



# VAAHINI CONNECT PODCAST | SEASON 2 | EPISODE 5 SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IS A BUZZWORD, BUT HOW CAN WE MAKE IT AN EVERYDAY PRACTICE? AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to the Accenture Vaahini Connect podcast. In Season Two, 'Meet the luminaries', we bring to you the unique stories of women luminaries who share how we can all play a role in furthering big goals that impact societies.

Whether you are a salaried employee, an entrepreneur, a student, or just someone looking for a way to contribute to society, in each episode, we hope to bring to you inspiring stories and effective ways on how each one of us in our powers can make this world a better place for all.

I'm Savitha Nanjappa, Success Coach, Founder of Success with Savitha & your Podcast Host.

"Sustainable consumption is a buzzword, but what does it mean for our everyday lives at work?" How can your work be part of creating a more sustainable world? In this episode, we look at how our everyday actions at work can help, besides the big goals laid out by large organizations today.

Meet our guest on the episode today - **Sahar Mansoor** is the founder and CEO of Bare Necessities, a social enterprise rooted in the philosophy of zero-waste, circular economy and sustainability. Co-author of the bestselling book, 'Bare Necessities - How to lead a zero-waste life', Sahar has also worked at the WHO in Geneva and SELCO Foundation, on implementing decentralized solar energy projects in rural Karnataka. Her work has been recognized by Google India, Al Jazeera, NDTV and Vogue, among others. She was most recently awarded the Cartier Young Leader award in 2022. Armed with a Master's degree in Environmental Policy from University of Cambridge, she was part of the INSEAD Social Entrepreneurship Programme. Sahar has also volunteered in Guatemala, Jamaica and the Democratic Republic of Congo for humanitarian projects.

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**Savitha:** Hi, and welcome to the Vaahini Connect podcast Sahar. Thank you for spending time with us today. And I'm looking forward to this conversation with one of the early pioneers in the world of sustainability. Welcome.



**Sahar:** Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited for this conversation, Savitha. Genuinely.

**Savitha:** Let's get started. My first question for you is this: you have popularized the zero-waste movement in India and have been living a low-impact lifestyle. So, tell us why did you decide to go zero-waste? And what? Or who inspired you to embrace this path?

**Sahar:** Yeah, definitely. That's a great question. You know, when people ask me this question, they mostly kind of think that there's one 'Aha' moment that makes it all kind of come together. But I think, in life, that there is a sequence of events that come your way, that really kind of mould who you are. And then that's kind of how it becomes. So, I feel like it's more of a culmination of many 'Aha' moments, so to speak. So, I think I've always been very excited about sustainability, and just being more mindful of the planet. I mean, growing up in Bangalore, I spent almost every weekend in Cubbon park with my family, since I was like a four-year-old; But it was really, as an adult, when I was in college -- I went to a very small liberal arts school, where I started to take a lot of environmental courses. And I was really, really encouraged to ask questions, I was encouraged to volunteer in the Los Angeles forest after the forest fire. You take a surfing class and understand the science of surfing in the ocean, by virtue of doing that. So, I think there were lots of things that kind of just got me even more passionate and excited about this 'gorgeous mama earth' that sustains us.

It's just amazing how everything works, and the composition of this ecosystem. It's so beautiful and so intricate. So, I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to working towards the environmental space, but that meant the solar energy space or the waste management space.

So, I moved back home to Bangalore, after my very nerdy academic life -- I was kind of on the track to be an environmental professor at the University of Cambridge. And I started to work in rural India, and the solar energy access space. That really meant like almost every seven days, I was in just a different

village, primarily in Karnataka -- you know -- overnight bus rides, backpack, a kurta, a bamboo toothbrush, and just there. And, I think, energy access, again, is a really important way to create impact, because I think, without energy, there's no more, you know, you and I can't have this conversation, but also, machines can operate, economies can improve machines, you know, medicines can't be refrigerated and whatnot. So, I was really excited by doing this meaningful work in the solar energy space. And everyone in the office knew I was really obsessed with waste. So actually, they put me on this project to work with a waste picker community, not too far away from Bangalore international airport. And I, you know, while designing an energy intervention for them, I just spent a lot of time with them. I follow them around town on my cycle in the mornings, from 5 am to 9 am. I noticed the conditions in which they were segregating all of the waste, noticed the lack of maybe the waste infrastructure systems and a lot of pockets of our city, the gaps in the ecosystem. But I think most importantly, I was just really shocked by the kind of human justice issues associated with our waste problem. So, on a more just a human level, something just kind of shifted inside of me.

I said, you know what, I don't want to be part of this problem. And I'm going to try this very crazy thing, and I'm going to try living a zero-waste lifestyle. That's kind of how it began. I'm clearly not perfect, you know, there are lots of imperfections. And, but I think it's a lifestyle that encourages you to be quite ambitious, in, you know, producing a positive kind of impact on the planet and kind of trying to reduce your negative waste footprint by as much as possible.

**Savitha:** I mean, that's a unique and very interesting journey you've had, and I think what comes across is your passion for the space, you've actually done the work you've had feet on the street. And I want to ask you at this time, today, organizations of all types of becoming more



invested in sustainability as a concept. The reality of climate change is becoming too prominent to be brushed under the carpet. As a change leader, what according to you are ways for organizations to create awareness and nudge their employees and stakeholders towards action?

**Sahar:** Yeah, I think that's a really timely question. I think, you know, all of us have to just acknowledge that we have a role to play and a part to play. I think that's the first step in terms of just organization. It's kind of creating awareness for stakeholders, but also employees, I think the first step is showing core benefits -- it could be an environmental benefit that comes with a cost-saving, right? For example, one company in the UK that makes tea, realized that they're going to try and reduce that paper footprint by just three mm on each teabag. And that basically helped them save 9.3 tonnes of paper and 47,500 pounds. So that's it, it's not just an environmental benefit that you see on paper, and you can, you know, reduce your waste, and reduce your reliance on an environmental source. But it also makes money for the company and makes environmental sense and economic sense at the same time.

That means through employee engagement, through CSR programs that are more robust, that are more meaningful, that are looking at kind of not just a namesake donation at the end of the year, but really saying, "hey, how can we, you know, change things from our organization level?" -- I think those are a few ways in which you can like, find synergies in your employees' personal values, because maybe they care about, maybe they're passionate about giving a cleaner, greener planet to their kids in the future generations. But if you're able to kind of align those personal values with the company's values as well, I think there'll be just great synergy. And naturally, people will think about sustainability as the default, rather than like this exceptional thing you have to do.

**Savitha:** You make it sound really easy to kind of start, but I think we're all there at this time that conversation is happening. And my next question to you is, be it a salaried employee or a top business leader, how can each one of them be part of creating a more sustainable world? How can everyday actions at home and at work make a conscious difference and get closer to realizing Zero Waste goals? I know we've touched upon this a little bit. But would you like to share a little more in detail for personal and home and work kind of scenarios?

**Sahar:** Yeah, definitely. Honestly, for sure, the best way to get started is right here, right now, where you are in your personal life. Because, of course, organizations and cities and countries will take time, but where you can get started almost immediately because you have full kind of control over all of your actions in your personal life. So, you know, whether it is your personal care home care routine, which means you're using a miswak stick or a bamboo toothbrush, using a shampoo bar, maybe sort of a container that might be you know, in plastic, and then, of course, have lots of nonpolluting ingredients as well. So, take a deep dive into your personal care routine and say, "Hey, what are things that I can replace? What are things that I can make myself?" You know, what did my mom or my grandma use? Maybe a few years ago before, you know, just this wave of consumption and conscious consumption is now like an Instagram phenomenon, but what really were the products that they used when this was just a way of life?

So, I think that's the first step kind of doing a waste audit on your life. Just like anything, right? If you're trying to like get fit, or you're trying to save money, you first need to do an audit on your bank account or your audit on your health and wellness routine. It's the same thing with waste and sustainability, just start with an audit of your life. Try and replace products in your personal care routine, in your home --that could be ones that are just a little bit more low



impact -- that could be a coconut scrub to wash your dishes, it could mean using soap nuts, it could mean supporting other small businesses that are already making the staple products for you. So, you don't have to kind of do all of that R&D or DIY in your kitchen.

Then, as the world gets better with the COVID situation, we're all slowly trying to travel. My Instagram is filled with everyone taking gorgeous holidays, in some of the most beautiful places on earth. Something that we all universally think is beautiful is nature, whether it's the beach or the mountains; that depth of beauty is worth preserving. Here, we can be really mindful when we travel -- carrying our own water bottles, as simple as that carrying our own dabbas, spoons, and forks. So, we're really not, depending on the single-use plastic items. That, I think, is also really important. It was amazing, you know, the Himalayas was visible for the first time in 30 odd years from 100 meters and more in the first wave of COVID, because there were just fewer emissions on the road. So, you can see very, very tangibly that your actions actually matter.

So, I think just making those small mindful steps in your daily life, and you know, bigger ones, too, if you can afford to invest in an electric vehicle, especially now with the rise of fuel and everything -- you know -- that could be another actionable item we can incorporate into our lives.

**Savitha: Great! I mean, so many great tips right there. Yes to composting, no doing single-use plastic -- I think you share a wealth of knowledge and things that people can do small little things. And finally, as we come to our last question for you today, tell us what has been the most challenging or surprising thing about living zero waste? What were the biggest things you had to change?**

**Sahar:** That's a good question. Initially, when I started, I was a little cognizant -- I started when I was maybe 24 or 23. And I was worried that I'm

going to be like a not fun person at parties. So that was kind of initially I was a little, like shy and cognizant about trying to be kind of discreet about it. But actually, you know, the more I said "no straw", I kind of noticed that my friends were kind of doing it around me as well; because that just made them think that "Oh, I mean, we're going to literally sip on a drink for 10 minutes, maybe an hour, but these plastic straws are going to end up being on our planet for 700 odd years, and of course never really does, it's just going to disintegrate into small pieces of microplastic and land up in our food and groundwater. So, you're right, that makes no sense." So, it became like a little bit of a snowball effect. But I didn't think it would turn out that to be that way I thought I would just kind of be made fun of so that was kind of an interesting challenge.

You know, I love chocolate. And, you know, that's a fair acknowledgment to make, and especially when you travel, and you know, it's like, 'oh, Swiss chocolate is really famous. And yeah, it's going to be a little bit of aluminum in it.' But then I just kind of found my way of like, 'you know what? it's packaging, that's fine. I'm going to recycle that. I'm going to put the aluminum in my aluminum jar and kind of finally take it to the recycler once I aggregate a fair amount.' So, I think finding a median, and not being too hard on yourself was really important to me. Because I think, initially, when I started, I was just such a purist, and maybe being a little too hard on myself.

I think through the pandemic, all of us loosened up a little bit because you didn't have a lot of choices, right? Some things just had to be delivered, unfortunately, during those circumstances. So, I started to be a little bit kinder, I think, to myself in terms of that. So yeah, I think ego is, it is real. So, one challenge is kind of negotiating with yourself, defining what is reasonable and realistic for yourself, which is a real kind of acknowledgment to have.



And then, you know, little things like medicines, and maybe your favorite snack when you're on a bike ride, and you're doing 100 kilometers, and you need a little granola bar in your back pocket. And you can't necessarily put an energy ball, which is going to just accumulate sweat if it's not packaged in a certain way. So yeah, I mean, just finding your little median thing. Some ways I navigated those challenges.

Yeah. And so true balance is something that you have to do what you can and go. I mean, take it step by step.

**Savitha: All right, with that, it's a wrap. Thank you once again, for being here today, as usual, Sahar it has been a joy talking to you. Thank you so much for being here today. And it's been great chatting with you.**

**Sahar:** Thank you so much, Savita. It's been my pleasure.

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Thank you for listening to this episode. Remember, we may not turn into changemakers overnight. But all of us hold the power to lead small, incremental changes that can eventually make the world a more equal and fairer place. You can join the Accenture Vaahini network, a networking forum for women professionals, enabled by Accenture. The link to join is in the description of this episode. Also, don't forget to send in your feedback and thoughts to us.

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