

Tech Reimagined – The Future of Travel

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BRADLEY HOWARD (BH): Hello everyone. I'm Bradley Howard and welcome to the latest episode of Tech Reimagined, where it's all about the big questions around technology and the industries that are impacting it. Today's big question is what will the future of travel look like once the pandemic is over? And I'm delighted to have with me Alex Hunter, the former Head of Digital for the Virgin Group, with me again to dive into this thrilling topic. Alex, welcome to the podcast. Would you like to introduce yourself?

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ALEX HUNTER, BRANDING & CX EXPERT (AH): Sure. Thank you very much for having me. This is a topic I'm always delighted to talk about. So, yes, I spent some time in and around the Virgin Group, first as a part of the team that founded Virgin America, the airline, and then as the Global Head of Digital Strategy for the for the whole group. And I also have a travel show which on YouTube, which I've done for about five years now. So we are about to get into a topic that is near and dear to my heart, both professionally and personally.

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BH: I think I speak for everybody when I say that we're all keen to start traveling again. Do you think that travel is going to pick up again from where we left it in late 2019?

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AH: I sure hope so. I think we're starting to see some green shoots emerging. I mean, certainly whenever I go to the U.S. and travel internally, it's like nothing has changed. The planes are all full. The airports are heaving. You know, the only real difference you see is the masks on the plane. Now that there's you know, there's this, the vaccination program is going so well over there. Internationally, it's a very different story. I think the flights across the Atlantic, while the loads are increasing, are still very, very empty. A lot of the airlines that pulled back from destinations and routes nearly 18 months ago have, they're not considering reintroducing them any time soon. But I think in terms of leisure travel, we'll see that pick up world desperate to get out. We saw the whole thing with Portugal lately. As soon as that was announced, people just wanted to get out and see something different. Business travel, the numbers are still really, really low. I think it's very difficult for businesses to justify sending their people into what is - whether it's actually - but perceived as a reasonably risky environment. I don't subscribe to that feeling myself, but it's understandable, you know, and I think we've also realized the efficiencies of what you and I are doing now. We can we can have, you know, one on one or one to many conversations using these technologies that were in their infancy when the pandemic started and now have matured to very reliable, interactive, interesting platforms. Will they replace face to face? I don't think so. But we may at least think twice before jumping on that plane for a half an hour meeting, you know, six and a half hours away.

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BH: I still seem to have one meeting a day where someone joins on mute and starts trying to talk and everyone shouts, "You're on mute!", it's quite amazing, isn't it?

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AH: It sure is.

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BH: So do you think there will be a slow ramp up for business travel, or do you think that Zoom and Teams, et cetera, and the other collaboration tools are here to stay for a long time?

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AH: I think they're definitely here to stay for a long time. I think they actually offer an advantage because if you consider a consulting firm, for example, that's based in London and talking to a client in Sydney, they're going to have to make a choice about how many people they're going to take over to that client meeting in Sydney. There's a significant cost involved there, especially if it's routine. But then you also have the disadvantage of all of the institutional knowledge from that consultancy firm, is with whoever however many brains are traveling to the client. Whereas if you're doing something like this, if the client asks the question that is beyond the scope of my understanding, I can go, "I know somebody, they're just sitting over there that can answer this question, just one second," and you can grab them and the client gets a satisfactory answer as opposed to saying, let me get back to you on that. So I to me, that's an immediate advantage to keeping these technologies at least as an option. So I hope they don't go by the wayside. I have a feeling that they won't because we've discovered many of the efficiencies and advantages to adopting them for this type of conversation as well.

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BH: And one of the things that I find is that I used to do a fair amount of travel. And I now realize that with lots of back to back meetings, I think I used to use the travel time as kind of thinking time. You know, I was undisturbed on an airplane trip or even national travel sitting on a train and just letting the thoughts subside, really, and start really thinking more deeply. Now, it's quite difficult to work out when there's thinking time and it feels a bit odd sometimes blocking out a whole load time in the calendar to do that. But I think I took that for granted before starting to work virtually all the time.

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AH: I think a lot of us did. I think that working from home has really alienated a lot of people, because we took, as you said, that buffer of a commute for granted, you know, with that decompression time, even if we weren't thinking about anything other than like, what does balsa wood taste like or anything like that, doesn't really matter what you're thinking about. It's just a moment to decompress and that, you know, there are mental health implications there when we start to think about whether we're going to get people to come back into the office as well. And we have to train ourselves to take time to do exactly what you're describing when we don't have the opportunities forced upon us, if you will. It's a very important topic.

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BH: So what do you think the travel industry needs to do in order to encourage more business travellers and probably leisure travellers as well?

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AH: It's a very good question. I think airlines are seeing reservations for leisure travel at reasonably robust levels. I think they're confident about that. So continuing to communicate process and procedure for safety, you know, for COVID safety is going to be important. But we've been living with this for a while now. And I think it's actually changed, I said a habitual level. We don't want people too close to us. We like we feel comfortable wearing a mask in enclosed environments. So I think the vast majority of us will want to do that anyway when airlines broadcast their protocols for flying and say you need to keep a mask on etc, we're all going to go, "Yeah, well of course, I want to anyway". So it then becomes a price - where we're back to the differentiation that they used for eons, which is price, product and frequency, and when so much of

the world is still closed, at least to us here in the UK, then it becomes a destination choice as well. So I think you'll see people making choices based more on those factors than on 'am I safe to get on an airplane?' The airlines in the industry and the world in general have evolved, frankly, to understand what we need to do to stay to stay safe in those environments.

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BH: So you talked about destinations. Do you think that some newer destinations are likely to leapfrog over some of the traditional destinations? Do you think this is an opportunity for them to move ahead, so much?

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AH: I think so, I, I think, too, we pushed staying in the UK for travel and I think people are discovering parts of this country that they'd never explored before, which is great. Now that the world is opening up, I think I hope people explore places that they never would have considered in the past. We tend to get into ruts when it comes to holiday. We only have, you know, a couple of weeks a year maybe, really, in practical terms. And there's a strong argument for going back to the places that we know and trust and love and feel relaxed and happy as opposed to trying somewhere, you know, uncharted. But I hope that this gently nudges people towards being slightly more pioneering and, you know, going to countries and even cities in their own country that they perhaps hadn't considered in the past. I think that that maybe they'll discover their new favourite place in the entire world.

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BH: And do you think there are any digital opportunities for either airlines or other hospitality companies to offer to customers, are there things which you're thinking, it's just amazing that they still haven't adopted some of these new digital tools?

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AH: Yes, I think what's been great, if one can say anything great about this pandemic, is that it has forced legacy companies, incumbent, lazy, big, slow moving companies, forced to become to adopt digital and then in an intelligent, consumer friendly way, because if they didn't, they were screwed. And banks and airlines have done a pretty good job of that. Travel shut down, so they had - you hoped they would take that opportunity to invest in technology. You know, am I going to want to go and press a kiosk button that somebody else just pressed a bunch? No. Am I going to want to touch, you know, an IFE monitor that, I don't know, I didn't see anybody clean it, so I don't know if it's actually clean. So, you know, putting the check in process a lot further out, putting it on our phones, making all of that much, much easier, giving the flexibility. So - we should touch on that, because if you consider in the past how much of a pain it was to change a flight or get in contact with anybody, pre pandemic. Now, because, you know, they want to differentiate themselves with their flexibility, they've had to fundamentally rearchitect their reservation systems to accommodate those changes. That in and of itself, we may not see all the benefits of those, but I guarantee you we will in the future that will give us so much more power as consumers and passengers to change things, to upgrade, to switch flights, to cancel flights. That to me is huge. And it's the same with hotels putting the key card on our phones in and all of the sort of, the booking things I mentioned with airlines. So, this has forced innovation, which to me is not a bad thing. And the longer this goes on, I think we're talking years, not months, I hope that we'll continue to see that adoption of digital to the consumer's ultimate benefit.

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BH: Oh, I certainly hope so as well. Like always, Alex. It's been a pleasure to chat with you, and thanks so much for joining us today. For our listeners, I hope you had a wonderful time with us today, please remember to like this podcast and subscribe so you can hear the next episode. Thank you.