

One Knight in Product - E108 - Merina Khanom

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SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, Merina Khanom



Jason Knight 00:00

Hello, and welcome to the show. I'm your host, Jason Knight. And on each episode of this podcast, I'll be having inspiring conversations with passionate product people. If you like the sound of that and want to hear from me and some of the finest product thought leaders and practitioners in the world, why not head over to [OneKnightInProduct.com](https://www.oneknightinproduct.com), where you can sign up to the mailing list, subscribe on your favourite podcast app or follow the podcast on social media and guarantee you never miss another episode again. On tonight's episode, we talk about making your way into product management from a non traditional background, finding your specialty and fighting the corner for your users to make sure they're not seen as a second thought. We also go deep into what it means to be the only person that looks like you in your organisation, why it's lazy to blame a lack of diversity and inclusion on pipeline problems, how conferences and community organisers still have a lot of work to do and why increasing opportunity and diversity of thought isn't just as simple as us asking all of our marginalised teammates to do all of that hard work for us. For all this and much more please join us on One Knight in Product. So my guest tonight is Merina Khanom. Merina is a former management consultant and head of PR turned mobile product manager with BBC iPlayer, so please press the red button for different microphone angles. Merina is all about meaningful conversations and also a passionate advocate for mental health and racial equity. Merina found out she was the first ever hijab wearing Muslim in the history of iPlayer. And once reflected that the only person she'd seen in the office that looked anything like her was the cleaner. She's here tonight to dig into some of the reasons for that and show her hopes for a more equitable future in tech and product. Hi, Merina. How are you tonight?



Merina Khanom 01:33

Hey, Jason, I am really excited to be here. So thank you for inviting me.



Jason Knight 01:37

No problem. It's gonna be fun. So first things first, BBC iPlayer. Now I'm not going to patronise

my UK audience because everyone there is going to know what iPlayer is. But I also have many international listeners. So for the record, what problem does iPlayer solve? And how have you been helping to solve it?

M

Merina Khanom 01:51

Okay, so for our friends, outside of the UK, I would say I player is serving the needs of on demand content. So think of us as the inspiration behind Netflix...



Jason Knight 02:04

... that's a tasty comment!

M

Merina Khanom 02:07

... but it's true, right? So it's nothing that they hide that it's spoken about publicly, it was the inspiration for what took Netflix away from the DVD rental model. So of course, they're totally crushing it now and showing us how it's done. But we were the pioneers. So I'm going to take that.



Jason Knight 02:23

There you go. And what have you been working on there to bring that along and try and help them if not crush it, or at least not be completely crushed.

M

Merina Khanom 02:31

So something that I was really excited to work on and just got shipped towards the end of last year was the I play a children's experience. Now, I think I've been really looking iPlayer because we are across three different platforms TV mobile web, and as you've mentioned before, I am on the mobile team. But across all three platforms were split between browse and playback, ie helping users to find something to watch, or enabling users to play content that they want to watch. So most product folks only get to work on either browse or playback. But given that I was delivering an end to end children's experience, it meant that I was lucky enough to be able to cut across that traditional playback and browse divide. And that's something that I'm really quite proud of, because it works on the children's profiles works on a one to many model as opposed to a one to one model. So that will be similar to our competitors, Amazon Prime and Netflix. But it definitely is, is definitely one step up from what you've got on Spotify and the Children's profiles there.



Jason Knight 03:43

Excellent. I'll see if I can get the kids to log in and take a look. But that's interesting about being a mobile product manager because of course, lots of product managers get to work in and around mobile, but you're very specifically listed, you're listed yourself and you're worked at

around mobile, but you're very specifically listed, you've listed yourself and you've worked at iPlayer and National Zakat Foundation before that as a mobile product manager. So I'm assuming that that means mobile apps. What was it that got you into mobile product management? Like was that a passion of yours like mobile was a thing that you were really keen to get into? Or was it more of a workplace right time first job, and then that kind of got you moving?

M

Merina Khanom 04:19

So is it a passion of mine? Yes, mobile absolutely is. But how did I get there? Truthfully, I fell into it. So as you mentioned, my first exposure to mobile product was actually when I was working on a digital team in a charity. Yeah. And at the time, there was a really big debate in the third sector as to whether or not it was you know, if it was wise for charities to jump on the bandwagon of shipping apps because everyone else was doing it. Yeah. And if they could realistically afford to maintain their apps, or was it better for charities to invest in responsive websites, and my organisation attempted to do both. And whilst that wasn't my preference, it didn't teach me about the world. have native mobile. And that's essentially what helped me to secure the role I am in today. So I fell into it. But you know, I believe everything happens for a reason. And one of my personal wins. Looking back on my first year in iPlayer, was developing eye players first ever mobile iOS version support model. And I think, as I'm sure you can relate to, I think, for PMS who are newer into the game, it feels really tempting to run towards every single user facing feature, you can turn around. Because they're things you can talk to your family and friends about. Yep, without losing them. But I do think that stepping outside of your comfort zone and understanding what makes your specific platform tick is essential for a product manager, because eventually, you're going to run into a Vita that isn't straightforward to implement, may not work on every iOS and your technical team will need to know that you've got a basic level of appreciation of those challenges.



Jason Knight 05:57

But that leads to another question then, because I've never worked in mobile product management, again, I've worked in and around mobile, web and responsive design and stuff. But if we're talking native apps and building things across all of these platforms, obviously number of platforms is reducing now, but there's been a bunch in the past. Are there any things that you feel are different in mobile product management, so things that you think that maybe some of your colleagues that aren't working in mobile, maybe either have it easier or harder?

M

Merina Khanom 06:27

I mean, I'd be putting myself in really tricky waters, he talks about things being, you know, I think we all think the grass is greener on the other side. I think one of the things that you'll find in mobile product teams across different businesses is, unless mobile is the number one platform in terms of customer base for your business, then quite often it can be assumed that whatever is happening on other platforms can be shoehorned into mobile, and it will just be a simple job. Yeah. And insofar as iPlayer is concerned, the biggest platform is not mobile, of course, it's TV. And I guess, in that regard, I would consider myself a champion of mobile. And I think I do speak up for my teams, when I am explaining to our stakeholders know, we can't just shoehorn what's been done on TV into mobile, and that's not going to work. And it's the same

for anything that's been implemented on weapon. Yeah, it's, it's something that I've probably become known for in the team. But it's also something I do with a lot of pride, to be honest, because once you've learned the nuances of your own platform, it's up to you to help other people to understand that.



Jason Knight 07:39

Yeah, for sure. So being a real advocate, and I guess there's a lot of trying to deflect a lot of that. Like, you don't want to feel like a second class citizen within your product organisation as well, right? Like you want to be seen as a strategic part of the business and not just some, oh, yeah, well, we got to do it just because some people use a mobile. So I guess that's something that all product people want to feel like as well, like, no one wants to feel like they're just a, again, second class citizen. But let's go back to those kids for a second. Because Was that something that you had to do a lot of discovery with those kids to try and understand their pain points? Or were you working maybe with the parents? Or, like, how did you go about prioritising what to build for this kid's platform?



Merina Khanom 08:21

Well, that sounds like a juicy job interview question, Jason.



Jason Knight 08:25

I have my moments.



Merina Khanom 08:27

So luckily, this work kicked off just before the pandemic. So the UX research team were able to organise face to face lab sessions with family. So we have parents with children in the lab, as well as diary accounts of what was working for them in their natural environment at home, to find out what their pain points were with both our existing products and competitive products. And I think one of the things that maybe the UK audience will be able to appreciate will be the expectations that come with the BBC. Yeah, from, you know, licence fee payers. So you can I mean, did you mention that you have children? Jason? I do I have to? Okay. So, I'm not sure if this will resonate with you. But a lot of parents that we spoke to said they might expect their child. In fact, they do expect their child to find something eventually inappropriate on YouTube say, Oh, yes. But they have a completely different set of expectations when it comes to the BBC and iPlayer. And that was something that they needed to feel was their safe zone where they could get that, you know, that little bit of respite to, you know, to just leave the kids for a few moments, or maybe longer, but they need to be able to trust that when my kids got their tablet or their mobile, that they don't because it's such a personal device, right? Yeah, you cannot just casually walk past the living room door as a parent and see what's on the Family TV. MPC and compare that to what's in your child's hands, be a mobile or a tablet. So when I was looking at what the requirements were for mobile, and tablet, because while so work on the mobile team that covers tablets as well, you know, one of the things I had to explain to our stakeholders was that my level of safeguarding, I needed to raise the bar, because in order for

parents to feel that they could give their child their own device, or give them a device for them to use themselves, and keep for themselves, then they needed to trust with certainty that I play with the safe zone. And I don't need to worry about what they're gonna find in that they can competently allow their children to explore the app for themselves, give them some independence,



Jason Knight 10:47

Makes a lot of sense, and absolutely does resonate with me some of the things I see the kids trying to watch on YouTube, I'm already horrified. And I'm sure it's only going to get worse. But you said before this, that your CV doesn't look like everyone else's. And I'm assuming that that's not a comment on its formatting. So the question that arises from that is, well, first of all, what do you specifically mean by that? And I guess, secondly, has that presented you with any challenges getting into the world of work?



Merina Khanom 11:15

Okay, so when I say my CV doesn't look like everybody else's, I guess, another way of describing that is I have a non linear career path. So I've changed careers, not just job role, or title, but also sectors three times now. So I guess, you know, one of the challenges that comes with that is, you're starting from scratch every time. But I think, to get into product and into tech, specifically the the number one barrier that kept on coming up again, and again and again, was the filtering out at stage one where a standard requirement on the applications was to have direct experience in an agile delivery team. So I didn't have that. Although, in lieu of that, I was, you know, I was signing myself up for courses on Agile delivery. And, to be honest, I did read the Agile Manifesto. I did read it, and I was reading up all sorts to be honest, I might, my knowledge was pretty impressive back then, in terms of what Agile delivery is, or what it should be. And, you know, looking back, I can laugh, because I think that didn't need to be as high as it was because when you actually get onto the other side, and you're actually working in tech, you realise everyone's just got their own version of Kanban, or their own version of Scrum or their own version of Scrum ban. There's, you know, I don't think it needs to be such an academic discussion. And if you were, you know, if you had a candidate who was in a similar position to me, you know, who was acknowledging that? No, I don't work in an agile environment right now. But I read up on the theory of it, then I think that's the best you can really ask well, because like I said, I knew more about the Agile Manifesto, than than I do now. Because, you know, all that memories got washed out of my head, to be honest.



Jason Knight 13:27

But there's a certain level of gatekeeping there, though, as well, right now, some people are gonna sit there and say, Well, yeah, sure, you know, that is gatekeeping. But that's making sure that there's a bare minimum level of capability, or that you've at least worked in that kind of environment before, but some other people would say, probably with some justification, that the more of this kind of gatekeeping, within job specs, and even within the interviewing process, the more likely you are, for example, to not be able to get people from, say diverse backgrounds or, you know, either diverse because of where they've worked or diverse because of the situation. They've come up through the educational background they've had the

opportunities that they've had in the past. So like, What, in your opinion is kind of fair game when it comes to requirements versus not really fair game and actually bordering on gatekeeping?

M

Merina Khanom 14:18

Okay, so I think I'll use an example one for myself, but one from somebody else who I knew he was looking to break into tech at the same time. She's not I was gonna say was not she is not she was not a nice time, a product manager. She was a UX writer. But like me, she was from the third sector. And we were both trying to break into tech at the same time we both were stumbling against this same barrier of not being able to fulfil the requirements of working in an agile delivery environment. What would have been fair game is if we weren't working in the same roles that we wanted to be in. I was a product manager who wanted to continue to be a product manager. She was a UX writer who wanted to continue to be a UX writer. So when you look at it like that, I think you really got to stand back and question why you're filtering out? You filtering out because you've got so many applications, you just need a way to get the numbers down. Yeah. And if that's the case, fine. But then think about how you do that in a way that actually serves the company. Because that surely can't be the only question mark. There's going to be people who have X years of experience, versus people who've got less. And that's just one example. But there's got to be loads of ways you could rethink that.



Jason Knight 15:44

Yeah, I've always been very wary of the concept of trying to automatically screen stuff out. And some people have had this discussion on Twitter, with recruiters in the past. And many people claim that all this hype around automatic CV screening and stuff like that is overhyped and that these things are always looked at by people. And I guess, I don't necessarily trust that to be the case for all companies. I'm sure that some people always try and shortcut things if they can. But I guess you always have to think of some of the or I always have to think of some of these stories that you see about like, when the same CVs are sent with like black sounding names and white sounding names for the same types of job and the white sounding names get like double the callbacks or whatever. It's like, there's definitely something amiss there....

M

Merina Khanom 16:29

I mean, I've experienced that I've definitely experienced that. I've had conversations with recruitment agencies where they're the middlemen, and they're trying to secure interviews for you. Yeah. And when they got really excited about my CV, because I meet the criteria more than maybe other candidates that they found. And then for some reason, the company knocked it back. Yeah. And they weren't able to explain why. And unlike, maybe if I changed my name and resubmitted, we could do, we could do an A/B test and see how that works...



Jason Knight 17:04

Product manager to the core!



Merina Khanom 17:06

Yeah



Jason Knight 17:07

But on the same theme, the last time we spoke before this, you were telling the story about how you realised that you were the only hijab wearing Muslim in the history of iPlayer. Now I play has been about since about 2007, give or take, so that's 15 years or so. Mm hmm. Now, some people will along the same vein as what we were talking about just now about, like, the excuses that people might try to make for that, that some people are going to sit there and say, when presented with a fact like that. It's a quote unquote, pipeline problem. There's not enough hijab wearing Muslim women candidates out there, so we couldn't possibly have hired them. What's your response to a bit of feedback like that?



Merina Khanom 17:47

I think, I mean, I'll speak to the kind of thoughts that initially pass my mind. I'm based in Manchester. Yep, born here, lived here all my life. If I walk into central Manchester, I won't need to wait a hot minute, before I see a spot another woman, Muslim woman wearing hijab. Same if I walk through any part of central London. Okay. Let's not get complicated, because I'm not from London, and I can't speak to that. But, you know, I've always worked with you, Manchester and London. And to be honest, I've always felt like in terms of diversity in London was just a bigger version of Manchester. So again, I wouldn't need to wait a hot minute to see another Muslim woman, you know, at the tube station or just out and about. Yeah, so if we're seeing people out there, but then not in tech, then to me that presents the question of what have we missed, you know? Yeah. And whilst I haven't seen myself represented in iPlayer, equally when I've been to product conferences, I mean, this is prior to the pandemic, of course, when we used to go and sit in actual, you know, the good old days. Yeah. We used to go to mind the product in London every year. And then, when they started off the Manchester one, we used to attend both my eyes were actively scanning the Conference Centre. And you know how big the Barbican is? Or do you know how far and wide people travel for those conferences, you would be registering at the same time that somebody come along with their luggage from Singapore, you know, people make an effort to come far and wide for those kinds of prestigious events. And yeah, I've never been able to spot anybody that looks like me. So that to me, says we've got we've missed a trick there. I think it would be too reductive to say it's a pipeline problem. For me personally, not being able to see somebody that looked like me did make it more of a challenge. to break into tech, maybe if there were other women that looked like me that might, you know, it would have the hole Do you have experience in Agile might not have been the question. Or maybe those scenarios where my CV didn't even make it to the first round, even though I could tick off all of the requirements on paper, maybe that wouldn't have happened. But I think it would just be too reductive to say it's a pipeline problem.



Jason Knight 20:28

Yeah, for sure. I mean, it's not an argument that I buy, I think that there's a lot of bias in the system. And that's something that people need to work actively against. But day to day, was

that something that manifested itself, or has manifested itself in your working life? Like, aside from the the general day to day Islamophobia that you get in various parts of UK society? Is that something that had an actual specific impact, or even a general impact on say, your day to day work as a product manager?

M

Merina Khanom 20:58

Yeah, I mean, like, as mentioned before, I've changed careers a few times now. And my career actually started off in the NHS in general management, and it might sound like, you know, pulled apart from product management, but it really isn't, because what I was doing on a day to day was managing the needs of the users, ie the patients versus the needs of the business, ie the hospital trust. So it was very much in line with the skills that are needed for product management, back then I very often get mistaken for the doctor, because typically, that's dressed like me would be, yeah. And to be fair, you know, many of my uni mates are medics and dentists. But yeah, in terms of what that meant, for me in tech was that, as I mentioned, when I was trying to break into tech, I didn't know anybody that looked like me in this space. And when you don't see yourself represented in an industry, that surfaces at least two challenges that I can think of, firstly, how do you as the person aspiring to break into tech believe you can do it when you can't see anybody that looks like you? And secondly, how do potential employers or your peers or your boss, if you're already in that space? How do they shed their own unconscious bias when hiring you or entrusting you to take the lead on something when they haven't seen anybody who looks like you do that before? And, you know, I've already told you, and you've already mentioned in the intro earlier that, you know, the first time I actually saw somebody that looked like me, or the BBC was when I was in the London offices, and I saw the cleaner. Yeah. And you know, for me that the thing I told myself, that day, that instance was Marina, don't you dare forget, don't you dare forget that. People who look like you don't have your job. Yeah, people that look like you have her job. But like I said, even when I was, you know, huge conferences like mine the product, I couldn't see anybody that looked like me. And I think that's really challenging because, well, the two reasons I said number one, for me as an individual, how do I how do I begin to believe that I can do it? But number two, how do I then have a team or seniors around me that will feel confident and interesting meats take the lead on something when they just haven't seen it before?



Jason Knight 23:25

Yeah, that's a really fair point. And I think that the one thing that then it kind of feels like almost like a self fulfilling prophecy in a way, because if you don't get, again, people that look like you going into tech there No, no role models for the next generation of people that are like you to get into tech, which starts to sound a little bit like I'm saying there's a pipeline problem, but I'm trying not to say that, but it does, it does feel that that chain needs to be broken so that young women trying to get into tech, at the beginning of their career can actually then feel inspired to go on and and do that and feel that they belong there. So first, there's a lot of work to do there. But hopefully, with some of the stuff that you're doing, that we'll talk about, that can be a conversation that progresses. But you described how the killing of George Floyd impacted you personally. And obviously, that impacted the great many people around the world when they saw that happening. And obviously, the verdicts that came after that as well. But specifically for you, it really made you believe that that was, or that now was the time to

speak up more on racial equality or speak up at all within the confines of your work and your role. And I guess, presumably, even outside of that, as well. But what did speaking up look like for you?

M

Merina Khanom 24:40

I think the very first thing that I did was actually talk to my own peers. Yeah. Not to change anything, but to just say, Hey, how are you feeling? And that might sound really simple. But actually, even that felt like we were going against the grain, because we'd never dared speak to each other about race before. Yeah, you know, and even when somebody casually might have dropped into the conversation before, that huge event in history, it was a conversation that got brushed under the carpet very, very fast, because life has taught us to shut up and pot up. So we been programmed to say, No, everything's fine. No, it's all cool here. We don't have those issues. And my instinct was like, I didn't plan to do all the things that I ended up doing. But, you know, the first thing I wanted to do was to reach out to the people that were in my own pay group just to say, are you okay, and that was it.



Jason Knight 25:48

But that sounds like the sort of question and indeed, general sentiment that would then open up the floodgates, to some extent, if you're going around and asking people this and having those difficult conversations that there's probably a lot of pent up, need to talk about that. Is that something that you found that all of a sudden, you were having a rather large number of these conversations with people that, like you said, kind of felt compelled to shut up before now I had a chance to actually put it on the table.

M

Merina Khanom 26:16

I didn't actually, I think most people gave, you know, the lines that we've all been programmed for so many years to say, we're okay, everything's fine. And there wasn't one single emotion, there was very mixed emotions. You know, even for me on an individual level. One day I was numb, Mondale's, like, yeah. Just another statistic. Yeah. There's gonna be loads more. This isn't the first, this isn't the last. So I think at the time that I was speaking to my peers, it was on a given week where I tried to, you know, schedule as many calls as I could. And people were probably still in shock at that point. And just saying, yeah, it was sad, but I'm okay. And I don't think I developed any sort of meaningful insights at that point. It was just the very beginning of something. And it was only with one colleague, who is another product manager. And not by virtue of His discipline, my hasten to add, but just because of the conversations I've had with him. Prior to that, I felt like I had a safe space to say to him, no, no, no, tell me what you really think. Yeah. And I knew with him, that I could be myself. Like, I could be fully myself. And the thing that I said to him, even though I don't think he was fully sure yet how he felt, and I totally wasn't fully sure yet how I felt. I just felt like this adrenaline inside me. And I was like, I don't know what's happening in my head in my heart. But I know that I cannot sit still. That's all I knew. I did not know where any of this was going. Yeah. But the one thing that I said to him was, when his name is ALU. The one thing I said to ALU is, look, I don't know what tomorrow holds. But what I do know is that today, people are willing to listen in a way they have never listened to before. Tomorrow, this could be chip paper.



Jason Knight 28:24

Yeah, for sure. But that then leads to another question. Like you talk about what then happened next, after you started to have those conversations and how many initiatives that you were working on then potentially develop? It sounds like you then got involved in other maybe bigger initiatives, broader initiative to try to bring this to the fore, I guess, within your organisation. So what did that look like? Did you get involved in advocacy within the BBC? Or did you get involved in advocacy, kind of wider in the product community or the tech community in Manchester? Like, what were those next steps? And how did they go?

M

Merina Khanom 28:55

So I think, yes, to both within the BBC all the way. And I basically approached the person that I had, I felt a good relationship with, which was the then director of iPlayer, and sounds. And I just, I just said to him, Look, I've got an idea. What do you think? I feel like we could, we could run a book club together with the senior leadership team. And Allah will support me with this. So you can get in more than one perspective. But we'll keep it as a enclosed safe space, help people allow people to ask questions that they might not feel comfortable asking in a larger forum, and also allowing people to, you know, to be vulnerable in that space. Because I just don't think reading books or listening to podcasts or by yourself is going to cut it, because I don't believe education is the problem, Jason. We've never been short of information.



Jason Knight 29:55

But it's people's willingness to listen to that information and actually act upon it right. And this is what We were talking about before we started recording this whole idea of, like knowing it in your head and knowing in your heart and actually being able to act upon what you've been told. Yeah, I, you know, if we exclude a certain proportion of society, which is disappointingly large of people that are just, I don't know, if they're uneducated, or but they're certainly gonna be very difficult to educate in the areas of diversity and equality and inclusion, because you know, that, you know, the kind of the that section of society that I'm talking about, I mean, they're all over Twitter, you see this nonsense going on all the time? So from your perspective, is it more about then, if we assume that maybe wrongly but assume that we can't change them in any meaningful way? In the short term? Is it more about targeting that more sort of middle and towards that to try and bring some of those people that are for want of a better word on the fence? Or do you think that that's kind of the the easy way out, and it's actually more important to target that less pleasant section of society.

M

Merina Khanom 30:57

So I haven't, you know, before, before the killing of George Floyd, I've never been active in this space before. Not really, maybe my student days, I did a thing here or there, because who doesn't want to stand outside the Student Union steps with a holding a banner, I mean, that's part of that's part of your writing passages. Here, you need to go to NUS conference, that's the thing to do. But I hadn't really in terms of investing my own learning, and not really trodden this path before. So the only thing I knew was what I just learned from work life in general, which is,

culture comes from the top. So the top that was in reach for me, who's not going to the DG, but the top that was in reach for me was going to the director of iPlayer. And Townsend. Like I said, I had a good relationship with him. And I knew that if I pitch this to him that he'd at least be willing to listen. And thankfully for me, he was very warm to the idea. And he sponsored the idea. And if it wasn't for him, me and all, he wouldn't have got to have done half of what we've done, quite frankly. So that was the work that I did, you know, within the BBC, and then I tried to think about, okay, where does culture at the top? What does that look like in my space outside of the BBC. And in that year, in 2020, I thought about, well, you know, who were the big conference organisers in my space. So I communicated with them, you know, in product circles, and I just reached out to them just to start a conversation and ask them to consider how representative their speaker lineups were, and try to get that dialogue going. But also, I wanted to think about what I could do myself. So in the same year in 20, I also set up a closed group on LinkedIn, for being product managers in the UK, because I wanted to provide a safe space where people could just talk openly about their challenges, their struggles, and how we could support each other with that. But that was in 2020. In 2021, I reached out to various women in tech awards, to try to understand why initiatives that were designed to highlight marginalised women still didn't include hijab wearing women now, I hadn't before 2021 vocalised, the lack of visible hijab wearing women in tech before primarily because I didn't want to take away from the much needed discussion around Black Lives Matter. Yeah. But it felt right to surface it in 2021, because last year marked the 20th anniversary of 911. Yep. And in all of the awards that I'm seeing for women in tech, posted online, top 50, top 100, and I'm talking about ones that focus on the UK, in Europe, not even things elsewhere, because I've never lived elsewhere. So I can't speak to you know, whether or not there is a pipeline problem elsewhere, but I know that definitely isn't here. And I engage with them to try and understand why I couldn't see any of that represented, and it's 20 years. Plus now, and clearly, there's still a lot of work to do to shake off the stigma that came with that for, you know, visible Muslims.



Jason Knight 34:22

And how did that discussion go down then with say, some of these conference organisers like, do you have hope that through 2022 there might be more representation of visibly Muslim women in the awards and in the conference lineups, do you think that's a discussion that's going well? Or do you think there's still quite a lot of work to do there?



Merina Khanom 34:41

It's a really tricky one, because when I initially contacted conference organisers on I was asking them, you know, where are your black and brown faces? This is essentially what he's putting out there in 2020. Yeah, and you know, how can we end with with a few black and brown faces that you've got in your archives? Is there any way we can give these more visibility, give them a better platform. And I think at the time, the world was feeling very raw, should we say, and perhaps the timing of my conversation was off, because essentially, I felt like the organisations that I was communicating with were in denial, right of what the status quo was. And it's different when you're talking to people that you know, versus people that you don't know, I probably wasn't not probably I wasn't able to get engaged with them in the same with the same level of trust and safety that I could do with people in my own space in iPlayer. Right. So the conversations were, you know, it was mainly denial of the situation. And I wasn't really able to tackle that. But more recently, towards the end of last year, when I was approaching

organisers of various women in tech awards, and asking them why I couldn't see any job wearing women, 20 years post 9/11 represented. One of the responses I got was quite funny, it was, I'm sorry, but we do not have any data on whether women were a job or not. And I knew for a fact that with that particular awards body, that they took photographs with every single nomination. Yep. So it should have been pretty obvious. It should have been, but thought, Do I really want to engage on a conversation on how we define data at this point? But I don't know, I think I don't look back up those conversations as wasted. Because sometimes just sometimes your job is done. When you've planted the seed that made your audience uncomfortable. Yeah. Because we're not doing it with the intention to make people uncomfortable, but maybe in their own time and space. They'll be able to work out what made them feel so feel that way. And they can work through it in a way that feels safe to them. So maybe my job was not to take them on the journey. Maybe my job was to plant the seed.



Jason Knight 37:17

Yeah, I think there's always going to be some people that are immune to that self reflection. But as you say, as long as you can get to the ones that, that have that in them, then I think, again, we spoke earlier around this idea of like, it's not going to change overnight, right? This idea that we have to make incremental change, and try and win hearts and minds as we go. So hopefully, like you say that seeds been planted. But what have you got now planned in 2022? Like if you got more initiatives on the go, have you got more conversations to have or other things that you've got on the roadmap to try and advance the cause?



Merina Khanom 37:51

Honestly, I think my answer is going to disappoint you. I feel like as my you know, my recent LinkedIn posts alluded to, I feel like now is a time where I just kind of need to sit back and reflect on the journey that I've been going up for 100 miles an hour for the last couple of years. And I need to take a step back and think about okay, what worked well, what didn't work well, and where do I want to invest my energy? Yep. In the next year, because it's absolutely exciting, Jason. It's absolutely exhausting. And when I read the book called Black fatigue, yeah, honestly, it just spoke to me on so many different levels. And I don't think I knew what it was before then. But I was feeling it at the time. So I definitely will remain active because I don't know any other way of being. But in terms of working out how and where and what that's that's all for me to discover.



Jason Knight 38:55

Yes, fair enough. And I think that point about black fatigue is really interesting as well, because it feels like almost a lazy thing to think that it's just been people's jobs to fix this as well. Obviously, people like yourself have a really strong voice and a really strong part to play in it. But it can't just be on your shoulders to fix inequality that's been foisted upon you.



Merina Khanom 39:18

Yeah. And I totally, I totally echo that sentiment. In fact, I don't believe that change will happen if it is one sided. Yeah. it has to be everybody pulling together as a community to to make this

it is one sided. Yeah, it has to be everybody pulling together as a community to to make this change. Otherwise, it's just not going to happen. And whilst I was really active, I have to say for the, you know, for the audience's benefit, that nobody should ever expect black and brown people to be the activists. Yeah. Because they've been active every day of their lives in a way that maybe nobody will even understand they're carrying lifetimes worth of trauma that no amount of therapy will be able to eradicate. And it's just an expectation we shouldn't have. Yes, it's great to learn from lived experience. But I would say it's it, the key is not to have the expectation that somebody can give, because you just don't know how much trauma that person is already carrying.



Jason Knight 40:27

Yeah, for sure. Absolutely. It's, it's on all of us. Hopefully, discussions like this and other conversations that you know, people in the community are having will help, as we said before, move this on, step by step. But yeah, 100% agree that it can't just be on the victims to be the ones that fix it as well. It feels like this is a shared responsibility. And where can people find you after this, if they want to talk more about any of the issues that we've spoken about in this podcast, or maybe find out a bit more about mobile product management or any of the other things that we've been speaking about?



Merina Khanom 41:00

Best place to find me is really on LinkedIn, I'm quite good on my messages there.



Jason Knight 41:06

Alright, I'll make sure to link that into the show notes so people can come across and hopefully lend us support and maybe share some stories with you as well. Sounds good. Well, it's been a fantastic chat and obviously really good talk about some really important issues and really glad to get some of your experience and some of your story. Hopefully, we can stay in touch. But as for now, thanks for taking the time.



Merina Khanom 41:25

Thank you, Jason.



Jason Knight 41:28

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to OneKnightInProduct.com, check out some of my other fantastic guests, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app. Make sure you share it with your friends so you and they can never miss another episode again. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest. But as for now, thanks and good night.