

Darja is driven by data and design

She's founded two design agencies, is a member of Sweden's National Innovation Council and is a new member of the board of SVID. Meet Darja Isaksson, the digitalisation expert who has been described as one of Sweden's most important agents of social change.

By Lena Lidberg

ANYONE WHO GOOGLES DARJA ISAKSSON will find a whole collection of titles: digital expert, innovation strategist, change agent, concept developer, researcher, lecturer, inspirer, consultant, design agency founder....

She has been selected as one of Sweden's 15 leading super-talents (by Resumé magazine in 2013) and one of the country's 12 most powerful opinion shapers (by Veckans Affärer magazine last year).

This spring she also placed eight on Veckans Affärer's list of the most important women agents of social change in Swedish industry.

She herself sometimes deflects the attention by tersely describing herself as "a tech nerd from Piteå". But the truth is this: when Darja Isaksson waxes lyrical about the ongoing digital revolution nowadays she also has the prime minister's ear.

Since 2015 she has been a member of the Swedish government's National Innovation Council, whose overall goal is to strengthen Swedish competitiveness.

Just over six months ago she was also elected to SVID's board, where she wants to help increase the importance in society of design as a methodology.

"I apologise for being late," she says on the phone at just after half past eight on Tuesday morning.

A couple of minutes later she swishes into our meeting place, insists on paying for breakfast and finds a quiet-enough nook in the French-style restaurant at Stockholm's central station.

These blocks of the Swedish capital are her new territory.

At Bryggargatan/Mäster Samuelsgatan streets, beside the Åhléns department store, she lives with her family in a rented townhouse in what almost 15 years ago became the city's first housing district on top of a roof.

Isaksson practises what she preaches – one of her pet topics is smart cities and finding sustainable solutions in an age of strong urbanisation.

"Half of all urban surfaces are used for roads and parking spots – intended for cars that nevertheless stand still almost all the time. If we could get rid of most of the cars, we could both reduce fossil emissions and have room for more homes," she says bluntly.

She is passionate about many solutions in the transport sector. Car and bicycle pools are one aspect but she also favours digital solutions that can link up supply, demand and various modes of transport.

Where does Sweden stand in this field?

"Internationally we are in a good position but there are cities in other countries that are more advanced. Helsinki is one example – they're good at intelligent transport systems there. Copenhagen has high accessibility for bicycles, and for some years now Amsterdam has had a platform with open data about transport possibilities. At the same time San Francisco has introduced dynamic pricing for parking spots – that's an exciting initiative. Here in Sweden we could have a road tax where parameters like the type of fuel, degree of utilisation



Photo: Joel Nilsson

Darja Isaksson

and public transport possibilities help to determine what you have to pay. What we need is a new approach, a new policy and a decision about what government authority should have the task of being responsible for an open algorithm of this kind.”

In addition to transportation you also often point to health care and education as sectors having major possibilities of digital improvement?

“Yes, nowadays we can save lives in a totally different way than before. We can ensure that health-care resources go farther while also shortening queues and increasing accessibility. It’s possible to make meetings more efficient and have more generic workplaces whose usage depends on what the demand is like. It’s also possible to meet a doctor online and get advice about self-care. Such things save both time and lots of money. We’re just at the beginning of all this.

“Digitalisation is also involved in education and is changing both schools and learning, which is becoming more of a life-long project. There, too, accessibility is increasing at lightning speed: today you can sit at home in your living room in a tiny village in northern Sweden and take a free Master’s degree from Stanford in the USA.... The opportunities exist but unfortunately we’re not using them yet.”

” **The digital revolution is fundamentally remodelling society. It’s challenging our old concepts about everything”**

When you give lectures you often say that we’re living in fun and exciting times, when all the conditions exist for us to be able to save the planet. Please explain.

“The digital revolution is fundamentally remodelling society. It’s challenging our old concepts about everything from value to democracy, and it’s changing how we produce, consume and communicate. Data is giving us opportunities to organise ourselves in new ways – data is the raw material that we need to be able to extract and refine, just like ore and trees. The changes are creating growth but it’s important that this can be balanced by a development that is environmentally, financially and socially sustainable. One of the cornerstones is transparency and open platforms, which are the basis of innovation processes and business development. Things are happening

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very fast right now and this is influencing us as individuals, as citizens and as business entrepreneurs.”

But you also perceive some lurking dangers?

“Yes. The first stage of digitalisation is leading to greater efficiency, lower prices and increased consumption, which comprise a dangerous trend. Even today we’re consuming more than the planet can withstand. That’s why we must introduce environmental management measures and ensure that the efficiency gains we achieve are used to change our consumption patterns.

“In a global welfare system we should also have an equal right to optimised welfare. That’s one of my strongest driving forces. We’re not there yet, and it almost makes me lie awake at night. People who have the knowledge and opportunities will go abroad to get access to things like stem cell treatments etc. But we must find ways of broadening access to advanced treatments, not least now that global health insurance may soon be a fact. We’re maybe just a few years away from Facebook offering banking and insurance services. The only question is who sets the risk premiums and algorithms in such a system? And how egalitarian will it be? There’s a lot to think about on this issue.

“Another important aspect is everything to do with personal privacy and the individual’s right to data about him- or herself. Sure, we can store things like health data but we must agree on how we do it. Often it is the young countries such as Estonia that are the most digitally mature. It has legislation giving people real-time access to what data the authorities have on them.”

What is your role on the government’s National Innovation Council?

“When the National Innovation Council contacted me in 2015 I realised it was not about my formal platform: I’m not CEO of Ericsson or Volvo, or president of the KTH Royal Institute of Technology or Gothenburg University. But I have worked with various digitalisation themes and I like having lots of things going on and opportunities to move around the system. At our latest meeting, in mid-May, one topic we discussed was open data. That’s an area very close to my heart.”

What is Sweden’s strength as an innovation nation?

“We’re good at English, we are early adopters, and our population is highly connected digitally. It’s also possible to start a limited company here without risking your child’s education

or your own health insurance. Sweden produces one percent of the world’s knowledge from less than one-thousandth of the world’s population.... We are ten million inhabitants who as a group are highly trend sensitive. If we decide to do something we have good possibilities of succeeding.”

What are the weaknesses?

“There must be proper leadership at all levels for the digital transformation to function. This is a really difficult process and there will be many failures. For example, in Sweden we have many management boards that are relatively immature when it comes to digitalisation.

“Our biggest problem is that we still don’t have the necessary structures. We’ve built a large system of silos, which every service designer knows. The money exists but not the national processes. Municipal self-government is a chain where a lot falls between the different areas of responsibility. Resources are being used wrongly and many people are abdicating their responsibility.”

What role does design have as a methodology in the digital transformation process?

“It is a totally decisive factor. We need to work with processes and cross-disciplinary combinations, to include people, and to put ourselves in the customers’ shoes. We also need to have standards and other forms of infrastructure so that the information can be linked up and create innovative strength.

“But we also need to consider that technology does not automatically take us where we want to go. As designers we also have a responsibility for the ethics and consequences. We can use prototypes when major things are to be transformed at the level of society but a degree of humility is required. More designers need to become interested in the institutional systems and learn more about them.”

What importance does SVID have to the Swedish work for innovation and change?

“I’ve known about SVID for a long time because I’ve run a design agency. SVID is an important actor when it comes to advancing design as a methodology and finding many of the answers we need at the level of society. A lot has to do with how we should scale various competencies – that’s something that’s really needed. The organisations that have been successful over the past 20 years are those that have had this ability and have realised the value of investing in design methodology.

“We design advocates must think in the way we did in the 1990s, when we stood on the barricades and fought for user friendliness. We can if we want to – as long as we work together!”

Darja Isaksson has chosen a breakfast combo of cheese and ham sandwich, orange juice and Greek-style yoghurt. She’s ordered tea instead of coffee. When most of the morning’s hubbub and clinking of glasses starts to subside in the restaurant she apologises for speaking in a mixture of Swedish and

Photo: Carlos Zaya



English with phrases like “top-down model”, “tipping point” and “big, hairy problem”.

Later today she will go home and prepare a project meeting on the topic of mobility services. She chairs a research project that involves such actors as the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute (VTI), and the companies that founded and own the public transport service development company, Samtrafik i Sverige AB. Together they are developing a vision for 2050.

What do you spend most of your work time on?

“In addition to being involved in projects and on councils and boards, I lecture and have commissions as a consultant. This always takes me into new contexts and sets of problems – which is an exciting part of the job and includes both gathering and transmitting information.

Previous interviews with you make it clear that you were interested in technology and design even as a child. Tell us more!

“My dad worked for the Swedish national telecom administration and what later became Telia Research. In his spare time he was an electronics inventor and at home we had a lab where my siblings and I could do things like weld circuit boards. My parents founded a company that sold test instruments to customers in the paper and steel industries throughout Europe. The rights were later sold to the USA, where the instrument was used in submarines.

“We got our first computer in the family as early as in 1982, and that was when I learned the basics of programming. I’ve always been interesting in technology, especially how it can be combined with my favourite subject, design. I wasn’t super popular in school when I was growing up but when I discovered the Internet, new worlds opened up and I came into contact with new people. That’s how digitalisation became a natural force in my private life as well.” ■

Facts

Darja Isaksson

Name: Darja Isaksson.

Age: 41.

Profession: Digitalisation strategist, lecturer and design agency founder.

Family: Married to Mijo Balic. Bonus daughter Miranda, 13, and sons Aiden, 9 and Baltazar, 6.

Lives: In a rented terrace house on a roof in central Stockholm.

Grew up in: Munksund outside Piteå.

Education: Studied media engineering, a cross-disciplinary engineering degree at Umeå University.

Professional background: At age 22 went to Zürich to do snowboarding and work as a web consultant. Was simultaneously involved in building the then-biggest website for club music in Europe. After returning to Sweden, founded her first digital agency, inUse, in 2002. Ten years later founded the digital innovation agency Ziggy Creative Colony together with Mijo Balic. Resigned as its CEO in 2014.

Leisure: Likes to play Minecraft with her son Aiden. Meditates (although not every day). Likes to spend her summer holidays at her parents-in-law’s house in Croatia.

Facts/National Innovation Council

The Innovation Council’s task is to develop Sweden as an innovation nation and strengthen its competitiveness.

The Council focuses on digitalisation, environmental and climate issues, and life science, but also discusses other areas of significance to the innovation climate and competitiveness.

In addition to Sweden’s Prime Minister Stefan Löfven it also includes government ministers **Magdalena Andersson**,

Mikael Damberg, **Helene Hellmark Knutsson** and **Isabella Lövin**.

The ten other, advisory members are: **Ola Asplund**, senior advisor, IF Metall, **Mengmeng Du**, entrepreneur and board member of various companies, **Charles Edquist**, Professor at the Centre for Innovation, Research and Competence in the Learning Economy (CIRCLE), Lund University, **Darja Isaksson**, digital strategist, **Sigbritt Karlsson**, President of the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, **Martin Lundstedt**, President and CEO of the Volvo Group, **Johan Rockström**, Professor in Environmental Science and Executive Director of Stockholm Resilience Centre at Stockholm University, **Karl-Henrik Sundström**, CEO and Managing Director of Stora Enso, **Jane Walerud**, entrepreneur and **Carola Öberg**, project manager at Innovationsfabriken Gnosjöregionen.