

## Here at AWS \_ S1E9

Speakers: Constance Souchet & Nnedimkpa Nnadi

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**Nnedi:** So, I think diversity increases creativity, it also increases productivity because you're able to anticipate a wider range of customer problems or the solutions that you create would obviously address a wider subset of customers, because the people designing those solutions are diverse as well and more representative.

**Constance:** Hi, I'm Constance. It's very hard to define what or who an AWS employee is, and for me, that's why this place is so great.

AWS is a really agile company, always looking to adapt and change for the future. We don't sit still and wait for things to happen; we make things happen. And to do that, we need a really diverse workforce.

So, far on this podcast, we've spoken to people with vastly different experiences. We've had people that have made the jump from different industries or already had a significant amount of experience under the belt. We've had colleagues that never even thought AWS would have been possible. But here, there's no such word as impossible.

Today, I wanted to speak to someone with a really keen eye for the diversity in our workplace. I wanted to learn a bit more about how it makes this place so successful. Welcome to Here at AWS.

**Nnedi:** I am scared of heights in general, and my way to combat that is to keep trying to do things that make me rise more than two feet above the ground.

So, in September, last year, I went hot air ballooning in Cappadocia. That's one of the most interesting experiences I've had because I was up there like 3000 feet, and I saw the sunrise come up. I realised, oh this isn't so bad, why I was so scared.

**Constance:** This is Nnadi, she's used to facing her fears head on. She may be quite new to this career, but she has packed in an amazing amount of experience already.

**Nnedi:** So, I'm an associate process specialist, but my area of expertise is DevOps, which is a sweet spot between development and operations. My primary responsibility is to ensure that companies, enterprise, organisations can deliver the software at a high velocity.

So, this involves infrastructure automation, automating software releases and ensuring that code is tested in an agile manner. So, I've had a myriad of experiences. So, I worked at a financial services start-up in product and user operations, I've done research and engineering, and I did a bit of test automation at a large consulting firm.

All of these experiences showed me that I was very interested in a customer-facing role, and I had a bit of programming acumen. I'm also very interested in efficient processes, so DevOps was sort of a role that combines all of that.

AWS in particular, at the financial services start-up I work, AWS was the tool that we used for monitoring and that's my introduction into the Cloud. So, when the opportunity came to apply, I was like, "Yeah, sure, why not?"

**Constance:** That sounds super nice, I think a lot of people actually learn about AWS while working with the U.S. product, so that's quite interesting.

Nnadi is originally from Nigeria. She came to the UK to study and like others we've spoken to on this podcast, she found adapting to life and work in the UK challenging.

**Nnedi:** I originally lived in Nigeria, I came to the UK for a master's degree and then started working at AWS.

So, it was a huge leap, I got a scholarship doing master's degree at Imperial College, and it was a very different experience to me because all of my education actually had been in Nigeria, and similar to what I've described around just understanding parlance and learning, like the nuances of communication in the UK context, that also applied to my education.

Thankfully, I had professors who encouraged me, we had a very wonderful career scheme that shared out opportunities for work, and there was a lot of support for international students. So, I would say that panned out really well in the end.

But the main challenge was still similar, just trying to fit into the culture and there was the fact that a portion of my degree was completed during the pandemic. So, there wasn't a lot of human-to-human interaction. It was a lot of me studying through the screen and everything.

So, I came to become more comfortable or to assimilate even more properly after I started at AWS.

Not to sound cliché, but the code for one, that was really intense. Besides that, just being able to understand UK or in particular British parlance, there's a whole way of communicating either with body language or with language, and there's not really a training for it. You sort of just have to pay attention and then with conversations and get better at it.

There's also socialising, socialising is different here. Pop culture, I had no idea what all these things were, so I had to really come out of my shell a bit to be able to engage. So, they weren't really barriers or challenges, there were just things I wasn't aware of before moving, and I'm still growing in a couple years down the line.

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**Constance:** Fitting in wasn't always easy for Nnadi either. As a black woman, she's found tech organisations need to be sensitive with how they approach diversity. For her, it's really important that she's seen in the workplace.

**Nnedi:** I mean there was the fact that joining my team, I did struggle with trying to identify where exactly I fit in. This is true for a lot of tech organisations, people of my heritage, my race, we kind of belong to a minority group so there's not a lot of people that look like me, have my particular experiences.

And when I joined, it took a while for me to be able to try and feel at home. So, I joined a couple affinity groups and that was when I realised that my experiences were also valid because previously, I was in a place where I wasn't sure I could fit in. I hadn't realised that the reason I was hired was because I had a unique and diverse perspective, and I could share that as well, and people actually wanted to listen to that.

So, I think joining the affinity groups, hearing other people's stories, the support from my team, that kind of led me to that realisation.

I mean, diversity in itself encourages more creativity. So, if you have diverse opinions in your room, obviously, you're going to get solutions or products that are multifaceted and address a larger subset of problems.

So, I think diversity increases creativity, it also increases productivity because you're able to anticipate a wider range of customer problems or the solutions that you create would obviously address a wider subset of customers because the people designing those solutions are diverse as well and more representative.

#### [Music Playing]

**Constance:** Affinity groups are a vital part of AWS culture, and it's so good that Nnadi discovered them. Affinity groups are a really good way of making sure employees feel connected and empowered. They are employee-led and supported by leadership giving anyone and everyone a space to interact with people that they share values with.

There are a huge number of affinity groups that make sure everyone is heard regardless of religion, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, the list is endless.

Outside these groups, Nnadi is also aware there is a genuine push to address concerns she has had about coming from a different background. If she does sometimes feel like an outsider, her colleagues actively try to counter this.

**Nnedi:** I think this happens on a day-to-day/occurring basis in the sense that seen as a lot of people with my unique background or unique perspectives when events are being planned, I see that there's some particular emphasis on ensuring that I'm included.

So, with the activities, with the places that we're going to, I find that very helpful and I think it happens a lot, so I can't point to any one particular moment, but yeah those are times when I feel very included.

**Constance:** In her early days at AWS, she also had support from mentors, another crucial part of life here.

**Nnedi:** Yeah, I think my team really provided a safe space for me in particular. I had some mentors when I first resumed that made me realise that my fears were okay, and I wasn't the only one who had those fears because it's easy to feel very overwhelmed when you are in a new place.

So, they provided that safe space for me to communicate what I was feeling and make me feel heard and seen. And as a result of that, pointed me to other resources and let me know that it was okay to contribute, and realised that my team was that safe space where I could feel seen and feel heard.

That sort of gave me the confidence to be able to share around technical things and also, start to organise events and it's a ripple effect. You do them more and then you get more confidence as time goes on.

I think I felt it would be difficult for me to fit in. I mean it's a generic thing. In Nigeria where I live, the tech field is dominated by men and it's the same thing here as well. But then there was the added factor that this was a different country, an entirely new culture, so I wasn't really sure how I could contribute, so I can put it that way.

And honestly, I overcame it by one, realising that I was hired for a specific reason, like AWS chose me first. And then I also, overcame that by realising that I had a lot to share and a lot to offer.

And then started to speak, also just getting over the shyness of asking questions or feeling that if I was wrong, it would be an indictment on not just myself but everyone who looked like me.

So, shifting away from that and then allowing myself the freedom to just exist in this space and actually, find connection and find meaning to my work, that's how I overcame it, and talking to other people as well, I think that was very helpful.

**Constance:** As the mentoring process has been so useful to Nnadi, I was curious to know if she has become a mentor herself.

**Nnedi:** Yes, I'm currently an onboarding body to a new grad on my team, and it's really like a full circle moment for me because I'm very particular about ensuring that she has a couple of tools that helped me when I first joined that.

So, just creating that same safe space for her to communicate freely and then ensuring that she's able to have that path to growth and realise that AWS is a place where she can reach whatever potential that she wants and there's no need to be worried or feared or holding herself back.

You'd have to be really intentional and really deliberate about making connections. So, when things are in person, you could just bump into people in the hallway by default. If someone sits next to you in class, you could start like small talk and have your conversation from there.

But when things are virtual, you're going to have to be intentional about truly getting to know people, scheduling coffee chats, listening very keenly about other people's interests, and then picking conversation points from there.

Finding out the people who are interested in similar things and then sort of gravitating towards them, and also, actively trying to contribute, especially if you're introverted like me, so you'd have to consciously put in the efforts to ensure that your voice is being heard, and you're actually actively sharing.

And it's also realising that same thing as work, same thing as school, there's a reason you were chosen to attend, there's a reason you were hired, and yeah, you want to ensure that your contribution is seen and visible and felt, so yeah, that's what I would say.

And just aside the leadership principles and internalising them and making them my own, I've learned that there's a lot that can come from deliberate thoughts and deliberate planning. And actually truly, truly, and I try to use this in most phases of my life in every situation, it's like what is the long-term impact of my actions?

So, at AWS, it's more around the customer and ensuring that every step that is being taken benefits the customer. In my personal life, the way I reframe this is to ask myself what the long-term idea or the long-term goal is and realise that every action I'm taking is either a choice for that or a choice against.

And that's sort of like the framework that I try to live by. And I had a sense of that before, but just working in a company, that sort of embodies that, it's been able to translate even more into my personal life.

#### [Music Playing]

**Constance:** At AWS, Nnadi has really managed to cultivate a space where she feels confident in herself and her action at work, it's a really supportive environment for her. And having grown in the company, she's formed some really interesting opinions on what makes this place so successful.

**Nnedi:** Yeah, I think it's interesting how AWS is so large, but it's still like a very, very agile and innovative company.

But one thing in particular that I've learned like working on customers within professional services, is we're able to keep the customers long-term goals insight while we're accomplishing short-term things.

It may sound straightforward, but AWS teaches you to do this in such a way where we don't sacrifice long-term benefits to get a short-term win. So, when I'm working on a solution, I'm encouraged to think I'm creating a solution for this problem now, in two years, how is this customer going to be using this particular solution?

And that helps you design solutions that are very thoughtful. Like you are very particular about how you use the technology to solve a customer's problems. So, I think that's one particular thing to AWS culture that was new to me and I'm so glad I'm here and I invite with like in all of my daily processes as well.

**Constance:** It's clear that Nnadi has a bright future ahead of her, and with affinity groups and supportive colleagues, she feels seen and heard. So, what are her ambitions?

**Nnedi:** So, I'm really interested in serverless at the moment. I'm actually on an internal program, so I'm interested in becoming an individual contributor, like a technical specialist in that area. I've also been considering becoming a customer delivery architect.

So, I'm so grateful that AWS has internal processes that allow you explore different career paths without too much commitment to actually figure out if it'll be a best fit for you. So, I'm very confident and I'm hopeful and excited that in the next two years I would be well-established in one of these particular career paths.

**Constance:** That sounds like amazing goals.

**[Music Playing]**

**Constance:** Thanks so much to Nnadi for a fascinating discussion, and thanks to you for listening. It's always so fun to chat with new people from this AWS family.

**Geetha:** Exactly, no one here is just an email address, everyone is building something, and they all have a story to tell.

**Constance:** That's it for now, so don't forget to subscribe.

**Geetha:** And hey, if working up here in the cloud sounds like fun, why not check out our website in the bio, you may just be the person we're looking for.

**Constance:** We'll see you next time on here at AWS.