

## Interview Questions: DEI Leaders Award Feature

In this interview, Cerba Research's Jo Sechi talks about her transition from humanitarian advocacy to DEI leadership, emphasizing the power of education, visibility, and competency-based equity in healthcare.

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**Q: Your journey into DEI work began in an extraordinary and challenging place. How did that early experience of giving voice to those who couldn't be heard shape your approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion work today?**

**A JS:** My journey into DEI work began from a place of witnessing extreme injustice. At just 21, I found myself documenting the aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre face-to-face with the brutal consequences of hate. It wasn't abstract. It wasn't history. It was real people whose lives had been destroyed simply because of their ethnicity.

That experience changed me forever and I realised two things very clearly. First, **silence is dangerous**: when we fail to give voice to those who are marginalized, we become complicit in their erasure. Second, **privilege is a platform**, and I have a responsibility to use mine.

I strongly believe in the butterfly effect, i.e., that small actions, done consistently and intentionally, can lead to enormous change. Not every act of inclusion has to be a grand gesture, sometimes it's the quiet decisions, the everyday interventions, the willingness to challenge bias in the moment that reshape systems.

To this day, the memory of that injustice of lives devalued because of race, religion, or identity sits at the core of my work. It fuels my determination to build spaces where dignity isn't conditional, where equity isn't optional, and where no one is made to feel "other".

That experience taught me that I may not be able to change everything, but I refuse to do nothing.



**Q: You transitioned from war zones to retail fashion – specifically working with brands like Diesel and Levi’s. What did the fashion industry teach you about creating spaces where people can be their authentic selves?**

**A JS:** Transitioning from war zones to retail fashion was a profound shift, but one lesson carried through: the importance of environment in shaping behavior.

Both Diesel and Levi’s taught me that authentic culture drives authentic behavior. At Levi’s, authenticity isn’t a campaign it’s in the DNA. From its San Francisco roots to today, the company’s history is embedded in every decision. Employee Resource Groups, such as those for Women, LGBTQ+, Black & African American, Asian & Pacific Islander, and Veterans, create spaces where people feel seen and empowered. Programs like the H.I.V. Foundation, Community Day, and the “Giving Back Never Goes Out of Style” ethos make inclusion actionable.

Under Chip Bergh’s and now Michelle Gass’ leadership, Levi’s consistently takes a stand, whether advocating against gun violence, supporting LGBTQ+ rights, or maintaining unwavering DEI commitments endorsed by 99% of shareholders. These aren’t marketing gestures; they are lived values. Experiencing this culture showed me that when an organization aligns its history, purpose, and actions, it enables people everywhere from San

Francisco to Europe or Asia to bring their full, authentic selves to work. In essence, fashion taught me that authenticity thrives when culture is lived, not marketed. People resonate with spaces that have integrity, history, and a clear identity and that’s what enables them to be fully themselves.

**Q: When you arrived at Cerba Research, you said there “wasn’t even a policy really”. What was your priority in building a DEI programme from the ground up?**

**A JS:** When I joined Cerba Research, there was no real structure around DEI – no policy, no framework, not even shared language. So my first priority was to create the foundation. For me, that meant three things:

- 1. Establishing a formal policy** something concrete that defined our values, our commitments, and our expectations. Without that, DEI remains just an intention rather than an obligation.
- 2. Building resources and education** because change doesn’t happen through policy alone. I focused on equipping people with tools, training, and understanding so they could act with confidence rather than fear of “getting it wrong”.
- 3. Starting conversations** I knew culture shifts don’t begin in documents but in dialogue. So, I made it a priority to talk about it, to plant seeds, to normalize the language of inclusion and make people feel safe engaging with it.

In short, I, with the support of colleagues, peers and leaders, built the structure, the support system, and the conversation because all three are needed to grow something sustainable.

The start of this work began in 2022, but now it’s being truly **amplified by the incredible DEI Task Force** led by Kahle McDonough from Cerba Healthcare, that has been established with passionate representatives from all our offices. Their perspectives, energy, and commitment are driving meaningful progress across the organisation. This is just the beginning together. Having just launched our revised DEI charter, we’re building the foundation for lasting, inclusive change, with an incredible roadmap of DEI initiatives and ideas for 2026.

**Q: You’ve created an extensive portfolio of training modules covering everything from neurodiversity to cultural awareness to LGBTQ+ inclusion. Why was education your starting point?**

**A JS:** Education was my starting point because you can’t change what you don’t understand – and understanding itself makes a difference. Awareness opens the door to empathy, better decisions, and meaningful action. Change is important, but even just knowing and understanding can have a powerful impact.

Bias and exclusion don't always come from malice, more often they come from ignorance. People make mistakes simply because they don't know any better. And if we don't give them the knowledge, tools, and language to do better, then we're setting them up to fail.

For me, education is the foundation of change. Policies set expectations but **education creates transformation**. It helps people move from fear or hesitation ("What if I say the wrong thing?") to confidence and empathy ("Now I understand and I know how to act differently").

By building training across areas like neurodiversity, cultural awareness, and mental health, I wanted to make sure no one had the excuse of not knowing. When people feel informed, they become empowered and when they're empowered, that's when real behavior change happens. Education wasn't just a starting point it was the catalyst.

**Q: The "I See You, I Hear You" campaign seems central to your work at Cerba Research. What is it, and why is visibility so important in DEI?**

**A JS:** The "I See You, I Hear You" campaign began as a simple idea. It wasn't a formal initiative at first. It really started around mental health and neurodiversity, because I noticed so many employees were struggling silently. What I realised very quickly is that people don't always need a policy, sometimes they just need to feel seen.

So I began using the phrase **"I See You, I Hear You"** alongside topics that are often overlooked or considered too sensitive to talk about openly, things like grief, anxiety, ADHD, menopause. These were conversations that weren't happening but were desperately needed. The moment I knew it mattered was when an employee emailed me and said:

"For the first time, I feel seen and I definitely feel heard."

That was it. That was the proof. Visibility isn't just symbolic **it's validating**. It tells people: You're not invisible here. You're not alone. You matter.

The campaign is far from finished, in fact, I feel like we're only at the beginning. But if it has already given even one person the confidence to speak about what's important to them, then it's doing its job.

We still have a long way to go but being seen is where change begins.

**Q: You've implemented the Career Companion tool based on competencies rather than traditional performance metrics. How does this approach support equity and inclusion in career development?**

**A JS:** In short: by pivoting into a competence-based, growth-oriented model, we put people before points, potential before performance alone, and trajectory before tally. This supports equity by giving all employees a clear, visible map and a shared language for development so that each person has the chance not just to be measured, but to be seen, heard, and to grow.

### **Giving people ownership of their journey.**

Because we use a competency-based framework, each employee can see where they are now, where they could go, and what supports they need to get there. It's about "team members working together like a well-tuned band" rather than soloists playing their own tune.

It encourages self-reflection, self-mapping, and active choice. It's their compass, not just our map.

### **Promoting Visibility, Fairness and Inclusion**

When career development is tied to competencies and clear growth paths rather than subjective performance reviews alone,

we level the playing field. People from different backgrounds, neurodiverse, minorities, new joiners can see clear paths and measurable skills rather than rely solely on "who you know" or "how loud your voice is."

Visibility here means: "I see you. Your competencies matter. Your journey is legitimate."

When the tool provides "scientifically validated insights... to make confident, data-driven decisions" it reduces bias and opens inclusion.

**Q: You've achieved 879 hours of DEI training across Cerba Research in 2024. What does that level of engagement tell you about your employees' hunger for this work?**

**A JS:** Yes, part of that is due to mandatory DEI training, but the real growth came from what happened after. The more we opened up conversations, the more employees began leaning in, asking questions, seeking clarity, wanting deeper understanding. That tells me this isn't just compliance, it's curiosity and hunger for change.

We're living in a VUCA world – volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. There's a constant influx of negativity in the wider world, and people are looking for tools to cope, connect, and respond with empathy rather than fear. That's what DEI education offers.

It's not just training, it's resilience building.

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It's not just awareness, it's human connection.

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It's not just about "doing the right thing", it's about helping people navigate uncertainty with understanding rather than defensiveness.

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So those 879 hours aren't just numbers, they're proof that people are ready. They don't just want to tick a box; they want to learn, grow, and belong. And that gives me real hope.

## About

# Cerba Research

Cerba Research is a leading laboratory services provider across all clinical development phases, to the life science industry (or pharmaceutical, biotechnology, medical device, government, and public health organisations).

It combines the deep scientific expertise of specialist services with the capacity and breadth of a global central laboratory network. Cerba Research develops innovative solutions to unique challenges in research and drives operational agility at scale for multiple therapeutic areas, with world recognised expertise in virology and oncology. It is part of the Cerba HealthCare Group with 15,000 employees on five continents, driven to advance health diagnosis.

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## About the Speaker

Jo Sechi, Assoc CIPD, is a compassionate and strategic Global Talent & Development Director with over 15 years of international experience driving culture transformation, leadership development, and organizational growth.

She has pioneered initiatives in inclusive leadership, wellbeing, and digital learning across diverse industries and regions, building high-performing, people-first environments where innovation thrives. Recognized for her impact, Jo was nominated as an Inspirational DEI Leader at the Diversity and Inclusion Leaders Awards (2025). Passionate about empowering individuals and shaping equitable workplaces, she continues to champion global strategies that align business success with employee growth and belonging.