

Interview with Anja Geitmann

<https://www.stemdiversity.com/interview-videos>

Q. So we're sitting in a very historic site of Montreal: the west end of Montreal. We're with Dean Anja Geitmann. Please state your name and affiliation.

A. My name is Anja Geitmann. I am the Dean of the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and also the Associate Vice Principal of the McDonald Campus of McGill University.

Q. Could you give us a summary of your research?

A. I'm a plant scientist – I'm a plant cell biologist, really. I try to understand how plants grow. Plants grow by dividing their cells and by growing the individual cells and all of that is governed by very physical processes, since plant cells are surrounded by cell wall – that's the stuff that makes your **clothes**, for example, cellulose. And so, in order for individual plant cells to grow, strong forces have to act. I try to understand how individual plant cells grow, how they divide, how they form a tissue, how a leaf makes a leaf, and not a flower, and how a flower forms, and not a leaf.

Q. This project has to do with STEMM – not stem as a plant but STEMM standing for Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine, and Math, and diversity at McGill and beyond. Why is diversity important to you, either in your daily life, your personal life, or your professional life?

A. Diversity is a very wide term, right? And as a term it pertains to both gender and race and representation and I think what is really important is giving everybody the same opportunity. Not everybody will grasp them. I know that people have different preferences and there are certain professions that are preferred, for example, by males or females. But I think everybody needs to get the same opportunity to actually develop these preferences and not be determined by what we grow up with. And so, it's crucial that we have a high variety of people on our boards, in our groups, in our teams, for the simple reason that teams work much better when they're not dominated by a single gender or race or other group. Representation on all of these groupings is absolutely crucial for the optimal functioning of a unit – academic unit or industry anywhere, really.

Q. Is it actually part of the policy of here, at Agriculture and Environmental Sciences? Is there a policy statement that talks about diversity and inclusivity?

A. We have, of course. Every hiring decision is being made taking this into consideration. For example, when we get CVs, we look at what is the gender distribution in the CVs that we receive – all of that. We look at what are the people that are shortlisted, and do they represent the distribution both in terms of gender and minorities, for example. And then, only then, do we go about selecting the best person – because the best person should get the job, absolutely, but we want to have a shortlist that actually represents the wider community that has applied to the job.

Q. And that has been done for a number of years, even prior to you being Dean?

A. Oh, absolutely. That is something that McGill has – I think McGill, among all Canadian universities is very much spearheading this and has been doing so and it is one of the universities with the highest representation of females, for example, in their leadership teams, so it's doing well, but we can always do better and we need to overcome our own biases, internal and subconscious biases, in order to do so and really consider everyone for the job, who is qualified.

Q. Have you experienced and or seen bias in your career?

A. In my own career, for the longest time I thought I didn't, because I went through the academic path quite unimpeded and everybody always supported me, until in hindsight, I sort of discovered the small biases I experienced. I'll give you a couple of examples. Awards are something that, really, only gives you one line in your CV, you won this or that award, but when they accumulate and sum up in your CV they strengthen a CV enormously. And I had submitted a number of nominations of other people for awards and I discovered that in my own CV, I basically had no award. And I discovered this when I was Dean, only, when I was asked to let people know what kind of awards I had, and I was like "No, I really don't have any," and it always takes somebody else to nominate you for an award, right? So, I was like, "Huh, what are my own biases, maybe?" And I looked at my own award nominations that I did for other people and lo-and-behold all the people I ever nominated for awards were male. So, I have to start with myself to see am I biased in terms of seeing in other people that are qualified and worthy of an award and was I maybe the victim, so to say, of that same unconscious, and I think it's unconscious, bias, in terms of awards. So, that was one thing that didn't particularly affect my own CV – I'm here and I have a very high position – but I'm pretty sure that affects a lot of women in building up their academic CV.

The other thing is, and I think that's not a bias or discrimination, is simply a difference in behavior. There is a statistic – I don't know whether it's true – but very interesting. A man will apply to a job when he only fulfills part of the qualifications that are written out in the profile – maybe about 60% of those qualifications that are required in the job profile – he will happily submit his CV, whereas a woman will only bother to do so when she thinks she fulfills 100% of the qualifications.

Q. This is based on a study you read about?

A. This is based on a study that I read about but only indirectly, so I cannot vouch for the 60% and 100% but I am pretty sure that the tendency is very true because it's not so much that we don't think ourselves qualified, or that women don't think themselves qualified, it's more that they won't bother because they think they will not be considered anyways if they don't fulfill 100% of the qualifications that are in the advertised portfolio or profile. The problem is women don't realize the game is not played that well. Of course everyone who advertises a job profile would like to have that perfect person who has all the qualifications, but there is no such

person, so they will look at a whole lot of CVs that do not fulfill all the qualifications and choose the person that best does the job and this is actually how I ended up in this job, myself. I would never have considered to actually apply to it. I was very, very aggressively headhunted into it, by a headhunter, who told me: "Try it, submit your CV." And it took him 3 times to actually convince me to update my CV, which is a major enterprise for academics, to submit it, because I thought, "Why would they even consider me? I have no administrative experience, for example." Turns out that the people who then hired me saw many things in my CV that did seem to qualify me for the job, and so this is how it goes in many cases: we're not qualified for all the qualifications in the job advertisement but women just think the game is played that way and they don't even apply to start with, which is a bias that is self-inflicted that we need to work on.

Q. You've cited the positive and negative experiences in your career in terms of diversity and bias. What about in your personal life? The way you raise your children, the way you interact in your home, with your friends?

A. So, I have two boys, and I vehemently try to supply them with toys that were non-particularly gendered, or that included both, so they got dolls when they were little, and I exposed them to everything that I thought were female toys, so to say, they just didn't pick them, ever. The only thing they played with were cars or airplanes. Maybe their father being an airplane engineer made a difference in that, but what I figured was there are probably were differences – we cannot deny there are differences in interests but what we need to do is give them the opportunity to actually discover it, and I thought I think I've done the necessary to give them the opportunity to discover it but if they don't pick it, it's their choice.

I have a personal pet peeve about child-raising, and that's the clothing industry. Everything that's tailored to girls is, per definition, in pink. That very girly equipment – not only clothes, but also notebooks and pens, and everything is already very gendered at a very, very early age, which I think is a very dramatic mistake because it makes very young children already grow up in a very gendered role and not see the many opportunities that they have that are non-gendered, like working in the STEMM field, for example. From an early age, it seems to be so masculine – would you give your niece, for example, a looth or a microscope for her birthday? Or a cutting knife or something like that? We really have to pay attention what we give our kids to play with and what kind of role models we give them and that pertains not only to boys but to girls as well.

Q. Who does the laundry and the cooking and the domestic work, in a house with three men and one woman?

A. We're very much same opportunity for everybody. I do the laundry my husband does the cooking. Funnily enough, one of my sons had a poll at school last year and the kids were polled who does the cooking at home and he said he was the only one who raised his hand when he said that his father was doing the cooking and all the other households, it was the mother the cooking and all the other households, it was the mother doing the cooking. In our household, I mean both of us cook, but my husband does 80 or 90% of it.

Q. What age is that boy?

A. He's 14 and his brother's 11.

Q. What are some things that you feel still need improvement, aside from that bias that you talked about in women not really playing the job-hunting game in the way they should – anything else that we could improve on?

A. I think the subconscious bias that still all of us have – and I include myself in that, is something we really, really need to work on. And I think the so-called “affirmative action” has helped in that in the sense that we are forced when we are doing hiring to consider that question. That is already something that raises the point from subconscious to conscious awareness and it's very important. But there are many moments where we need to still work on that subconscious bias and that's a subconscious bias, as I've said, not only on the side of employers, for example, but also the future employees. Giving the same opportunity to people. What they choose afterwards, is their choice, but giving the same opportunity to people is really, really important and we need to work on that, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of minority, in terms of race, in terms of disabilities. We need to give people the same opportunities and we need to be aware of – sometimes it costs us, an employer, or, let's say a professor, who hires graduate students, it costs some effort to give those same opportunities. We also have to realize that people are not the same, so if I am a professor supervising graduate students, it's very possible that one graduate student needs a lot of supervision whereas the other is very autonomous, and so we need to actually individualize our approach to supervision, which is really, really important.

Q. And that leads me to the mentoring question. Did you go through the mentoring system? And you can cite mentors?

A. I had mentors, informally, all the time, but never officially assigned, but I had very important mentors in my life. One of my early mentors in my career was my supervisor when I was a Post-Doc. She was female. She had actually left academia for a decade or so in order to raise kids and be a high school teacher and then she decided to come back into academia and become a professor and then rose in the ranks, relatively late in her age, so to say, and I always admired her for that courage to do so. It was, at the time, a relatively male-dominated institution on top of it and she just did that, and just seeing that woman doing that – having that role model was incredibly reassuring. It's possible – you can do this.

Q. So can we actually acknowledge that with her name – is that alright?

A. Yes, **Animee Amens** is my former supervisor at the University of Wageningen in Holland. She is one of my important mentors. The other mentor was really important in recent years when I got hired at McGill. Deep Saini was, at the time, when I got hired at University de Montreal, where I was before joining McGill, he was the director of the institute then. He was a good

colleague – became a good friend over the years. He then left the institution to become Dean elsewhere and then Vice President at the University of Toronto and is now Principal in Australia, so he is ahead of me in the administrative career and was a very good resource in terms of... first of all, encouraging me. He always told me “Go do this, submit your CV. If they ask you to do this, they have done their due diligence and they think you have at least the potential to be considered.” So he was not only encouraging but also gave me the details. Through the interview process, he told me: “This is what’s going on, this is what will happen.” And so, it was very reassuring.

Q. For this one?

A. For this one, for this position, here.

Q. You were fifteen years, at UdeM. You were never headhunted, you never went for anything in that time?

A. They did try, and I said no, at University de Montreal.

Q. Was it because you felt not ready?

A. I felt not ready, I felt I wanted to focus on my research, but I do also admit that working in a French system, I coped with the teaching, I coped with daily life in French, but I didn’t see myself going up in the administrative ranks in French, simply for reasons that are related to my not-perfect French, at the time, and so I took the easy way out and I said no. I had been offered opportunities and I said no, but then when McGill offered me in this opportunity, it was like “Oh, I can actually do this in English, in the same city.” And it was still very intimidating and daunting, and that’s where Deep Saini came in and said: “You can do this – try.”

Q. He’s much older than you?

A. He’s a few years older than I. He grew up through those ranks very quickly and very efficiently and enjoyed being an administrator, so on top of being a mentor, he was also a role model because, for many academics, administration is the dark side, because why would you leave research and all the fun that you are having in the lab in order to do administration, which is something that sounds very dry? You know, sitting in an office, and you know? On the contrary, it’s a fantastic job. You get to do so many different things and make a difference for so many different people – it’s a great job, and he was the one to tell me. He said: “You will enjoy it, and you have the personality to do that. You have the interpersonal skills to do it. Try it out.” And so he was not only a mentor, he was encouraging and a role model at the same time.

Q. What advice would Anja, would you give? A young girl, a high-school student, she lives here in Mac, she grew up in Saint-Anne, she’s seen this place, she probably picked up bugs, looked at plants, went to the eco-museum and now somebody’s asking her: “You’re going into CEGEP, what are you going to study there?”

A. When you decide what kind of career to embark on now-a-days, it's really a challenge because most of the jobs that will exist 10 or 20 years from now don't even exist now-a-days, so you'll have to get trained for something that might not even exist yet. That means you'll need to get trained on something that you actually enjoy and that you can then develop into a career, so having fun at your work is absolutely important. Imagine, you have to work with this for the next 40 years, so first thing: try to find out what you like doing – what do you like doing, spending your time on for many hours a day? And science is one of those careers. Just imagine you're a scientist and you find out something in the lab – you're standing in the lab, you have your pipette, you've pulled out this gel and you've found something and you're the first person in the world to know – to have understood this, let's say, biological process. You're the first person and now you can solidify this data and you write this paper and you actually tell people about this. You're the world expert in this – isn't this such a fantastic career to embark on? This is so noble – this is so fantastic, and it's so much fun, so try and consider science or math or engineering as an opportunity to actually grow – not only earn money, but actually have fun and make a difference, not only for your life but possibly for society and for the entire world.