

Nordic Insights

Johnny Thorsen Eps 17 Part1

Satu: [00:00:00] Good evening, Johnny, thank you for joining us all the way from California. How are you doing over there? You have massive wildfires in California. Are they close by where you are?

johnny: [00:00:11] They they were the closest was about 50 kilometers south of where I live. That's now completely under control. So now they're about 120 kilometers north of me. So not far away. But, you know, close enough that we still get lots of smoke. So today we have an air quality index of around 100. A week ago, it was a 250. So it's much better today than last week.

Satu: [00:00:39] We know what you're going through, going through the same thing here in Sydney last year.

johnny: [00:00:44] Yes, of course. Yeah. You know it very well. Down under.

Satu: [00:00:47] Oh, it was very unpleasant and very scary. Now, before we start talking about COVID and travel and the future of travel, which I'm sure our audience is very keen to learn from you, let's talk about you and your very successful journey in the travel industry. Now, I learned that you worked as an I.T. director at BERG Hansen Rese Bureau in Copenhagen in 1991. So was that the start of your very successful journey?

johnny: [00:01:18] Not quite. And Berg Hansen was actually in Oslo. That is a Norwegian TMC But I started out in in Denmark, in my home country, working as a software developer, literally developing back office systems for travel agencies. And that's how I had my first contact with the travel industry. And it's ironic. But after kind of three years of developing Europe's first PC based backoffice system, I decided I had enough of travel and I actually left the travel industry for a brief period of six months. And and actually, I joined a startup that was set up by some of the largest banks in Denmark at the time, which was kind of created to introduce PC technology to the banking sector. And then a big banking crisis hit the financial sector in Denmark and we

got shut down. And when I started looking for a new job, my old customer from Norway Berg Hansen travel. They reached out and asked if I would be interested in coming up to Norway and eventually start an I.T. department from scratch. And that's when I became I.T. director for Berg Hanse in 1991.

Satu: [00:02:38] Okay. And so can you tell us a bit about shortly about your journey? How did you end up where you are today?

johnny: [00:02:46] Yeah, so it's it's it's really interesting. As I said, I started as a software developer, but when I moved to Norway and became IT director, I suddenly faced the interesting situation of being my own customer because I was now the owner and user of a system I had been part of developing and selling in my previous job. And it taught me one.

johnny: [00:03:11] That's great learning, very great learning, because it taught me, I still think one of the most valuable lessons for me, which is never overpromise, but always, always over deliver, because when investment decisions are made around new technology, they are really made in the hope and expectations of getting a good return on investment. And if the supplier has kind of overpromised and end up on their own, delivering the return on investment is gone and you now have a disaster project. So ever since I saw how important it was to understand what the return on investment was, that's been one of my guiding principles, to always explain very clearly what the technology can and cannot do. I ended up having four years in Norway as the I.T. director and grew the department from a size of zero to six employees. When I when I left Berg Hansen and my next job was over in London, where I became the European head of technology for what was back then called BTI Business Travel International, which was a network of a strong kind of regional TMC"s around the world. And my job at the time was to create a common I.T. strategy for, I think, a total of 28 countries across Europe, which was quite a challenge because each country, each market, each partner had their own kind of skills and capabilities and operating environment.

johnny: [00:04:45] And this was in the very, very early days of the of the Internet in 95, 96. So it was a big challenge to create a common IT strategy.

Satu: [00:04:55] Must be amazing, amazing. You know, learn about cross cultural communication and processing.

johnny: [00:05:02] Absolutely, and that was exactly one of the key challenges here, that suddenly my IT skills became less important because it was more about making people from different countries and cultures find out how to get a compromise in place that everybody could accept. And if you think back in history, 95, 96 was when the old Soviet Union collapsed. So part of the challenge was that we had a number of new countries literally becoming new partners for BTI. So places like Estonia and Kazakhstan were new partners that we had to find out how to integrate to a kind of common I.T. strategy. It was an incredible, interesting and challenging project.

Satu: [00:05:47] Yeah, sounds like that. So where did you where did your journey that after that.

johnny: [00:05:52] So in 1997, I was still would be at the time I was on a trip to the US and for the first time saw how the online technology, the Internet, could start interacting with travel. And I came back to Europe and spent the next six months trying to convince the BTI board to invest early in the online environment. And I did not win that battle. And therefore I decided to say goodbye. And I actually ended up having a short spell of being an independent kind of a one man company for three months where I became the reseller of one of the early booking engine, a product that was back then known as E-Travel, which was built by two people from Oracle who had kind of left Oracle and built a booking engine. And I literally had the reseller rights in Europe for travel before it was an armadillo's product. And I did land one customer, Novartis, in Switzerland at the time. And after three months, we have to conclude that the product was nowhere near ready or prepared to be launched in Europe. It basically did not work in Europe. So that was the second time I kind of joined a startup and tried from scratch and it failed. So I was back to the drawing board and when I started looking for what to do next, I got contacted from California by one of the economy, the first corporate online booking engines with real money behind it called "GetThere" in April of 98, I joined GetThere to kind of launch them in Europe and rest of world, basically. And I spent five years being part of an incredibly successful and exciting journey. And that's really when I would say I moved away from the traditional operational TMC world into the customer facing the traveler facing frontline technology. Online travel was an incredible, interesting area at

the time, and everything was new and had to be done for the first time. So it was an endless list of challenges to overcome and figure out how to make things work. It was incredible. Interesting,

Satu: [00:08:02] Right. And that must be when first time really you started think about the needs of the traveler. Yes. And more like a personalization.

johnny: [00:08:11] Absolutely. Until until I get there, my focus had mostly been on the backend. So how to get reporting and accounting data and data quality from the TMC operation to work. But certainly with online GetThere It was all about the traveller experience and the travel manager experience. So it was a big shift. And I would say that's kind of dominated the rest of my career and travel, really what I learned in those early days and and also to you are from Finland, right? My first project in GetThere was to fly to Finland at the time. Nokia was the launch customer in in Europe. Forget there in 98. And I had to fly up and explain to Nokia that this technology is new. It will not work until probably six to 12 months from now. But let's work together and make it happen. And Nokia decided to stay with the project. And we did launch about a year later and had a successful rollout. So Finland was kind of the launch country for to get their technology in Europe at the time.

Satu: [00:09:18] Oh, well, it's very interesting to know that's a that's a positive news.

Satu: [00:09:25] Now then you you had a stint at Travelport before you before you started your own company conTigo.

Satu: [00:09:32] Yeah. Yeah. So I spent five years with GetThere. And when they got acquired by Sabre, that's when I decided to kind of move on. And at the time, you know, Travelport as we know them today, back then they were Centand and Centand, owns both the Galileo, the Apollo and the Worldspan GDS platform. But they were operating all three separately. And in 2003, Centand did not have a corporate booking solution at all, but they had just acquired a small company in Seattle called, ironically, TravelPort. And I, join, Centand to help them bring the travel technology first to Europe, but also to Asia, Asia Pacific. And it was part of that agreement that meant that I moved to Sydney in 2004 and came out to kind of kickstart the online technology for what became travel port in the entire Asia region. And I spent two years working with with Cendant out of

Sydney. And then they decided to change their strategy and and break up the big centres into a number of smaller businesses. And that's where travel portal was created. But at the same time, they decided to stop the focus on corporate online technology in in Asia PAC. And I was basically told that my my role would not be there anymore. I could either come back to London and work for them there or do something else. And that was when the conTigo project had started to kind of become a reality. Canticle was founded or created as an idea after the London bombings in 2005 when the underground bombings took place in London. That was when the idea of a product that could communicate with thousands of travellers in a second came around and me and my co-founder, we started developing a prototype. And in early 2007, we had the first version of a kind of product ready. And that's when I said goodbye to travel. And we went all in on the Contigo project.

Satu: [00:11:34] And that was such an amazing success story, so you had a two man start up and you within five years you had 20 staff and you became a global Congress and you had three of the top 25 global enterprises as a customer. Now, what what was the secret of your success? Can you say a few things that you think that make you guys so successful?

[00:12:02] One of the I think the, you know, the components was the fact that this was now my third time doing a startup. So hopefully I would have learned from the two first ones. And of course, I knew what to look out for. I knew how to position new technology early on to early customers. But more importantly, this was the first time I was in charge of the product development and strategy in my two previous startups. I had been dependent on others, so I knew that there was no excuse. This time we had to get the technology right. So we were extremely focused on identifying two or three key problems that our customers wanted us to solve for them. And it's interesting, looking back in history, Finland once again became the launch place for the contigo technology into the corporate space, and it was still Nokia who was still a global powerhouse. Back in 2007 2008, Nokia became our first corporate customer and they really wanted something that would work on mobile phones from their travel perspective. So we launched our first. Then we went to other markets and other companies like Lego and Microsoft and JPMorgan. And for everyone, we sold the same core problem, which was to be able to reach thousands of travelling employees within a few seconds based on where they were at any given point in time around the world. And I think that was really

the key to success, that we had a laser focus on one core problem. We didn't try to solve the problems. We stay focused on one issue. And it's funny looking back, we did not have the term duty of care back then. So we just called our product an emergency messaging system. We didn't know what else to call it. And then duty of care arrived as a term. And today it's absolute standard and mandatory. But that was not the case back in 2008, 2009, when when we were launching Contigo.

Satu: [00:14:05] Yeah, that's such a great story. Now, then you sold conTgo to Concur and you went into your startup world. You had Mezi and now you have numerous strategic advisor and board member position. So now when we talk about today, how do you become a global travel tech evangelist, a futurist?

Satu: [00:14:30] What's the process and how can you predict the future?

johnny: [00:14:34] I think starting with the first question, how to become a global travel technology evangelist, as I call myself, I think it helps when you have left and works around the world and seen the different local versions of the travel industry, because while we have global crisis, we still have a lot of localized systems that are running around the world. And to kind of really think global, you need to understand what is normal, what is the way of working, what is the way of doing things, how is travel managed both from the corporate biocide, but also from the TMC and the supply side? And there are still differences around the world. We do not have a single global way of doing things. So I have the benefits of having lived in the different regions in Europe, US and Asia and been close, closely involved. I've been very active going to conferences in all three regions, and I've always made sure to kind of be involved either as a presenter, as a panel participant, all kind of have very active engagement with local experts because that's the only way you learn. So that's come, I will say, how I ended up really having a global understanding of travel technology in terms of predicting the future.

[00:15:56] It's kind of it it's interesting, I, I look at the data that we have access to and then I imagine what could be done with those data if a given new technology arrives and you can say a good example was when we launched Contigo at the time we had all these data sitting in backend databases used primarily for reporting purposes. And when I started thinking about how the mobile phone was becoming a better and better tool for communicating in writing, it just hit me like a. That why not send automated

messages to the phone based on the itinerary data? So that's kind of how that idea came up. And I would say it's always about looking at what we have and then imagining how can that be used in a new way? And it starts with data and ends with data in the travel industry because our business is built on data and making smart use of data. And when new technology arrives right now, Block Chain is a very exciting new technology capability. Once you understand what block chain can do and how it works, then you can start to imagine a future scenario where travel data become used in a new way on block chain.

Satu: [00:17:19] Wow, that is so exciting. That must be so amazing or worth living. If we go still, you go back to your career and your journey. I'm sure that you have, like, you know, many, many highlights in your in doing this year. Is there one that really tops tops it all?

Satu: [00:17:39] I would say that there's two, actually. One was in 2008, you kind of two of continuous existence. We we got nominated and we were three people at the time, me and my co-founder Henry, and our first employee, a software developer called Peter. And we literally got nominated as one of the best new global business solutions at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona. And we were there shortlisted against companies at the time, like Cisco and Siemens Network and two other global kind of giants. And then there was little contigo. And I still remember going up on that stage and seeing our name and logo next to these fall giants, that that was a real highlight because it it was kind of evidence that we have created something that did not exist anywhere else in the mobile world. And the other highlight, I would say that's really a career highlight. I've been lucky enough twice to be included on a business travel news annual 25 most influential people in India in the global travel industry in 2010 and 2018. 2010 was part of the contigo journey after we had delivered the ash clouds kind of communication solutions when the volcano exploded up in Iceland and in 2009, 18 was part of my work with many different startups where I really, you know, started to focus on helping startups, getting going, help them avoid the biggest mistakes and help them connect with relevant opportunities. And I still do that and I really, really enjoy it. And business travel news decided that they felt that work was influential enough that they put me back on that list. So I would say those two were really highlights being included on their annual top 25 list.

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