CORPORATE COUNSEL NOW
Powered by ACC

Unilever’s Global Push for Diversity

Interviews and Profiles





Ritva Sotamaa

CHIEF LEGAL OFFICER

UNILEVER

UNITED KINGDOM

More companies are undertaking efforts to increase diversity and inclusion (D&I) within their organizations. Unilever, one of the world's leading suppliers of food, home care, personal care, and refreshment products, has made strong commitments in this field in recent years. The British-Dutch company seeks to challenge harmful social norms and stereotypes in the workplace and beyond, enable the inclusion of disabled employees and LGBT+ employees, and advance the presence of women in management — with a target of 50 percent representation.

The global organization, with presence in over 190 countries and a reach of 2.5 billion consumers a day, has already made great strides toward accomplishing its goals. With its Global Diversity Board providing overarching vision, governance, and targets, Unilever launched an internal and external #Unstereotype initiative that aims to combat stereotypes in the workplace and advertising; the company initiated a Disability Inclusion Program in 10 countries in 2018; and 49 percent of Unilever's managers are women.

Unilever's commitment to D&I permeates the entire company — including its legal department. Chief Legal Officer Ritva Sotamaa has been at the forefront of an initiative to promote D&I in the legal industry — both in-house and in law firms. The initiative began in 2018 during a meeting Sotamaa had with other European GCs. Those present committed to joining efforts to promoting D&I in the legal field internally and externally when possible. Representatives from Unilever, Shell, Vodafone, BHP, and Anglo American presented a statement of support titled "General Counsel for Diversity and Inclusion" outlining clear and collaborative intent. Sixty-five large European companies were the first signatories, and the number has now increased to 80, with even more organizations expressing interest.

Getting to Know… Ritva Sotamaa

WHAT WOULD AN IDEAL WEEKEND LOOK LIKE FOR YOU?

I have a summer home outside of Helsinki by the Baltic Sea. That's where I love to be, surrounded by nature and the sea. I'm energized being there. I bring my kayak or my little motorboat to the sea and play a little golf. The relaxing and unwinding that this place provides me is really important for me to keep up the energy you need in this job.

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN THE HIRING PROCESS?

You're asking me to disclose my well-kept secret! I always try to discover the motivations of individuals or what makes them tick, especially their mindset regarding the business environment and willingness to collaborate.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO READ?

I read and write so much professionally that I actually feel that I have less time for pleasure reading now. When I find time to read, I love fiction.

At the core of the statement of support is the belief that general counsel have an important role to play in driving D&I due to the weight their guidance carries within their organizations. The General Counsel for Diversity and Inclusion agreed that they should make a conscious effort to have a positive impact. The statement is growing into formats and talking points for approaching law firms, workstreams to advance D&I in-house and outside, and best practices and key performance indicators. To date, law firms have responded positively to the statement and are actively engaging with the in-house community on this issue.

Growing up in her native Finland, Sotamaa once had a very different relationship to diversity and inclusion, especially regarding women. As with many Nordic countries, women are very present in the Finnish workforce, and most of the women in Sotamaa's life had fulltime careers. While she acknowledges that there is progress to be made in all countries, Sotamaa confides that when thinking of her professional future as a young woman in Finland, she never worried about the impact her gender might have upon her job prospects. But she understands this is not a reality for so many women globally. Unilever runs programs aimed at attracting, retaining, and developing female talent. Its hiring managers must use "balanced slates" during the interview process, which is when there are qualified female and male candidates to ensure a level playing field.



Sotamaa opines that diversity has been garnering more attention and action over the last decade internationally. “It has been on the agenda in many countries with either legislation attached to it or appropriate governance recommendations,” Sotamaa says. She also points out that diversity has multiple dimensions to it — while in the past gender representation was a major focus, there has been a broader shift to include people of different identities and backgrounds. Referring to Unilever’s inclusion efforts with disabled persons, Sotamaa shares, “We want to be the number one employer of choice for people who have disabilities. We have an ambition to have five percent of our workforce be employees of different abilities by 2025.”

As part of her commitment to the General Counsel for Diversity and Inclusion, Sotamaa cultivates a global legal team: “I have 10 different nationalities in my leadership team. It’s very diverse because it represents the globe, if you will, because we are so global.” Unilever’s legal department houses 450 people working in 55 countries. “The only way I feel that you can actually create impact globally is if you have diverse people at the table,” Sotamaa states.

This appreciation of global perspectives has been with Sotamaa since childhood. As a child, she lived in Jerusalem while her father was serving in the UN Peace Corps and the United States. Experiencing different cultures imbued her with the desire to study international law. “The colorfulness of the world and what it has to offer in terms of experiences beyond Finland was very, very alluring to me,” Sotamaa recalls. Her first job after university was at a Finnish healthcare company that was internationalizing. Sotamaa expresses a soft spot for the industry she worked in for over 20 years: “I liked the healthcare industry, helping people stay healthy or navigate through some of the toughest moments of their lives. But likewise in Unilever we are helping people to live more sustainable lives, which really gives me purpose.”

Now as a chief legal officer, Sotamaa uses these skills to help her employees navigate their career paths. She sees herself not as a manager but as an enabler of her team. “I want to make sure that I create an environment where everybody is able to shine and be at their best,” Sotamaa says. To accomplish this, she advises leaders to begin by acknowledging that their employees bring a lot of expertise and competencies to the table. The next step is encouraging everyone to challenge each other’s views in a constructive way, especially the leader’s. Sotamaa explains that this is the only way to build “value-add,” referring to how the team brings more to the table than one person can individually.

In many ways, her leadership style reflects an adage about diversity and inclusion, “Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.” Sotamaa celebrates the diversity of people and opinions of her team members and wants their full participation. She is embodying the commitments outlined in the General Counsel for Diversity and Inclusion statement and is just one example of what a commitment to D&I can accomplish for the company — and the legal field.

Danielle Maldonado



Assistant Editor

Association of Corporate Counsel