

# Driving renewal S2E6 - Every bit of sparkle has another side to it – guest Nina Nissilä, Kela

**Satu:** In this episode, my guest is Nina Nissilä, who works at Kela as the Director responsible for IT and shared services. Kela is currently undergoing one of the largest technology transformations in Finnish history—the Eepos programme—which is also significant in scale at the European level. The programme involves renewing all of Kela’s core benefit-processing systems along with their supporting systems, and in the future, the change will in some way affect the everyday work of everyone at Kela.

Technology-driven transformation, cybersecurity, modern technologies, and customer experience are close to Niina's heart both at work and outside of it. In her free time, she serves on the board of Witted Megacorp Oy. Over the course of her career, Nina has witnessed changes in working life from a broad perspective, across both the private and public sectors.

She has, among other things, co-founded the design-focused D9 digital team at the State Administration on behalf of the government and served as a business director at both CGI and Tieto. Throughout her career, Nina has also participated in several high-level working groups of the Finnish government to promote digitalization.

In 2023, Tivi magazine named her IT and Digital Leader of the Year. Welcome to the podcast, Niina.

**Nina:** Thank you.

**Satu:** You have indeed served as the director of Kela for almost exactly seven years now, and before that in various leadership roles, but you originally studied international politics at the Tampere University.

**Satu:** Tell us a bit about the path that led you to these roles?

**Nina:** That’s true—and along the way in my career there have been moments when we’ve even joked a bit about it: how someone with a background in social sciences, who studied peace and conflict research at university, ended up working in this field. It’s been said that these projects can sometimes become rather crisis-prone, so in that sense the education has been seen as “relevant”—

followed by a bit of chuckling. But actually, I have to say today, perhaps unfortunately, that having studied such topics and then having a career in digitalization, mainly from a societal perspective in quite significant roles, has turned out to be a surprisingly good combination.

These cybersecurity issues and such have become quite political nowadays, so understanding that landscape has proven to be beneficial. But there was a bit of luck involved initially. I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to study, but what I would do for work was not clear at all.

And then my very first official job was at Kopiosto, which is a copyright organization. There, I was responsible for planning compensations, and from there I moved to Ilmarinen. First, I was in charge of designing the pension payment system, and then I moved on to development services as a Service Manager to digitize customer service.

Back then, the term digitalization wasn't used yet; it was called electrification. And that's how my career started to progress. In a way, there's been a bit of luck involved in my journey as well.

**Satu:** And currently, you are indeed leading a significant technology transformation at Kela that affects all Finns.

And the aim is to renew everything in the benefits operations. In doing so, it will surely renew how things are done not just at Kela, but also the way our users do things and the processes involved.

**Nina:** Hopefully, that's the intention. And yes, there is room for simplification, there's no denying that. Part of the simplification also requires looking at legislation a bit to enable information to move more automatically. A large portion of the information that customers currently provide to us is actually in digital form somewhere, either with welfare areas, insurance companies, pension companies, banks, or electric companies. However, this information doesn't always come to us electronically, even in cases where we have the right to receive it. So, customers end up providing this information to us either as photos, notes, or in various other forms.

This is part of our effort to improve the flow of information, which would result in a smoother experience for the customer when applying for benefits, and potentially faster decisions. Of course, data that moves in a structured digital format is easier for a machine to process than starting by scanning a paper into an image and then trying to draw conclusions from that.

**Satu:** At what stage is this project currently?

**Nina:** The project is at a stage where we have completed the procurement and made the decision regarding it. After that, the actual contract negotiations began, which were concluded in late July. And on August 11, 2025, the first phase of the project started, which is referred to as a hundred-day sprint.

And practically, this means that we are now setting up those operations. Currently, there are about 150 people from the supplier's side and over ten people from our side involved. Establishing an organization of this scale and ensuring everyone knows what they are doing is quite an effort, and it takes a certain amount of time. So, that's what we are currently working on.

**Satu:** Yes, and the procurement of the supplier is certainly no small task either

**Nina:** No, it's not that, yes, the process actually took several years in such a way that we had, overall, this actually started from something, now it's probably, what would I say, so I wouldn't be lying too much, it's been almost four years since we started thinking that now we need to somehow, we've tried to make changes before and it hasn't really hit the mark properly, so now we need to, we knew that a change needed to be made, that we needed to come up with something that would make it succeed better than before. And we were thinking about whether there might be something semi-finished already in place that we could then build our specific needs on top of.

And first, we spent some time figuring out whether the whole idea was even feasible. Then we concluded that it seemed to be. In 2023, we kicked things off with market research phases. For roughly a year, we examined what our peer agencies had done and what the vendors were offering. And various successful and, in some cases, unsuccessful projects, to see how they went.

From that, we gained valuable insight and realized that this could indeed be built on top of a so-called off-the-shelf solution. After that, we launched the process by inviting expressions of interest from vendors, and based on those, four suppliers were selected to take part in a competitive negotiation procedure.

And the process then took another year, which concluded in the spring of the 25th of April, if I remember correctly, shortly after Easter, when the decision was made about who won. And of course, there are appeal periods and all the usual procedures in public procurement. After that, we moved on to finalizing the contracts. The draft contracts were already part of the material, so we didn't

start from scratch, but there are many details, such as date clarifications, names, and similar things that need to be completed.

And if I remember correctly, the contract had 19 appendices, so we're not talking about a single A4 page either; there were hundreds of pages of material to be detailed.

For those listening who are in the private sector or working on smaller projects, in this scale, every aspect is quite significant and labor-intensive, and the volumes are large.

**Satu:** It certainly sounds like it. You mentioned that Kela has earlier attempted to make the similar kind of change, so what do you think is different this time?

**Nina:** Well, the difference is that we have chosen a product on which to build it. Originally, the previous attempts had different concepts. One was to custom-build everything from scratch, and the other was to just modernize the code a bit without touching anything else. But now, the idea is that we have a ready-made product, which is a Salesforce solution designed for the needs of the public sector. So, the whole concept is somewhat different compared to the previous ones.

**Satu:** Let me recap to make sure I understand the core objective correctly: the information should move better between the systems, making it easier for us users so we don't have to deliver it to different places.

**Nina:** Yes, that's part of it, aiming overall to modernize the user experience. Although we have developed our online services along the way, there is still room for improvement in the experience. Up until now, all our benefits have been in separate systems, and we haven't had an overall view of the customer's situation. Therefore, we haven't been able to provide the customer with a comprehensive view of everything they have going on with us. I believe and hope that through this, we can improve the customer experience, allowing them to have a better overview of their service interaction with Kela.

And then, of course, the intention is to improve our overall automation in the background, so decisions will also be made faster.

**Satu:** Well this will certainly affect the work done by employees at Kela, so do you have any kind of insight into what changes are expected, or is it still more of a guess at this stage?

**Nina:** At a high level, there is a vision, but for individual cases, there isn't a clear view. At a high level, we are aiming for an automation rate of about 70-80 percent, whereas currently, we might be at around 20-30 percent if we look at the overall picture. Of course, there are individual areas where some are further along than others. But naturally, this also means that there will be less work done by humans.

But we have a situation where we have quite an aging workforce, with many people set to retire in the coming years. We also face the challenge of how to manage this on a national level, as the number of working individuals is decreasing while the number of retirees is soon to surpass that of the working population.

So, how... we can keep the services running, we have to consider the situation that we can't be as dependent on human labor in all areas. Yes, such a change is on the horizon, but what it means for an individual person will, of course, be seen more clearly later.

From the perspective of our IT unit, we no longer code everything ourselves like we might have in the past. Instead, we get ready-made solutions, and our work now involves more configuring, parameterizing, defining, and testing.

**Satu:** How has this idea and change been received by employees?

**Nina:** It really depends on who you ask. There are those who have long hoped that we would use cloud services more. And now that we are starting to utilize the cloud more, they are in the spirit of "finally." And of course, the staff hopes for more modern tools, so that idea also resonates well with our benefit processors. But I also understand that in our IT services, there are people who wonder if they will still have jobs in the future, and naturally, they are concerned about that. We don't really have an answer to that question yet, but I understand why it is being asked.

**Satu:** Do you have any practices in place to address all these concerns? It's really great that they even reach you, for example.

**Nina:** We do have various groups where these are discussed. We are also quite precise about how such cooperation procedures are followed.

For us, it doesn't automatically mean layoffs if there are cooperation negotiations. Instead, we go through all sorts of work phases via that process.

It's one way to have discussions through the staff representatives about what's coming and what's happening.

And we even have employee representatives in our management team as well as on Kela's board. So, in that way, they are involved in those critical decision-making points. And then there are many informal gatherings. We have various breakfast meetings, weekly meetings, afternoon coffee sessions, info sessions, and so on.

There have probably been hundreds of these along the way for both larger and smaller groups, where we've tried to explain where we are and what's in progress. Personally, I've spent a lot of time at the office, talking to people and getting a sense of their feelings and thoughts.

**Satu:** Well, you said it started about four years ago, maybe.

**Nina:** Yeah, I don't remember the exact day anymore. It was sometime after the start of the pandemic.

**Satu:** Exactly, I was pondering, how has your role as a leader changed, or what needs have there been at different stages, especially now as you move into a different phase?

**Nina:** We have a separate program management team that actually drives the program forward, so I'm not directly hands-on. Now, we might be at a stage where my role is currently smaller.

It might change again, but when we were making those big decisions, like what kind of options to use, whether to go to the cloud or not, and there were many difficult questions about data security and other issues, I had quite a significant role. I intentionally delved deeply into the details to understand what the options meant and what needed to be considered. It required a lot from me, took time, and demanded focus and work hours.

At that time, I was quite actively involved in the planning of the work. I wasn't part of the negotiations, but I was supporting from the background and involved in certain points when executive decisions were required. Now that we've moved to the implementation phase and PVC is primarily responsible for the execution, it is more under their leadership. My role is currently smaller, but since some of our people involved in the project are my subordinates, I am, of course, supporting them and monitoring the progress. However, I am not closely involved in the daily supervision.

**Satu:** I think that in such a comprehensive change, as with all changes, the role of communication somehow becomes even more important. It's about how everyone gets on board with the idea of where we are heading and the changes we are making.

Yeah, it is, and it's like... It feels like we've had a lot of reference discussions both with international social security institutions and with various other actors in Finland who have made significant changes.

One recurring theme is that you can never really succeed perfectly. Either it's too little or too much, or it's the wrong kind or at the wrong time, but at least we've tried, so we can hold our heads high. Part of the communication challenge is that during the procurement phase, things aren't very public.

People have a huge thirst for information, and speculation about the options and everything else can be quite dangerous. There are many points where we can't really say anything, and we might not even have the answers. Then people might assume that something very secretive is happening because nothing is being shared, and so on...

There are natural reasons why certain stages, from a communication perspective, feel difficult. And the management must also persevere through it, as it involves a certain amount of criticism that is almost impossible to avoid. But of course, one should still try their best to make the situation as smooth and less distressing as possible for those who are not yet deeply involved in the various work stages. But it is a demanding task, and the key to success in many cases is how things are communicated.

**Satu:** Yes, and at that stage—when you can't yet be fully open about it—it also reveals how we cope with uncertainty, and in that regard, we are quite different.

**Nina:** Yes. It has also been noticed that, in general, in all kinds of changes, it is perhaps one of the most essential work-life skills—how one manages that sense of uncertainty within oneself. And that's something you can't really do for someone else. Every person is an individual and has to find their own tools to improve that sense of uncertainty, but it is a very important skill.

**Satu:** One could think, of course, that there are channels where you can speak out loud, and that might already help and make you realize, hey, maybe I'm not alone with this uncertainty.

**Nina:** Yes, that's exactly how it is—and even at the leadership level, tolerating uncertainty is something you have to practice. Even if you're more in the driver's seat than some others, and in my role I've perhaps had better visibility into where things stand, the future is still unknown to me as well. You find yourself having to think about what all of this involves, what it means for your own work, and there are many different reflections along the way.

And some aspects can feel particularly uncertain—especially given how turbulent the world is right now. For example, I don't have answers either to how international security issues and other global factors might affect things. These are uncertainties I simply have to live with, alongside the responsibility that comes with my role.

**Satu:** Yes, you just have to go along with the journey. What is the current outlook on when this will be implemented?

**Nina:** Well, actually, we aim to have the first visible outputs by early May next spring. As part of this general support, there is a model for a single application, which is intended to be built on the new platform. The first version of this will come out next spring. The first phase will be then, and in 2027, the first somewhat larger wave will follow.

Which will then include three benefits as it stands. And then, in various waves, it will come, so the goal is now about seven years, during which time everything will be brought into production.

**Satu:** So some employees engage with the change earlier and see what it practically means.

How do you stay motivated and remember the direction you're heading in such a long change process? What does it take to keep employees engaged along the way?

**Nina:** Well, that's a good question... Maybe there isn't really a method where you can just press a button and all worries and problems disappear. Long projects generally need to be built in a way that acknowledges not everyone will be involved all the time.

It's only natural that as people's skills develop, there might be demand for them in other jobs, and at some point, it might even be reasonable from the individual's perspective to change jobs. However, the work community needs to

be structured in a way that it can withstand such situations, managing a certain level of turnover risk, and this is important to consider right from the start.

Then another aspect is that in such a long project, like ours with its various waves and different benefits, there is a relatively small group of people who, due to their roles, see the project through from start to finish. However, there is also a large number of people who are involved in a specific phase and then move on to other tasks. For example, in the first wave, there might be military assistance as one of the benefits. The people specialized in handling that benefit will be involved in that phase, but once it's completed, they are no longer needed in the project and will move on to other tasks.

This is one aspect that requires us to have a staffing plan within the project at all times. How new people are brought in and how information is transferred and shared between individuals. This is actually an essential part of long-term projects. A model where tasks are handed over seamlessly ensures that even if there are changes, the work continues.

This needs to be considered right from the start. Anything can happen in the world. And in situations like these, where there's not much room for failure, you have to be quite precise with your risk management strategies. That's why it's a very important element. In that sense, of course, we strive to maintain a good atmosphere for those involved in the project, so they don't feel the need to move on to other tasks.

Maybe the main thing isn't to prevent any changes, because we know that changes will happen for natural reasons, and it's a normal part of it.

**Satu:** Yes, seven years is a long time.

**Nina:** Yes.

**Satu:** So, have you personally learned something over the years from working on this project about leading a large initiative?

**Nina:** Yeah, I actually have a slide deck that I've presented a few times in different places, detailing all the things that can go wrong, and it's quite a few pages long.

It can go wrong in many ways. Some of it I've learned the hard way, and some I've picked up from others, realizing that these things can also go wrong. In its

own way, I think it's quite important to understand where the risk points are, so you can start building success from there.

A colleague once said that the DNA of large projects has a desire to fail. You constantly have to keep a tight rein and provide guidance, because it's quite easy for things to start veering off course, and eventually, you might end up in a thicket instead of where you were supposed to go.

So it definitely requires vigilance, and in its own way, it's an endurance sport in these long projects. The initial excitement is always nice when starting a project; everyone is super enthusiastic, thinking something fun and exciting is happening. But at some point, you realize, oh shoot, this is actually a bit difficult and laborious, and the inspiration might wane, leading to battle fatigue.

I've had those moments myself. Often, people who are a bit project-oriented and development-focused tend to gravitate towards these kinds of tasks. Those who prefer a steady routine, where they always know what to expect, might not even apply for positions where the day-to-day can be unpredictable.

**Nina:** So maybe it's partly a matter of personality as well.

**Satu:** What causes these massive projects to have a tendency to fail? Is it just their size or something else?

**Nina:** It comes from many factors, and size is one of them. In a way, the size is evident in the large amount of work and the many people involved. It consists of many small streams that together form the big flow.

And then, at the right moments, even the small streams can start to diverge a bit from the main thing. Sometimes it's easy to say, as the saying goes, "the devil lies in the details," and that's true here as well. There are many tiny details that can end up being worked on for a long time, which can delay schedules. On the other hand, sometimes it's not understood that a particular tiny detail was crucial to address at the beginning, and later on, it turns out to cause issues.

That's one part. The timeline, in its own way, even though it feels like a long duration, is actually an incredibly fast squeeze in our environment. We calculated that an alternative way to implement this would have meant a scenario of about 20-30 years, so seven years is actually quite short. But especially in these technology cases, a long duration means that if it goes any longer, there's always the risk that the technology starts to become outdated in some corner before you've managed to complete everything.

This leads to its own set of problems. And then there's one thing... It sounds like a technical issue, but it's actually more of a business matter, which is how the overall architecture is built. In large projects, it's sometimes difficult to visualize and keep it clear in a way that helps maintain focus.

So if it starts to get tangled up like a spider's web, with things crossing over and getting mixed up, which can easily happen with big projects, it can lead to a result that isn't as clear as hoped. This can cause delays, difficulties, and increased costs during the implementation phase.

Then perhaps one more thing I would say is that when the scale is as large as it is, in our case, we're talking about our entire benefits operation. We have over 60 so-called main benefits, and if you count all the sub-benefits and additional increases, there are a bit over a hundred, covering the entire human lifecycle from cradle to grave.

There are many details regarding the conditions under which someone receives a benefit or not. Modeling that with millimeter precision in the initial phase of the system, during the procurement phase, is completely impossible. The decisive factor is how the contract is structured—whether we end up in an impossible change management loop all the time or if we can manage the process of refining details in a way that keeps it reasonably under control.

And it's like, sometimes in large projects, we fall into the trap of making a million lines of specifications, trying to be as precise as possible, but it leads to the fact that even though you can model everything before you actually see how it works in practice, it results in the outcome not always being as precise as intended, despite efforts to be detailed.

And then minds change as well when we see that this could actually be possible this way, but since we've defined it that way, what then? So, there are many ways things can go wrong, but these are the kinds of issues that usually arise.

**Satu:** Yes. You mentioned that some things are only learned later—things that perhaps could have been done differently at the start. In that light, is there room in this project for learning through experimentation, or is it something that can be meaningfully utilized here? How do you see it?

**Nina:** Well, maybe not experiments in the way I understand them or how others might understand them as well, but I would talk more about a growth process. In a way, our first wave is smaller because the benefits are somewhat different

from each other, so we learn a bit about how different types of benefits behave in this context.

So it's not really an experiment, because these are genuine benefits that are actually being put into production. The end result is meant for production, whereas in an experiment, the idea might be that it never even reaches production.

At least in some types of experiments, but this is more about learning and growing into the job. Once we understand better, the next steps, which involve slightly more complex benefits, will be easier to handle because we are better prepared and understand what needs to be considered.

So it's more of a growth process rather than an experimental one.

**Satu:** So, you mentioned earlier that you have an innovation unit at Kela. How does it relate more broadly to Kela's renewal in various projects and, for example, to this Eepos program?

**Nina:** They are actually kind of our eyes to the future, specifically in terms of technology.

When I joined Kela seven years ago, one of the challenges at that time was that, as a civil servant, we did try out various new things, but we couldn't quite manage to stop those experiments even when it started to seem like they weren't really working out or taking off.

And then it was decided that something needed to be done, so we would have a team that, first of all, limits the resources used to investigate something when it's not yet clear if it's worthwhile or not. Instead, they would narrow down the group and conduct some preliminary research to see which ideas might take off and which might not.

Then there's the famous "Kill Your Darlings," where they, without batting an eye, eliminate ideas that are quickly seen as unlikely to succeed. This actually saves taxpayers' money much more than just muddling through and trying to push forward.

This has also proven to be economically sensible. Now, of course, we are moving towards a world where certain technology choices have been made. We have discussed how to direct this group's activities so that they focus more on creative work within those specific frameworks.

To get a bit of a head start and see what might be sensible to do in a few years, for example with the help of AI or something similar. In the Eepos program itself, we are currently just setting up the platform, so in the work that is happening there today, we are not yet discussing what we will do with AI.

But still, we can have a team that is already pondering what the future might hold. So when the day comes that the program is ready for the AI phase, we won't be completely unprepared about what is possible and what makes sense.

**Satu:** How does this innovation unit collaborate with other functions within your organization? So that it doesn't remain an isolated island where learning stays contained?

**Nina:** They are actually quite well-networked within our organization. We've made a special effort to ensure they are very close to the service operations and receive input from there. The idea is not that the service operations should identify the problems that need solving. This team should then figure out which technology fits best.

The process is not that they come and tell you what your problems are. It requires very good collaboration. We also have certain roles specifically designed to act as a bridge and engage in discussions with the service operations people to determine which problems are worth diving into.

**Satu:** How does it work if one of your employees comes up with an idea on how things could be done differently or better? What is the channel they can use to bring up such a thought?

**Nina:** It probably depends a bit on what we're talking about. These ideas do come up, and some are quite everyday things, like doing tasks in a different order. Naturally, these are considered within the service operations. There's a dedicated development unit whose job, among other things, is to think about how to change the order of processes, for example.

And if it's more about, of course, what's currently a popular topic of discussion, like AI, everyone is buzzing about it, so for us too, generative AI is now a big thing. We have quite a few innovation projects going on, including myself, where people are suggesting, "Couldn't we place one agent here, another there, and a third somewhere else?" So, yeah...

Quite a few of us then get in touch with the innovation unit, asking if they could create an agent for us. I've instructed them that this also applies to assignments

coming from me, that they shouldn't take them as gospel. Even if we are somewhat ordering AI, they need to consider what the sensible technology for it is.

**Nina:** Quite often, it actually turns out that some other approach can solve the issue more easily than using AI. The existence of the innovation unit is pretty well known, so when there's a technology-related matter, our people are quite good at tossing ideas their way.

**Satu:** You mentioned AI and earlier automation, so what roles do they currently play in your operations?

**Nina:** There are a lot of promises, of course, for many others as well. We have machine vision in production, and it has been in productive use since 2020. We receive a lot of attachments with our benefit decisions or applications, and these are processed with machine vision. People can also send us these attachments as photos, and as many might notice from their own experience, the camera can sometimes be oriented in various ways when taking these pictures. Consequently, they arrive in our system in various orientations when submitted through the online service. The machine then rotates them correctly and reduces the file size, which has led to our data center capacity for this purpose dropping to a tenth of what it originally was.

And as many of you probably know, photos taken with a mobile phone are quite large in size, so this has also been a small eco-friendly act. In addition to that, it has made our work more efficient since people don't have to manually rotate the images, thus using slightly less capacity. But then there's this generative AI, which is perhaps the most talked-about topic right now. We do have various activities related to it underway, but the greatest potential for us might not be in our core operations, like benefit decisions. In those areas, a rule-based approach might be wiser and more productive in the long run. However, in various support tasks, such as assisting with communications and handling large volumes of documents, for example, when I receive numerous links to different documents and materials online, instead of reading hundreds of pages, I can have the AI summarize them for me and get the essential information. So, in that sense, we are already using it, but time will tell.

I believe that this might be the first wave of buzz, and the productivity benefits might still be limited in such a high-risk business. But then... perhaps the next wave of development will come in a few years, which could be even more beneficial for us.

**Satu:** Yes. Do you see that it has somehow changed the role of leadership or your approach to it in any way? Has it had any impact on that?

**Nina:** Well, at least one change has happened, thanks to ChatGPT... Before it became a hot topic, our management team, except for me and our IT director, was never really excited about technology matters.

And that was fine, they don't have to be. But after this came out, probably everyone has tried it and thought about where it could be used. So, in that sense, some technology has come to the attention of business people, and at least that change has happened.

People have perhaps started to think about what technology could do. In that way, it has maybe made the development side of technology a bit more everyday. And then, in part, maybe we've also started to gradually understand a bit more about the risks related to cybersecurity and other issues. Not entirely enough yet, but somewhat.

But has it really changed the essence of leadership? I would be inclined to say not significantly yet. Bigger changes might still be on the horizon. There has been some contemplation about whether roles like mine will be needed much in the future. Routine HR tasks, such as approving vacations, will likely be handled automatically without much intervention.

And handling large data sets and giving recommendations, and so on, whether decision-making can be outsourced to a machine, maybe. I don't consider it impossible, but it will probably take some time.

**Satu:** Human interactions are not going to be replaced anytime soon.

**Nina:** Of course, even though many jokes suggest that Finns are so reserved, the difference might not be that big, but I still want to believe that it has its own value.

**Satu:** Hey, we talked briefly before this recording and you mentioned that on your first day at Kela, you said you wanted to hire designers.

**Nina:** Yes, that's correct.

**Satu:** Could you tell us a bit about where this idea originated and what role designers currently play at Kela?

**Nina:** Yes, we actually have quite a few designers at Kela, but this started before I joined Kela. I was leading a D9 digital team at the State Administration, which was a temporary experiment initiated by the mid-term review of Sipilä's government.

The State Administration was tasked with creating a digital team, and I was hired to lead it. My first task, of course, was to assemble the team. At that time, I already had a strong vision that the problem in government administration wasn't so much about the ability to digitize forms or other things, but more about how the digitalization was being done.

And I recognized that... Getting the customer's perspective into the development process is crucial. The digital team became very design-oriented, with designers on board. I had been somewhat exposed to the topic before, but I had a major realization at that point about what could be achieved with design expertise. And when the team's project was nearing its end and I ended up at Kela, I had already started contemplating it a bit, as I was somewhat familiar with Kela's operations when I joined.

One thing that should be done to ensure the customer's perspective permeates the entire organization is to start from the strategy itself. The strategy should be built in a way that serves the management, incorporating design and utilizing design thinking in the strategic process.

Therefore, my first suggestion to the then-CEO was to hire a couple of strategic designers to help us with the process. Although it is technically the board's responsibility, the question is really about how the process is executed. He was excited about the idea, so we hired a couple of strategic designers and revamped the strategy-making process with their help. Instead of the board retreating somewhere to come up with ideas and then doing a lot of work to get the staff to understand what those ideas mean, we involved the staff extensively using design methods to understand what they needed from the strategy and what they saw as important to include.

Then those inputs were taken to the board, which then performed its part of the process, and I think it was very successful. This led, among other things, to the fact that we still had various strategy tours and other events where the staff was informed about our new strategy. But we also had quite a few people who had already heard something about it, so the ground was more fertile for considering those questions, and it didn't feel quite so foreign.

**Satu:** Yes, and in a way, if these things have originated from them, it might be easier to buy into the idea later on as well.

**Nina:** Then there were some quite amusing moments, like when some issues raised by the staff were also being considered by the board members in discussions. Both the staff and the board members would say, "Oh, it's wonderful to see that issue on paper, the one I brought up." And of course, it made us smile because it came from both sides, so it was like...

I felt a certain sense of accomplishment at that point because it was easy to accept, as both the staff and the board saw themselves in that document.

**Satu:** Yes, this was apparently a new way for the board to operate at the time, so how did they react to it?

**Nina:** I think it went well, they didn't question it at all, they were completely fine with it.

At least I haven't heard that there was any major surprise about it, so... now, of course, we have made a bit of a rolling process since then, so we don't have a five-year plan anymore. Instead, we review every year to ensure we're still on the right track. The changes have been subtle, minor adjustments, but nothing major. Somehow, it seems to have paid off. At some point, we elevated the role of foresight work, and in that, we also utilized strategic designers.

So they get the tools to try to look a bit more forward and understand which phenomena are important to us. And right now, that's quite a significant part of the work of our strategic designers. But then we also have service designers specifically developing those processes separately, spread across different parts of the organization. I can't say exactly how many, but it might be around ten, though not necessarily many tens, but a few.

**Satu:** Really interesting, it's amazing that you got to work on that right from the start.

**Nina:** IT was fun too.

**Satu:** Excellent. Before starting at Kela, you were at a place called Tieto and CGI in Finland, so both in the public and private sectors. How do you see the underlying principles or "rules of the game" in these two different worlds?

**Nina:** Well. The basic assumption is that they are quite different, but what I had noticed myself is that in the end, the differences are surprisingly few. Since I consider myself a change leader, from this perspective, the essential thing in change is actually the change in people's behavior, so it doesn't really matter whether the activity is privately or publicly funded because people are people everywhere.

So in many ways, the underlying principles are actually quite similar. Of course, differences emerge when it comes to where the money comes from and how it flows through the process—the private sector operates a bit differently in that respect than the public sector, and that can matter in certain situations.

From a project perspective, procurement processes are also different in the public sector, with specific appeal procedures and other formalities that don't exist in the same way in the private sector. That said, in larger projects in the private sector as well, there is still competitive tendering, and in practice the processes often end up looking quite similar in terms of the details: conducting market analyses, benchmarking options, scoring alternatives, and so on.

In larger, more demanding projects, the differences are very small, but in smaller matters, the private sector has more flexibility to directly acquire solutions that actually appeal to them. In such cases, the differences are noticeable, but having worked for large employers myself, there's a certain amount of corporate bureaucracy that comes along, making it quite standardized and similar to what the public sector does.

Then, through my experience on the board, I've noticed that being a small to medium-sized enterprise... There's naturally a different kind of agility compared to larger organizations, and that's where the difference becomes more apparent.

**Satu:** You mentioned that as a change leader, you've naturally been involved in many changes. And change always requires a change in behavior as well. Often, the technology can be implemented, but then how do we get people to act differently? The question. So, what have you learned over the years about how you've grown as a change leader in that regard?

**Nina:** Probably, I've gained more patience, as I was especially impatient when I was younger. And maybe it's a good thing because for a change leader with a quick sense of time, one personal challenge is that when you start thinking about the change, you've already processed it in your mind and settled it, while the rest of the team is still bewildered about where we should be heading.

To remember to be patient and keep repeating things, even if it feels like you've explained it seven times already, you still need to go over it again until everyone is on the same page about what needs to be done and where to go. And on the other hand, as we mentioned earlier, communication needs constant tweaking and consideration of how to approach things. Especially understanding the background people have and the perspective from which they view things.

Sometimes the message can be understood differently depending on the background of the person receiving it. There can be unfortunate misunderstandings if you don't realize that when you phrase something a certain way, people might interpret it differently. Even if you meant something entirely different, you might not always get it perfectly right every day, but sometimes it does hit the mark a bit better.

**Satu:** I would like to ask you, Niina, what has motivated you and what currently motivates you as a change leader?

**Nina:** Yes, even though it's a bit of a cliché and everyone is buzzing about AI, it is quite fascinating. I've spent some time trying to understand what this phenomenon is all about.

Since I'm not a technical person, the specific technological solutions aren't that significant to me. It's more about what can be achieved with them and how they will change our ways of working, our professional lives, and perhaps even our everyday lives. We are living in quite fascinating times in that sense. The bigger changes will probably be seen when I'm already retired, but it's great to be part of such a major breakthrough. I find it quite meaningful because I enjoy observing these larger phenomena; it's somehow in my blood.

So it feels fun, and I've also had the pleasure of being in this workplace as well as in previous ones. I have really great colleagues, and I get a lot of strength from the fact that it's nice to work with nice people who are also competent on top of everything else.

**Satu:** So, what about you personally? How do you maintain your ability to renew yourself and stay sensitive to it?

**Nina:** Maybe a part of my personal story has been this responsibility on the board of Witted Megacorp. I was lucky enough to get an invitation to join the board about a year and a half ago, and I've really enjoyed it. It's very different from my day job, especially since it's a mid-sized IT company.

It has been really refreshing to contemplate those issues from that perspective. And we deal with very similar themes there as in my day job, but from a slightly different angle. It has been very rewarding, and I have enjoyed it. In my free time, I have tried to familiarize myself professionally with what it means to be on the board. It has been my way of increasing my own wisdom and continuing a bit of informal learning, if I can put it that way.

**Satu:** To conclude, what thoughts or advice would you like to share about change management with our graduating students at Aalto University who are considering such roles in the future?

**Nina:** Well yes—starting from the lighter end, I’ve noticed at some point that if you’re able to get along with change, there will certainly be no shortage of work. In that sense, it’s actually quite a good thing if you’re interested in this kind of role.

Another thing that perhaps comes with experience is that many people feel there’s a certain professional sparkle to it—saying you’re a change manager. With a bit of luck, you may get roles where you’re on stage yourself, telling the story and building your personal profile. But what comes along with that is the fact that most of the day-to-day work is actually quite mundane—rolling up your sleeves and dealing with difficult issues.

Things don’t always go according to plan, people may be worried or sometimes even angry, and all of that is part of the job. You have to be able to handle that too—it’s not all sunshine and glory. There’s a heavier side to it as well. To get those kicks from successfully driving change and those feelings of victory from a well-executed project, you have to be willing to push through the hard work.

That’s something worth remembering: every bit of sparkle has another side to it, and that’s an inherent part of the profession.

**Satu:** Exactly. Hey, thank you, Niina. This has been a super interesting hour-long conversation with you.

**Nina:** Yeah, thanks. I could have gone on much longer. Maybe next time then.

**Nina:** Let's continue next time.

**Satu:** Thank you.