



# Beyond what you see

In this regular series of interviews, Lynne Connolly, Global Head of Diversity and Inclusion, speaks to colleagues and guests about the importance of a culture that encourages people to be open about their whole selves and the difference this can make personally, for the business, and society.

## Lynne Connolly meets Anjali Shah

Anjali is an Investment Director, European & US Equities, Smaller Companies Team, Aberdeen Standard Investments. Anjali is a CFA charterholder.



ANJLI SHAH

**Hi Anjali, thank you for speaking with me today and for agreeing to share your experiences. I'd like to start with asking: how might others describe you?**

I think they would describe me as hard-working, analytical and ambitious. From school age I've worked hard, gone the extra mile, am always prepared to contribute and keep on top of my work. That's what they see.

**And is that how you would describe yourself?**

Yes – it's how I think and how I speak. I like discussing a range of topics and hearing different opinions. My friends value that I give a balanced and honest view rather than sugar coating things! I think my background has made me the person I am, especially with regards to my work ethic and ambition. I was the first in my family to complete A-Levels and go to University. I successfully got internships in investment banking, joined the Financial Services Authority/Bank of England graduate scheme, became an Equity Research Analyst at a stockbroking firm, and then went on to become a Fund Manager at Aberdeen Standard Investments.

**Are there attributes that colleagues may not always see?**

I think I have a good sense of humour but perhaps not everyone sees it to the same extent. I'm very aware that in a working environment I come across as professional as possible. I also think humour can come more naturally or more easily with those who one shares an affinity with, whether it is background, experience or common references. For example, I can joke more about my culture with my British-Indian friends.

**Do you feel you have different personas, in that respect?**

I don't think I am actively choosing to be different but perhaps it is more of an unconscious process! I am able to (or at least try to!) compartmentalise work and my personal life. While I try to get along with all of my colleagues, I believe it is natural to feel closer and more comfortable opening up to some individuals over others.

**Is there anything else which is important for your colleagues to know about you?**

It's fairly obvious that I am a female, of Indian ethnicity and British (English). The way I speak and my background at the University of Warwick, having previously been a City Stockbroker and now a Fund Manager, leads many to assume I am publicly educated. But I am from a working class background, was educated in state schools in London and was the first in my family to go to University and work in this profession. On learning this, people's first reaction is shock or surprise; I hear the comments of 'Haven't you done well to get to where you are'. I try to take it as a compliment. I'm proud of where I've got to as it has been through hard work and determination. There is no doubt that participating in programmes like SEO London, a group that supports students from ethnic minorities to prepare for their careers, and having inspiring colleagues who have acted as mentors, has helped me immensely.

**How has that felt?**

I've had some challenges along the way. At a personal level, people often make cultural assumptions or stereotypes based on my ethnicity. Personally, in these situations, I tend to address the assumption and help "correct" the misconception. I have also faced the assumption that I'm the junior person in the meeting, or more recently, the junior or trainee fund manager who has less 'say' in the fund. In reality, I am an investment director and the named co-manager of a fund. While this might partly be due to being a woman or ethnic minority, I think the bigger factor is because my co-manager is highly-regarded and experienced, with a great track record. I've learnt how important it is to be proactive in building your own profile internally and externally. This in turn can help grow your own brand!

**From your own experience, what is most challenging about being an ethnic minority in the work environment? And what can colleagues do differently?**

Most challenging are preconceptions of culture and stereotypes. I would ask colleagues to just ask the person, to understand more. Tone is important, as is asking in a way in which doesn't evoke a defensive response. I've been asked 'Where are you from?' and when I say I'm British then I've been asked again or the question has been rephrased to the dreaded 'Where are you REALLY from?' Personally, I'd rather the question was more direct: 'What is your ethnic background?' or 'What is your ancestry?' The other thing is to use the colleague networks in the company as a great place to go to learn and meet others. It's a safe place to ask questions and better understand others' perspectives. As for not being mistaken for the junior, I'd suggest to be confident in contributing ideas, get involved, and be proactive in raising your profile. Sometimes you have to be your own champion!

**Issues of race have been in the media a lot recently, can you share what impact this has had, from your discussions with other ethnic minority colleagues?**

When George Floyd's death happened, a lot of ethnic minorities were upset and angry. I also think there was a great deal of frustration, given this was not the first time such an event occurred and, sadly, probably won't be the last. There can be a tendency to want to just "get on with the job" and mask over things, even though it is on your mind. In the past, it was mostly ethnic minorities who raised awareness and condemned racism, but this time feels different; there are a wide variety of voices now. This should not be seen as a "white v everyone else" issue. Indeed, ethnic minorities are themselves a mosaic, and experiences can be varied. Most people want to see visible and tangible actions to address years of under-representation in the industry. However, it can be an uncomfortable and challenging topic to discuss.

**So how can we be better allies to our colleagues?**

Some people are curious but are worried they'll offend and don't know how to ask. It becomes this giant elephant in the room. So ask your questions – it's just being thoughtful about the way they're raised. We need to make it ok to talk openly about this and be able to say when we're not doing ok.

I'd also say to call it out when you see or hear behaviour that's not in line with our values. Support ethnic minorities through mentoring and opening up your networks to help them progress their careers. For example, take them along to events which could be beneficial to their development, introduce them to others and include them in projects where they could add value. This should not be tokenism but rather an opportunity to help level the playing field and enact positive change. Hopefully that results in an environment where everyone has equal access to opportunities and the ability to thrive!



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