's something for me about ... in this new world ... about doing inclusion and learning by doing instead of actually constantly talking about inclusion. So another example is, on these calls, like all of our virtual calls, we've got into the habit now of putting our pronouns next to our name ... on Zoom calls ... and I'm finding that brilliant because actually then that sparks conversations as to OK so why is that important? And actually it's so incredibly important for ... especially for anyone who's non-binary ... so, for me, the new ... this new space is about practical inclusion; it's not talking about diversity; it's doing stuff and then people noticing it and it's really practical inclusion.

FJ Yeah ... and because people notice it you can then talk about it again.

KSS Yeah, exactly.

FJ Yeah. Wonderful. Wonderful. So, really excited to talk to you and some fantastic things it sounds like you're working on, Keela. Thank you very much for your time. Much appreciated and ... there you go ... time for lunch and a break.