

Bob Gilbert (00:02):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales. This is a podcast series that explores with travel and tourism leaders, their take on key issues of the day. My name is Bob Gilbert, general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency. Eddy Alexander, looking back, I've had the privilege to have worked with a number of iconic global brands. I'll be chatting with those that are helping shape the future travel and tourism industry all with their own unique tales to share.

Bob Gilbert (00:38):

Today's guest. We welcome Esra Calvert, Esra in a couple of words, humanizes data. Her background includes Zartico, Virginia Tourism Corporation and Virginia Tech here. Esra's insight on trends that the pandemic accelerated, transformational technology, dispelling the fear of data. What's important for DMO to measure community based marketing, the big quit, and changes in workforce behaviors. So join us on Tourism Heads and Their Tails. Welcome to another addition of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. And I'm more than delighted to be joined today by our guest. Many of you know, Esra Calvert and Esra is one of those personalities that you will see at many travel and tourism industry events, normally making a presentation up there on the stage. We're so happy to have her here today, so we can have that conversation live and Esra's background, as I described earlier, I think we first met when Esra was at Virginia tourism. And what we're gonna be talking about today may include Virginia, but it's gonna be far broader. You know, we've come through a period over the last couple of years of change. Some COVID driven some, just a function of acceleration of consumer behaviors, uh, over the years, but somebody who can walk us through that and hopefully can help us perhaps shape our thinking in terms of what may come next. So without further ado, I will introduce Esra Calvert, Esra. Welcome.

Esra Calvert (02:23):

Oh, thank you, Bob. It's a pleasure to be here and it's always fun to talk tourism and, uh, be a part of these meaningful efforts. Uh, tourism is definitely changing, transforming, but the opportunities in front of us are definitely immense.

Bob Gilbert (02:41):

In indeed. Yes. I mean, we, we speak about change and we speak about accelerated change. What are the big changes that we have seen and that we can learn from over the last couple of years and what that, uh, will translate to as we plan for the future?

Esra Calvert (03:00):

Absolutely. Uh, there were some shifts that we were seeing prior to COVID actually, when we look at the economies of scale, back in late 2018 and 2019, we have seen business boom, especially from a, a tourism perspective, but there were some challenges when we look at workforce, the society, global challenges, uh, and even environmental per se, especially within the European and Asia Pacific region. And when COVID hit, uh, as we all agree, it has really put it on our face. It was almost like waking up the sleeping giant. And we are seeing this automation technology data in these societal needs come to the forefront of destinations and Bob, you and I have talked about it many, many times. The role of destinations have just gotten bigger and bigger. Uh, we have a bigger task in front of us. We were always responsible for the tourism economies and really harvesting that nature. And now the role is even bigger dealing with workforce issues, dealing with some of the societal ch uh, challenges with equality, and even in some destinations, especially those, uh, natural areas. They have become faced with natural

elements as well. So the community values have come to the forefront and this has really changed the dynamics of how we do business and how we deal with challenges in front of us and technology. And this accelerated change is the rude accelerator of it.

Bob Gilbert (04:43):

So, you know, we look at the technology that has impacted perhaps data gathering, and we normally would talk about technology as it evolves, but I know that you believe that we are actually in the middle of a, a revolution and that technology revolution has impact with destinations. And there is perhaps the challenge with destinations is the fear of data and the ability to Un- really understand and to, and to use the, the data that is relevant to the decision making. Can you talk to us about this technological revolution and the introduction of, I think the words you would use would be the data angst, um, the

Esra Calvert (05:31):

Angst yeah, there is angst everywhere.

Bob Gilbert (05:33):

There's angst everywhere angst

Esra Calvert (05:36):

That we have angst. So, um, when we think about the tech space, actually, I look at it from the perspective of how we conduct business in today's world. And we talk about the workforce supply a lot, because it has been a challenge for many, many destinations, but I think one element gets hidden is how jobs are becoming automated. If you look at any forecast right now, whether it's globally or in the us, some of these jobs are going to be lost to automation. I believe the estimates, when we look at it globally, it's about 8% of the jobs will be all automated in the next, uh, 10 years by 2030. And in the us, it's about 25% of the jobs. So what does that mean? We are losing some of the workforce to that automation and many of us in hospitality. And even since COVID, we have seen these changes take place.

Esra Calvert (06:33):

So with automation, everything become a record. A decade ago, two decades ago, we saw this through the consumer search behavior. Everything was on the internet, consumer's voyage footprint. So that became data. And now we have data enablement from a workforce, jobs, business to business perspective. So all these services that we see how hospitality is conducted is becoming automated. I think that is just really a game changer for in our industry. The previous recession was about the Renaissance of products, craft beer, uh, wine tourism. We have seen all these niche markets come together. And in this marketplace, we are seeing the automation of jobs and also automation of B2B services, such as DoorDash, uh, services like Uber are really going into sectors and booking and, uh, different perspectives from restaurants to attractions and et cetera. So that is just going to bring more data in front of the MOS.

Esra Calvert (07:41):

I look at it as a good thing, but the challenge is not everybody loves data, especially for, uh, some marketers or some creative individuals. They really like their creative areas, but we all have to be data literate. And, um, you using that analytics muscle is going to be more and more important because there's just more of data. So for destinations, it's going to be a critical skill and also a critical decision

making capacity in dealing with all these changes. Um, I sometimes say, it's not your grandmother's DMO. Uh, so, uh, the next DMO, the DMO we are seeing right now, uh, they're becoming quite savvy in dealing with these changes and, uh, new data sets coming into the market. So like in recent, yeah, go ahead, Bon

Bob Gilbert (08:32):

I was gonna ask you Esra with the demands, that data gathering places on destinations and where the backdrop in the last couple of years where so many DMO have had to release research people. And now that we've kind of accelerating through and beyond, uh, COVID the, the need to understand the data that floats around us on a daily basis is more challenging because there are less people within the DMO to actually understand and make sense of the data. So how does one make that leap? How does one make that and embrace that change?

Esra Calvert (09:15):

That's a really good point. You made Bob, uh, yes, many DMOs had to send, uh, employees home. And now I see some DMOs hiring back, especially for those analytics services. And then some DMOs are going back and looking at their knowledge base and decision making capacity and data has become a job for everyone. Either model is accurate. It is a matter of which culture, which framework works for the destination. But the most fundamental question is what is the overall strategy of DMO that DMO that destination and how data is aligned with that overall strategy? Because in fact, if you don't have data that you are using, or if you don't have data that is not supporting your overall strategy, the data doesn't become tactical, it doesn't become, uh,

Bob Gilbert (10:13):

It's not actionable. It's not, it becomes less actionable. Yes,

Esra Calvert (10:16):

Exactly. So do things that can initiate actions tomorrow. I think that's a big, big takeaway for destinations and that cascading, that alignment with the overall strategy, is a must. That's the question that a DMO should ask at any time. And I always, uh, recommend to destinations to measure as widely as possible, but also as minimum as possible, if the DMO is trying to measure everything, they're going to become paralyzed. So it is a good mindset to have a focus and a linear and an agile mindset. It's really important because you have to do it at more frequently. Measurement needs to be more frequent.

Bob Gilbert (11:00):

So, you know, we hear the word, "pivot" um, <affirmative>, which was a key word of last year. It's become my least favorite word of this year, but agile agility was a key word, but it still remains from my perspective, a key, a key word, but those that, um, have that agility and I would say perhaps, um, people will disagree with me, but destinations haven't necessarily been known to be at the forefront of agility. It takes time to change their direction. How can they adopt and add an agile strategy?

Esra Calvert (11:37):

I have seen some destinations, um, especially small destinations, I should say, have been more quick to adapt in some ways, uh, because they don't have as much structured operations and being in small localities, they can be more agile to change. So, uh, some of the things that they have done is, frequent planning. They moved into that mindset of plan as frequently as possible. So instead of building these,

uh, huge plans that takes, uh, months and months to build, and it becomes this formal book or I'm calling it a formal book at this time, <laugh> they have moved away from that mentality and they're making decisions more frequently and they're revisiting their strategic priorities on a more frequent, uh, frame, quarterly, perhaps. So, and that's what I mean with a lean mindset measure as widely as possible, but go to your priority areas and revise them as quickly as possible. Everyone should look at their priorities and revise them every three months. Like to me, that has always worked. And that's what I'm seeing as successful practices as destinations. If you put two, three practices fi uh, priority areas in front of you, and if you're constantly revisiting them and updating them on a frequent manner, they're more accomplish, uh, achievements for a destination in smaller destinations have been, uh, really amazing. Uh, it's been, I've been very impressed with, uh, some of the efforts that I'm seeing, uh, across the states.

Bob Gilbert ([13:25](#)):

Is that gonna be difficult for the larger, I think you said that's gonna be tougher for the larger organizations, perhaps state, the producer, an annual plan, many of which are published. Um, and it's very difficult once you've published an annual plan. If you see something after three months that isn't working, um, you know, how do you communicate that? How do you make that change? Number one, and number two, that the destinations are not working in a vacuum, you know, more and more, uh, including the relationship with their local communities. Um, how do you think number one, do you agree with that? Number two, uh, if that is the case, how, how does a destination, um, that has, you know, a quarterly review, how do they report back to their stakeholders and communities that may not be used to that?

Esra Calvert ([14:17](#)):

Yeah, I mean, at some states have done an excellent job, so I, I wanna make sure that I give, uh, good accolades to some of these things. Like for instance, the state of Wyoming, uh, when COVID hit with their responsible trouble responsibly messaging, they were so on the topic. And, um, they did the right things, both for their communities and also for potential travelers. I think the key is engaging the key stakeholders. Um, oftentimes this is down through the board of directors ensuring that their right stakeholders sitting, uh, at the table and making sure that these key stakeholders that are the brand ambassadors, uh, for the destinations are involved in the decision making. And they're also communicating cascading those messages, uh, across the locality, across the region, across the state and with COVID. Another game changer has been tourism as involved in many notions of the community.

Esra Calvert ([15:27](#)):

Like so many groups had to market to residents like, yep. And it's here to stay. That is not going to change. And even if we look at the function of economic development, I see more merging or co-working opportunities happening as we speak around the country. So there- there's more overdependence, interdependence between entities and residents became an important, uh, element to the picture- Element to the canvas of tourism. I was at a conference this week. I spoke at tourism Unity conference. It was more about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Uh, those were, uh, some of the notions that we discussed there as well. Uh, how do you build an equitable, uh, destination, but in so many ways from People of Color to also Equality in so many notions and dimensions of the destination. So those are the pieces that I'm seeing, the tourism director's job, tourism CEO's job just got bigger. And I, I really feel, uh, that tourism has more relevance in today's environment.

Bob Gilbert ([16:41](#)):

So it's part of the fabric of the community and far beyond what we used to call Staycation, which was a popular word in, at the very beginning of the pandemic where the destinations, you know, understood that, you know, they had to market to their local community as well for local businesses to not just thrive, but, but to stay alive, you brought up at the beginning about the workforce mm-hmm <affirmative>. So how did destinations manage to leverage if that's the right word, remote workers who want to travel? If you have the luxury to be able to work from anywhere, then you may, as a destination, want to invite those remote workers who, you know, to-

Esra Calvert (17:28):

Oh yes.

Bob Gilbert (17:29):

So that's really the-

Esra Calvert (17:30):

From a talent perspective? Absolutely. Oh my God. Um, Bob, I, I love the fact that you mentioned that when we look at all these rural destinations around the states, even globally, actually we have seen the rural areas recover from the pandemic very, very quickly. I mean, we, when we look at recovery, the leisure market in the us is recovering completely compared to 2019 numbers right now, like it's happening that leisure market has almost recovered it's there, but even we look at those rural areas, some of those destinations recovered end of 2020, uh, early 20, 21 accommodations like, um, Airbnb, rentals, they have seen record numbers. And when we look at the home prices right now, we are seeing that shuffling as well. I, I do think that that's a norm that's going to stay. Consumers are stitching their vacations. They're creating these amazing itineraries, but it involves work as well.

Esra Calvert (18:36):

It involves study. It involves family. So these lines are, uh, really bleeding into each other about how we work, how we do things, Uh, it is not that traditional mindset of 9 to 5 office. I think the office, um, life, it is not going to be the hybrid place that we are thinking about. The new office is just going to be everywhere. Like when I talk to hotels nowadays, I hear a lot of, uh, need bookings where teams are going to different destinations and staying at hotel for meetings and planning for a week. Like that's another trend that we have seen in the meeting space. So whether it is, uh, rentals, uh, when an employee goes to a destination for a month with family and making home away from home, those are the norms that is going to stay here. And those are tremendous opportunities for, uh, destinations because it involves technology. It involves talent. And also it involves tolerance in the means of building that culture mindset at a destination. So tourism has just gotten more and more relevant and the opportunities there are immense, we are still a very mobile society.

Bob Gilbert (19:51):

So are we seeing that this remote workforce traditionally come under the tourism leaders or economic development leaders, because it kind of touches a little bit on both, right?

Esra Calvert (20:02):

Correct. Traditionally it has been under the economic development umbrella because talent technology, corporate acquisition relocation, those are all responsibilities are of economic development. But when we ask consumers or, uh, the tech employees, let's say, now I'm mentioning about the technology

because that's the biggest sector that is growing. And if we ask about corporations where they want to move, the number one question they ask is what is there to do? They're asking about the quality of life and that quality of life involves everything Tourism involves. What is there to do? What kind of restaurants are there? What's the green space like that? The outdoors. So that mindset is very real. So I'm seeing opportunities and partnerships between tourism and economic development more than in the past. It was there in 2018 and 19 when we look at pre COVID, but now it's more pronounced and especially in small communities, in certain areas, ED, economic development and tourism are under one umbrella and that's a successful model as well.

Bob Gilbert ([21:12](#)):

Yeah. And I, and I guess it's important that destinations look at the right fit for inviting and engaging with those folks who want to come to their community because it has to be a right fit. Otherwise it's not gonna be a win-win, it would be a, a win lose and, that's not, that's not necessarily what we want, but that is really about the data insights, data gathering, the understanding, the, the demographics, the psychographics, the behaviors of a certain type of workforce, which one can do today to make sure that that aligns with the characteristics and personality and culture of a destination that you get that right fit. Then, you know, people like to work there for a short while and perhaps they wanna work there for the, for the longer term as well. So you are deep in research. I think one of your special- deep in numbers, deep in numbers.

Bob Gilbert ([22:04](#)):

Um, but there's that data is, is absolutely critical data. As you, as you rightly say, is a currency. Data is a currency mm-hmm <affirmative>, but there's so many touch points out there. If you are a smaller destination, how do you gather the data when you don't necessarily have the ability to read the tea leaves? If you will, to really understand what the data's saying, what do you do to be able to generate and capture in all of this aggregated data? How does one go about that? I guess they could, they could call Esra, they could call you. But, um, what are the guidelines for

Esra Calvert ([22:42](#)):

First and foremost, of course, with digital marketing digital technologies, there's already a ton of data at the DMO's hand. So it is our responsibility to become data literate. And the second is, and it's really good news data is becoming more inexpensive. So DMOs can put their hands on high frequency, high volume data in a less expensive way than five years ago or a decade ago because more people are using it. So I do think that that's good news, but the main question is how does that align with the overall strategy? Like, what are the most important pieces that the DMO needs to have their hands on? What do they like to accomplish and what are they accountable for? I think those are very important elements. What data insights do you have? What changes would you like to influence? And what accountability do you have? When you look at data in that mindset, it is so easier to make a decision.

Esra Calvert ([23:47](#)):

And I highly, uh, tell destinations, you have to have more frequent data. We can no longer afford to measure the phenomena or what's in front of us once a year or every other year. We have to have more accountabilities to show the success of tourism and to understand the makeup of the travelers and ensure that it fits to the local community, whether it is the residents or the business community, because longevity is an important factor. And when we talk about this sustainability mindset, it's the

longevity of budgets. It's the longevity of E- efforts. So accountability has to be there. It is data, but it's more than the data.

Bob Gilbert ([24:30](#)):

You know, I think that with the challenges that we've all had, it's- although we, we have to keep moving forward at pace, I think there is a recognition that there is a moment in time, which is now to give destinations the ability to regroup internally, to rethink about the way they manage and a time perhaps for realignment. And I think that Esra you've, you've given our audience a lot to digest and I think it gives them the opportunity to think through how they're managing their business today. Perhaps the ability to shake things up a little bit and to make those adjustments, whether they're small, uh, or large. So I just want to thank you so very much for contributing to tourism heads and their tails and look forward to meeting you out on the road. And I'm sure you'll be up on a stage in next to no time.

Esra Calvert ([25:30](#)):

Aw, thank you Bob. I really appreciate it. And one last advice for everyone is really invest in your analytics muscle, through your people and through your resources and, uh, make sure that it's accountable. Thank you.

Bob Gilbert ([25:45](#)):

Thank you. We hope you enjoyed today's episode, please Like, Thumbs up, Subscribe and Leave a Review. You can also visit eddyalexander.com to learn more about our tourism marketing and destination management services and read some of our recent case studies. Finally, if you'd like to suggest future guests or podcast discussion topics or to sign up, to get an email alert when we drop new episodes, please do so at eddyalexander.com/THATT