

SCANDINAVIAN FUTURIST IN LONDON

After experiencing both the joys and sorrows of success, Anne Lise Kjaer decided that she would never again lie sleepless because of astronomical overheads. Today, the Danish founder and director of the London based trend company, Kjaer Global, has put growing pains aside, and just enjoys doing what she does best – looking into the future.

Working to Pay to Bills

“When, in 2006, I sat for the second time in the company’s history worrying about how to manage the road ahead I decided, once and for all, that I would not live with the uncertainty any more. My company’s requirements and my personal standard of living were too high, and I only went to work to earn money to pay the bills,” says Anne Lise Kjaer from the podium, while the afternoon sun reflects off the Thames and into the room.

From Jutland to London

We are at the ‘DJØF London’ networking event, which this time takes place at London & Partners HQ on the Thames’ south side, with views to the Tower of London, the City financial centre and the capital’s hustle and bustle around the riverfront. Today’s speaker is Danish futurist Anne Lise Kjaer, here to talk about her career journey from young fashion designer in Jutland to internationally recognised trend-spotter and CEO of London-based Kjaer Global.



Danes Take Decision Shortcuts

And Anne Lise Kjaer has no doubts today, when she takes stock and looks back over her 25-year career abroad, that her Danish heritage has been an unconditional advantage.

Danes Makes Things Happen

“Danes have something in their culture that means they easily settle in other countries. They are more pragmatic and efficient than most, but also less authoritarian and hierarchical. Also they are not afraid to knock on the manager’s door or to take a shortcut to find the decisions makers. Therefore, Danes makes things happen, and it is undoubtedly one of the reasons that I have been able to thrive in a tough business landscape outside the Danish borders,” says Anne Lise Kjaer.

A Design Background

Recalling her career beginnings, she describes how, growing up on the West Coast, she had already decided by age 15 that she would become a designer. Anne Lise Kjaer chose to start her career at TEKO, Herning and had graduated with a diploma in fashion design by 21. During her first years of work, she undertook freelance assignments in Denmark, but soon realised that, with her existing customer base, she was missing the opportunity to work with the latest trends, which even then informed and influenced her work.

Scope for Independent Thinking

“What caught my attention most was uncovering new trends, and that did not interest my Danish clients. They just wanted copies of what we saw in Paris and New York. But after all I had not spent four years studying and researching my field just to copy from others.” That’s why, at 25, she decided to move to Hamburg to see if there was more scope for independent thinking. In succeeding years, she designed concepts for clothes, shoes, furniture and cars – and that was how she found out that it was trends at a strategic level that most interested her.



Relocating to London

“Through my work in many different industries, I could suddenly see that what really fascinated me was how trends actually develop and evolve. They don’t come from nowhere, but often arise out of complex relationships in society. I wanted to decode cultural complexity and this was seminal to the move into forecasting,” says Anne Lise Kjaer. Following this realisation, there was a relocation to London, where it was possible to really put her finger on the pulse.

The Success Became too Much

As a 29-year-old, the young futurist in London created her first trend-book and Nokia suddenly showed interest. And, with a company of that calibre on the customer list, the order book grew quickly and brands such as BMW, Sony, French Connection and IKEA also began knocking on the door. The company expanded, employed more and more people, and the turnover were rising fast. There was also growing media interest, particularly in Denmark, about this internationally renowned futurist. But at some point the success became too much.

When Enough was Enough

“There was this Danish documentary made called, ‘My Way to Success’, where I drove around London in my convertible and talked about all the prominent companies I worked with. But this was not what I was about, and it felt totally foreign to me. My economic model was ramped too high, with a huge property and a lot of employees that I suddenly was in charge of. It was hard to find inner peace,” says Anne Lise Kjaer, who was by then juggling domestic duties, work schedules, salaries, a £100K rent along all the other expenditures associated with success – including a nanny to take care of her son, because she worked constantly. *“It got to the point where I worked from 6am to 11pm, and yet could barely pay the overheads. And so I decided that enough was enough.”*



Today I can afford to Say No

So in 2006, Anne Lise Kjaer sold the million-pound property and reduced her expenses drastically. When everything was settled there was a rather healthy bank balance, enough to buy a great house in Highgate in the North London. Here, she

lives today with her family, which has since expanded with a husband and three 'bonus' children who lives abroad. There is also enough room to accommodate the Kjaer Global studio and a handful of freelancers.

A Great Ideator

"You learn from experience and I have learned that although I'm a great ideator, I am not necessarily great at being a manager. Today I mostly have freelancers and I outsource all administration, finance and IT. So everything runs on a smaller more sustainable scale, which means that I can be more involved in project work, but I can also afford to say no to assignments that do not appeal to me," says Kjaer. Crucially, since she has put aside this all-consuming manager role, she can once again solely focus her attention on identifying changes in society and translate these into future scenarios.

New Future Models

For this work, she uses a comprehensive methodology, which she has developed over the last 20 years. *"We live in a world mostly engage in left brain thinking, where the factual and everything we can measure rules. But today's facts do not tell us much about the future. We also need to engage the right brain informed by intuition and emotionally based values to understand society's currents and to see the big picture. For this, I have developed a methodology based on holistic thinking. As the mathematician Henri Poincaré once observed: 'It is by logic we prove, but by intuition we discover'."*

Balanced Informed Intuition

"The traditional model of forecasting is based on a PESTEL analysis, encompassing Politics, Economy, Society, Technology and Law. However, I developed a methodology that also incorporated the cultural and value-based trends in society. This Multidimensional Thinking Method is the foundation for mapping out the future and the core for creating a Trend Atlas for companies – a model that highlights both macro and micro trends." Through analysis of society drivers based on research extracted from a wide range of research papers, literature, and articles, Kjaer balance her sense of the future by informed intuition.

A Rewarding Journey

"I use this model to help companies develop a more holistic and complete model for trend mapping. And if I look back, I think my work with trends has been a very rewarding journey. The culture and understanding of new trends has changed. A decade ago, companies only dealt in 'facts'. Today they seek value-based and visionary

design thinking, which is precisely my strength. So this transition to an era where more organisations also consider feelings has only made my job even more rewarding,” she concludes.

IMAGES

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ARTICLE

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