

Countryside Coworking

with Julianne Becker and Mauricio Disilvestro

SPEAKERS

Maddie Duke, Mauricio Disilvestro, Julianne Becker

Maddie Duke 00:04

My first guest today is Julianne Becker, founder of Coconat, an award-winning workation retreat set in the German countryside just outside Berlin. Coconat stands for “Community and Concentrated Work in Nature” and is a place people can go to enjoy the all-in-one offering of a workspace, co-living and community. I'm going to talk with Julianne about Coconat and about her story and perspective on *The State Of Work*. Thanks so much for making the time to chat with us today. I'm really looking forward to hearing your insights!

Julianne Becker 00:37

I'm really looking forward too! I'm really looking forward to share.

Maddie Duke 00:41

Right, so you opened Coconat in 2017, creating a shared living and workspace in a historic manor house in the countryside. Can you tell me a little bit about what led you to doing that and how it got started?

Julianne Becker 00:55

So yeah, we opened in 2017. But the journey started many years before that. “We” would be myself and my partner and of course, some of the co-founders. We started thinking about this project, actually, in 2011. So myself and Janosch thought, “Hey, I could imagine starting a company”. And so we started doing this weird couple project of brainstorming startup ideas, which is just really weird.

Maddie Duke 01:22

How romantic!

Julianne Becker 01:26

Yeah I know! I was working for a startup at the time. And he always had all these like funny ideas. He's like, I don't know, kind of an inventor at heart or something. So we were always pingpong-ing, these ideas and we even got further into some, but this one kind of stuck. So, he had gone to dinner with a friend who was a filmmaker, and our friend said, “Oh, I'm working these 18 hour days, I have this deadline, I really wish that I could just be out in the countryside

working on this project, so that I don't have to then ride my bike through the city". And, you know, he was complaining about it. And Janosch came back and he was super excited. He's like, "I think this might be a really good idea. So let's think about it, making a place for filmmakers in the countryside". And we started thinking about it. We started doing like some budget numbers and it was gonna be like a 5 million euro investment, somehow, we were like, "oh, this is crazy". And then it just dawned on me. I was actually working in the field of co-working and researching/writing about co-working all the time. And I just was like, hey, actually everybody could do it. Like it doesn't have to just be for filmmakers. It could be anyone with a laptop. So then we started really thinking about it and put together our first team. We got some funding from Brandenburg to get coaching for business development. And we started telling everybody about it and doing research. And long story short, it took us two years to find our first place where we tested the idea. We spent four months preparing there and we were open for a month. And we really had a lot of people coming and testing it out and giving us feedback. The biggest feedback was: "the place is great, the idea is great but the internet here sucks". They were like "we would love to come back. But we can't work here if it's like this all the time". The way that we dealt with it is that we had to leave actually.

Maddie Duke 03:23

Oh, so where were you initially?

Julianne Becker 03:25

We were about 60 kilometres north of here, still in Brandenburg, in a very small village of 50 people a bit more remote than where we are right now. And so therefore really not connected. We were naive at that point. Or, we just didn't know that it's not always easy just to get the internet in a place. It wasn't on our list of priorities or even things that we were considering in a location, we'd kind of figured that infrastructure-things would be figured out. I mean, we were not that far away from the capital city. So anyway, after four months of really setting up this place, and trying all kinds of different answers—we had tried LTE and satellite solutions, but if it was rainy, or even cloudy, we didn't have a good connection. And that on top of many other things that weren't really working so well about that first place, really added up after a certain amount of time when we realized that that location wasn't really the perfect one that we had thought we found. But we had always been talking about the place and about this project. And then we were invited to present our results at this big agricultural fair called Grüne Woche (International Green Week) and the Ministry of Rural Development actually paid for us to have a booth and we presented the project. And that's when two different parties from this region found us and they invited us to look at the place where we are right now. So, after all this hard work developing the idea and testing it and presenting it and having it be a success, but at the same time a failure, because we really had to leave this location, finally, this place kind of found us. After many years of working, when I entered this place, I was like, "oh my god, we could open in two weeks in this place, it's all ready, and there's high-speed internet, on the property and like this, and that,"

Maddie Duke 05:30

So it's an interesting thing, because you kind of pushed through with the idea, even though at the time you weren't sure where it was going to be. How did that feel?

Julianne Becker 05:41

No, that was really tough. I mean, I gave the really short version. But leaving, deciding to leave that place was one of the hardest decisions that we made for as far as in the context of this project. I mean, it was really, it was pretty brutal. We kind of came back to Berlin feeling pretty defeated. We had this great experience of that one month, but we also had issues with the owners of the property, we really weren't finding a solution to working together with them. And we had this internet issue. And we also had the heritage department blocking some of our building permissions. And, and there were a couple more "ands", and after a certain amount of time, it was just clear that it wasn't the right place. It was too complicated for many, many reasons. The number one reason was the internet. And it was going to be like 50,000 euros to get fibreglass connection. Yeah.

Maddie Duke 06:42

You mentioned you have a couple of co-founders, do you have investors? Or people who've kind of helped with that initial investment in Coconat?

Julianne Becker 06:50

Let's see, we did a few things. Like for the test, we did crowdfunding. We were able to raise about 25,000 euros through that, which we used for the testing phase. And then, when we found this place, we tried to do some sort of private financing in a more like angel investment kind of scenario, but with people who are new to investing. So it was more people who had, for various reasons, money that they thought about investing, but they'd never invested before. And actually, our project wasn't really the right thing for a first time investment. And we'd gone through that process with two people. So it took a lot of time. So then we thought, well, we'll just go the "easy" route and try a bank. And so we did get a bank loan, but it was not the "easy" route. There's no easy way to get money when you don't already have it.

Maddie Duke 07:42

Yeah. Oh, it really sounds like you've worked really hard to get where you are. I'm really impressed at the resilience and, you know, having to overcome all these challenges along the way. It's even more impressive that you've established the place that you've got. Yeah, congratulations!

Julianne Becker 08:02

Yeah, I mean, there were a few times we didn't think we would really make it, I don't know, I couldn't give up on the idea, though. Because it was such a—we had this like this, like brainstorming of ideas. And it felt like it was one of those ideas that if we didn't do it, other people were going to do it. And I felt like, I just couldn't watch somebody else do this thing that

we were trying to do. Yeah, I would have been sitting in Berlin like, “ah, I can't believe it!”. So we push through. And like people who've known us the whole time also, they've been with us, they saw the whole thing.

Maddie Duke 08:39

Oh, that's great. So just maybe to take a little step back into the realm of what Coconat is and what makes it unique. You know, for anyone who's not aware of the concept, how does co-living work? And how does it intertwine with co-working?

Julianne Becker 08:54

So, if I was going to describe Coconat, I would say that we are an impact-driven company. And we have three points of focus. And one is, first, we had to build a sustainable, economically sustainable company. And that's where we have these three things that we offer, one is co-living, co-working and workation. And co-living is when people want to stay here for one week or longer. Co-working is for local people who live in the area who come here for the day to work on their work, as in a city co-working space. And workation is when people come for a short term, maybe just a few days to get a jump on a project or a group comes for a meeting and things like that. And what we had built in the beginning was a workation. So, the idea is that you escape the city, you have everything taken care of so that you can focus on your work and be really productive. So we really thought a lot about what healthy work-life is for people. If you as an individual come, it's important that you don't feel alone. About 90% of people are more productive when they're around other people, I think more and more people are aware of that these days after having to spend so much time alone in their home office.

Maddie Duke 10:16

Absolutely.

Julianne Becker 10:17

And when you might have this dream, or there's a sort of like, this notion of going to the cabin in the middle of the forest and writing your novel, and you're just alone with nature, and it's beautiful, but actually, most people would go nuts and not do anything, they would just, they wouldn't write the book—

Maddie Duke 10:35

They would just delve into a—just lean right into an existential crisis, probably!

Julianne Becker 10:40

Yeah, exactly. So that's why Coconat stands for “Community and Concentrated Work in Nature”. So, the idea is, if you come by yourself, you're able to sort of connect in with the people who are already here, or with people who are arriving, or maybe you run into your friend from the city, which happens here. And you work and then at lunchtime, you really take a break. We have a set lunchtime and a set dinner time. That's so people don't have to think about what

they're eating. Like that we take the decision-making thing, it's actually a weird stress thing that happens, you might not even realize it sometimes.

Maddie Duke 11:17

Yeah, it's like a mental load thing. I think I get that a lot, as someone who doesn't particularly love cooking, or especially grocery shopping. Whenever I have to, whenever I'm relieved of that decision, I really notice it, that my stress levels are slightly down. It's pretty interesting.

Julianne Becker 11:32

Yeah, it's kind of funny. And there's a few things like—or you're at your office, and you have to decide where to eat, and then it just takes a certain amount of time. Or you do the really bad thing where you have this deadline, and you just don't eat because you don't think it's so important, or you don't think you're that hungry. And then by the end of the day, you're a zombie that hasn't spoken to a person and you haven't really eaten and you are not in the best mood. And you probably haven't even been productive for the last four hours of that, you know. So we tried to address these sort of common things that happen with people to give a healthy workday.

Maddie Duke 12:12

And what about the idea of spending time in nature or even near nature, and how that can help with concentrated work, as you say? And is it good for productivity? And also, how do people balance that with their time spent there. Are they going out and spending time in nature in the morning and then working for the day, or is there not really a clear trend on how people balance it?

Julianne Becker 12:37

We had to make it really clear that that was like a part of the thing when you come here, we had one guy who was here for like four days or something and he was leaving and I asked him something about the natural pool in the back. He didn't know it existed. And I thought, did you not—? He didn't leave the building.

Maddie Duke 12:59

Wow.

Julianne Becker 13:00

He didn't go outside. We learned a lot of things in the very beginning to sort of give a good introduction to how things work, that we share the food. The first guests, actually we put the food out, and they took the big pot and they put it on their table and like, and then there was, like the rest of us, like, “ahhh actually, we all need to eat that food,” so we started to give a really good introduction when people arrived like how it works.

Maddie Duke 13:30

Yep.

Julianne Becker 13:32

And then we added that we give a tour even on the outside of the property. So when you come, we always show you around the whole place, also outside because that guy hadn't even gone outside. And so we need to make it clear that you can go outside and you can work outside. So when it's warm out, you can actually spend your time sitting there, there's WiFi everywhere.

Maddie Duke 13:53

Great!

Julianne Becker 13:55

On my tour, I always make sure to let people know that there are different levels of walks. You can take a five-minute walk, you can take a 20-minute walk, you can take a 10-minute walk or a one hour, four hours, like what you need, you can do and you can just ask us. So the accessibility of nature is really clear. And the reason we do that is also because the idea is that you have a new experience from your every day when you come here. There are people who spend many months here so it becomes their every day for sure. And they really incorporate nature for sure all the time. They stay because they're really enjoying being able to go to the forest all the time, getting the fresh air going for bike rides. Also the community. But the people who are here for just a short time, it's really that they shouldn't miss the chance to get inspiration from a new situation. People see animals, they see deer all the time. It's super exciting. I still get excited when I see deer so you know like yeah, it's nice and it gives you this different energy. So, we make sure that people appreciate that when they come,

Maddie Duke 15:01

And I'm sure it really has a big effect on people's state of mind and their ability to focus when they're surrounded by that kind of an environment...

Julianne Becker 15:11

Definitely.

Maddie Duke 15:12

Now, you mentioned that people come there for anywhere from, you know, a few days to months, who is Coconat for? Is it for individuals and also teams? You've also got some volunteers—can you tell us a little bit about the type of people that come to Coconat?

Julianne Becker 15:28

From our original idea, we wanted to make it a very, very diverse place. So we built it in a way that many different types of people can come here and feel pretty comfortable, or they do feel very comfortable when they come. In a “normal” time, not necessarily Corona time, you'll have a lot of different things going on, especially say, in the summer. The summer is really our busiest time. There's always a lot of people here, but the summer is like, you'll have a group of 20

people in the salon, you'll have maybe one or two smaller teams, either a startup or, or just a small team from a bigger company, then you'll also have individuals who are here. And the bigger groups usually stay for like a day or two and they might not mix with everybody. The smaller groups, depending on what they're working on and how long they stay, they might stick together, or they might start to branch out a little bit, especially at breakfast or lunch. I think breakfast is actually where the groups have a chance to meet other people because breakfast is not a set time. It could be that you're there by yourself, so you end up talking to somebody. I always talk to people at breakfast, it's really nice. And then you have the individuals who come and they really could be here for any amount of time. We have people who've stayed here, end up staying here for a year, usually with the exchange, with this volunteer exchange. We have a really flexible arrangement with the people who do the exchange.

Maddie Duke 16:57

Awesome. You touched a little bit on Covid, I wanted to ask how, as the owner-operator of a place like Coconat, what it's like trying to plan for, for the uncertainty of something like a pandemic and how you can offer flexibility or kind of maintain a reliable income or revenue as an organization, when there's so much uncertainty in the environment. How have you dealt with that? And what's that been like for you?

Julianne Becker 17:29

Well, I would say yeah, I think there's a few sectors that have been severely affected by the pandemic. And we're definitely in one of them. So the tourism sector is, for sure, very affected. So we closed for two and a half months. We're in Germany, so Germany is really taking care that businesses and people are not falling into poverty and struggling and businesses closing. So it's been really a very supportive system for us, also. We haven't been able to access everything that we thought we could, but we're still feeling pretty okay about it. And we have needed it. If they hadn't have provided these safeguards, I don't think we would have made it because we couldn't have guests, you know, so we had no income for many months. And the months that we were open, we had a different sort of capacity. So we were fully booked, like our rooms were booked, but we didn't have as many people per room as usual. So whereas we usually would have two or three people, the rooms are very big, often and where we would usually have at least two people, maybe three in a room. It was just one. So we have 20 rooms, and there were 20 people and that was the case. We had a lot of campers this year, though. We had tonnes of people camping too, because everybody was like, "yeah, if I camp then I'm not around other people".

Maddie Duke 18:57

Okay.

Julianne Becker 18:58

And when it was warm you could eat outside, so it was really nice. We have a lot of other projects going on as well, so we were never bored. So we started to put more energy into some of the bigger projects that we had in mind. So we really developed this tiny house concept that

we would like to push. We've already taken it now into the city to get permission. We also did finally get our funding for Maker Space. So we were able to put energy into projects that were not affected by Corona. We also, we're a co-founder of something called Smart Village which is a nonprofit focused on rural development. We were able to put a little bit more energy in there. That's like super exciting. We also, this Smart Village will now manage an amazing opportunity that happened, which is—our two small cities Bad Belzig and Wiesenburg worked together on a smart cities grant which they won. And now there's 7 million euros of funding coming for digitalization projects in this area. We had a little bit more time to put energy into our partnerships, to developing our on site projects, and things like that. So that was actually really cool. We're pretty hopeful about the future, so we're really happy that we're getting some support for sure. And I also am very sure, as soon as we can open that we'll be full again, because everybody really wants to get him to get out of the city.

Maddie Duke 20:30

Yeah, I know I'd be keen!

Julianne Becker 20:34

Come out! And the other thing with the lockdowns or the laws—we are officially in what's called business travel. So business travel has been allowed most of the time. And so, we're still talking about January, we still have to look a little bit deeper into the new regulations, which is what we have to do. Every time there's a new regulation you really have to read through it, see what it means, interpret it, get advice from the Tourism Board, ask them all the questions. For a while we were thinking, "Oh, do we offer that everyone can register their residence here?" We spoke it through with the Tourism Board, they gave us the pluses and minuses, does it work for us or not? They help us to navigate these new regulations that come every few months or every few weeks or every few days. So, we're figuring it out.

Maddie Duke 21:30

Yeah, I mean, it sounds like you've done a great job. You've had lots of other projects going on, aside from just Coconat. And also having that real sound understanding of regulations and keeping up to date with everything. These things combined seem to be keeping you afloat and keeping you okay through this year that hasn't, well, the year that wasn't a typical year and has been a real challenge. You mentioned that you're expecting a big influx of people, and that once they can come they will. In general, do you think that more people will be inspired to leave the city permanently since COVID? And since a lot of people who are employed, rather than self employed, have now gained a lot more flexibility and the ability to work remote? Because businesses, if they're not going remote completely, they're working on remote models, hybrid models of work. Are you expecting people to move out to the countryside more permanently?

Julianne Becker 22:30

Yes, I am. I mean, pre-COVID, there was already a trend of people moving to the countryside, remote work possibilities are not new. That's also been a growing trend before now, what had been a slowly growing trend will for sure, have a huge spike. I mean, right now, it's like a forced

remote experiment. And for sure, there's pluses and minuses about how it all happened, because it was a forced thing and done without pre-planning. And a lot of people were in situations that they just weren't prepared for, along with stress. And along with that, you know, people were working with their kids and distractions. So this was not a positive experience for everyone. But there have been a lot of positive aspects to it. I guess that a certain amount of companies will go back just to how they were before. But a lot of them will have to change because I think there will be more demand from the employee side for flexibility, especially when their productivity levels were a lot of companies, they have not changed their expectations of productivity levels, or they did give some lowering of those expectations in the first two months. But then now they expect the same amount of productivity. Especially the ones who have done a lot of work in reorganizing how they're working in a remote way. Yeah, and I think those companies will benefit a lot from what they've done. So I know a few people who've had really positive experiences, and they know that they'll be working remote till at least this summer. So the company's made the long term decision to go ahead and just say, we will not be in the office until June 2021. And then we will see, which I think gives people a little bit of that stability that we were talking about, you know, when you're totally uncertain about what the situation is, that affects you. So they made this decision. And now, those people are saying, "Hey, but I don't have to stay at home. I can actually—", so you know, a friend of mine went to Greece. We hosted people here who were in organizations who were never remote before. I've mentioned it like 'cause it's my favorite anecdote, that there was somebody who came here from the banking sector. Her office was on full remote and she came and she was like, "I didn't tell my boss I was coming but I didn't think it would really matter, like he doesn't know where I am." And I was like, "of course, it's fine!" You know, it's so funny because it felt like this, like sneaking out, like, doing something bad. But actually, it doesn't matter.

Maddie Duke 25:17

Yeah, I guess the only thing that comes to mind there for me is, particularly maybe somebody working in a bank, is security. You know, I guess there are considerations for what level of security your work demands, and privacy and things like that. And I guess that's probably something you've had to consider when it comes to the shared network, as in the internet network? Or is that something people manage via their own employer policies or client policies?

Julianne Becker 25:48

I mean, this kind of like a technical security question, I'm definitely not the right person, for sure. That's like the companies. I know that the comp—, like there's certain sectors where that stuff's very important. So we've been working on a project about increasing remote work possibilities with employers in this region—together with a partner organization—I'm not in the lead on it at all. But this sector, one of the biggest employers in this area is the medical sector and the medical sector has to deal with data protection on a super high level. Just like banking, of course, because it's people's money and health, it's like super privacy issues. So for certain types of work, you have to be on secure servers, and there has to be certain protocols, and those definitely aren't available in a co-working space, unless they've really worked with the company on how to develop different routes for the information to come to different modems

and no, for sure not everyone can work in a co-working space. But, there are certain types of work that can happen. So if you're not working with people's, with secure files with sensitive information, then you can be here so you can work on maybe communications projects, maybe bookkeeping, maybe, like different types of work you can do. So that's also what we're working with the companies on like, which work doesn't have to be in the office, because actually people are more productive when they can be flexible. So, have you considered that if it's just about a meeting or strategy thing, that they don't have to be in the office to do that they could do it in a different way. I think that's the main thing is just thinking about flexibility.

Maddie Duke 27:37

Yeah.

Julianne Becker 27:38

And to get back to the people moving to the region. It's kind of a global phenomenon, or at least in like, say my experience. So in the US and Germany, the housing market is insane right now, like people are moving. I think there's two factors to it: I think one is, for sure, it's the remote work thing. If they move, they're not going to automatically have to change their jobs. That's an interesting thing. And I think the other thing is that the pandemic has really made people get really into themselves, like, what do they want? I've seen people make giant life changes in the last year, where you thought, it's not even possible, like, because everyone's sitting at home. But actually, people are like making big changes. We moved from our, like, we're moving within the region from a little village to the town and we were looking for new people for our old flat and there were so many people that were interested in it. Right now, in this region now, there's less than 1% empty rental space. A lot of people are coming to the countryside. And I think it's because of the two reasons, yeah, people have the opportunity to, they still can have a secure livelihood, and they want to make the changes they've been thinking about for years. They're just doing it now, because, I think a lot of people are confronted with that thing, like, actually, "why wait?", you know, "I can't control everything. So I can control what I do. I should just do this thing I want to do".

Maddie Duke 29:11

For sure. It's causing a lot of people to go inwards and reflect on "What do I value? What do I want?" and especially those who are only able now just for the first time to be working remotely. They're kind of like, "Oh, I could actually move back to my hometown or wherever it is that I would want to be working that I originally couldn't". It's quite interesting. I think we'll be seeing the results of that for a while still.

Julianne Becker 29:38

The trend was already there. And then now it's just like this, it's like..

Maddie Duke 29:42

...it's just become more mainstream.

Julianne Becker 29:44

Yeah. This experiment. It's like a crazy experiment. I mean, it's like the biggest social experiment in human history for sure. And yeah, let's see what the results are. I think there'll be a lot of positive results.

Maddie Duke 31:07

Yeah. And what about the local community? How has it been integrating Coconat and the community that you've got there with the local community? Is it very involved or is it kept separate?

Julianne Becker 31:20

We, as the founding team of Coconat, we wanted to make sure that Coconat was not this UFO that landed in the middle of the countryside, that no one knew what was going on. So we've done a lot of work to make sure that we've been in touch with our neighbors, that was super important for us. Before we opened, we hosted this Design Thinking-like workshop with about 60 people, with 30 people from Berlin and 30 people from the region and many of those people from our village. And we asked them what they could visualize here, like, what did they imagine happening here. And we really listened especially to our neighbors. So they are not using our co-working, that's not what they needed. They needed a place to have their fire truck. So the Volunteer Fire Brigade is here. And we have a lifetime use of the space for them. And we host the local village fest once a year. And we just have the place available for if people want. And we are very open and we speak with them. And we listen to them. The only conflicts that we've had, oh no we had two. One was the first year, budget was a thing and time and everything, and we were not cutting the grass as much as they would have wanted us to. For us, it was great. I mean, people from the city, we don't care about having short grass, like it's not our thing. And we don't, we don't still don't cut everything. We keep a lot of it for bees and butterflies. But we have at least one kind of manicured garden. And that has really had a nice influence on our standing, I think. And the other conflict we had was just that one of our guests was flying a drone, and the drone went over the property of our neighbor. And he called and he was really like, "there shouldn't be a drone going over our place". Which is fair enough.

Maddie Duke:

I think there are some pretty strict rules about public, like, especially public photography, and things like that.

Julianne Becker:

In general, yes. In the eastern part of Germany, people are really sensitive to certain topics. And I also don't want a drone flying over me when I'm just reading a book or whatever I'm doing in the back! I don't know, you know. And people ask if they can fly their drone and I say "yes, you can, but you have to make sure it's on our property, not like going all over the place."

Maddie Duke 33:45

Yep

Julianne Becker 33:46

...and everyone respects it. So we haven't had that issue either. And then just to say a little bit further, we also work on a regional level. So we are really trying to be close with our neighbors, that they feel very welcome here, but we work really closely also within the region on their rural development goals. And we started this nonprofit, Smart Village, to sort of facilitate that part of the work that we do. That management of the project is actually outside of Coconat now and we're more of a partner, but we act as a practical space for testing a lot of these ideas. So it's a really perfect way that it's been built, that we're able to use our tools and expertise, our networks in certain ways. And then we brought in experts on different types of rural development to be the project managers of that. It feels good to know that we do listen to people and that it is appreciated from different sides as well.

Maddie Duke 34:42

Yeah, oh I love it. That's great. So a lot of exciting stuff going on for you. And for, you know, opportunities for remote and regional work.

Julianne Becker 34:53

Yep, let's get the internet connectivity in the countryside everywhere then we can really, really grow. It's really key. I mean, we have it here. There's expansion happening, there'll be new fiberglass in this region as well. I think everybody knows it's so important. I think any brakes that have been put on the funding for development of internet infrastructure in rural areas, really, they're lifting now, everybody really sees the importance of it. So I hope it gets fast tracked to all of the regions.

Maddie Duke 35:25

Yeah, I hope so too, it'll open up a lot of opportunity for a lot of different people and organizations and communities.

Julianne Becker 35:33

Exactly.

Maddie Duke 35:34

Well, that's about all we have time for and I think a really nice place to end. So thank you so much for sharing your story and your insights and your experience with us.

Julianne Becker

Thank you!

Maddie Duke

And I really look forward to following your journey.

Julianne Becker 35:47

Yeah, it's exciting! Thank you very much, looking forward to having you out here.

Maddie Duke 36:00

Hi, Mauricio, and thanks for joining me on *The State Of Work*.

Mauricio Disilvestro 36:06

Hi Maddie, thanks for having me.

Maddie Duke 36:07

Now, can you first tell me where you're joining us from today? Can you set the scene for our listeners a bit so we can get a sense of your surroundings?

Mauricio Disilvestro 36:16

So I'm Bad Belzig, which is down in Brandenburg, about one hour and a half from Berlin. And right now I'm in my living room and I have a really nice view. And the sky, it's now starting to open a little bit and I can see the sun entering my living room.

Maddie Duke 36:36

Lovely. So after six years living in Berlin, what drove this decision to move out to the countryside?

Mauricio Disilvestro 36:46

I would say that together with a friend, we were thinking of perhaps getting a small land in the countryside, and having both types of lives in the city and then also something in the countryside. And somehow this project was taking some time. I also was feeling this curiosity to really experience what would be to actually just take this step and try it out. So yeah, after six years in Berlin, I decided to move here recently, and I'm basically starting my journey here in this countryside lifestyle. So far, I have to say that I have no regrets. And I'm feeling quite happy to have taken this decision.

Maddie Duke 37:32

Great! And why this part of Brandenburg and not somewhere else? Was it Coconat that attracted you, or were you already familiar with the area? Why this part of the world and not somewhere else?

Mauricio Disilvestro 37:44

So Bad Belzig was the first town I ever visited in Germany, nine years ago, when I came to a community called Zegg, which was recommended to me by a friend. I came to this community and I had such a beautiful memory that somehow it stayed in my heart. So I made a long detour—I went to New Zealand and Australia for about two years—and then six years in Berlin, and then somehow this town was calling me back. And definitely Coconat is one of the reasons. So, this combination of having this community and people who are connected to the community and also having Coconat and also having the *Therme (thermal spa)*, which we have here in Bad Belzig. Quite beautiful, a big *Therme* and sauna facilities. These were the three main reasons why I decided to come here.

Maddie Duke 38:40

It sounds idyllic. And so actually, I might just take a step back a bit. Would you just tell us a little bit about your work and what you do as a freelancer?

Mauricio Disilvestro 38:49

I'm a WordPress developer, and I have been doing this for about 10 years. Most of my clients are in Berlin, then others are in Switzerland and France, mainly. So, at this moment, I am doing websites for clients and I also would like to start some blogging with the intention of also generating some passive income with affiliate marketing.

Maddie Duke 39:15

In terms of having left the city and moved into the countryside, is there anything you miss about city life so far?

Mauricio Disilvestro 39:22

To be honest, really little. I am quite enjoying the fact that I have this openness, so I can just go out of the house and then two minutes I'm in a forest and I'm in nature and that somehow it's filling me with so much life. In any case, Berlin is still very close. So it just takes one hour and a half and whenever I need to go to the city, I can patiently wait in the train and go to Berlin. So, definitely for me, Berlin is now a place to visit but not a place to live anymore. You may miss perhaps the practicalities of buying some things or having things open all the time, but it's not on my priority list.

Maddie Duke 40:08

And what about managing clients from afar? How have your clients reacted to your decision?

Mauricio Disilvestro 40:14

Basically, nothing has changed, in the sense of, also before, when I was living in Berlin, I was not really seeing my clients in person. And also, especially because of Corona, the first wave of Corona, my clients got used to having Zoom calls with me or just normal calls, and me working remotely. So I was already working remotely from Berlin, to be honest. So it has not changed at all. Now they are actually more curious. I would say that it's a positive reaction. Perhaps I would imagine that some other freelancers will have this fear of, "I will lose my clients, If I move

somewhere else”. I think things are already changing. Depending on the work that you do, taking this step could be quite easy.

Maddie Duke 41:05

And how have you found the process of finding new clients since you've moved away? Has it made a difference to how you acquire new clients?

Mauricio Disilvestro 41:12

That's a good question. I have to say that I'm in a privileged position of having done this for 10 years. So, there's a good amount of word of mouth, of people that recommend me and clients also that come back and I also have regular clients. So at this moment, I'm actually not needing to add too many new clients. At the same time, I have also arrived here two months ago, so let's see how things develop. I believe that this new project that I will develop could also bring some more marketing and could also bring potentially more interest, because I will also mix it with my lifestyle, which is something that many people are interested in. So I think it could even be beneficial to create something different. Try out something that perhaps is out of the box.

Maddie Duke 42:05

Yeah, it definitely gives you a point of difference to be working outside of the city. What about networking? Have you found that you've already integrated into a community? How do you find the difference between networking in a more rural setting than in a city?

Mauricio Disilvestro 42:23

I have already a couple of friends that live here, this was also another reason why I decided to come here, to still have some social links and some bonds with people living in the area. At Coconat it's also super easy to make new friends and to have beautiful conversations during lunch and dinner. I have to say that at the same time, Bad Belzigers themselves, they might not be the most open people, especially with the *Ausländer (foreigners)*, you know, and I still feel that I am seen as an *Ausländer*. And there is not so much this spirit of “Oh, wow, okay, this is interesting”, it's more like, “Okay, what is this *Ausländer (foreigner)* doing here?” And I think this is also related to the fact that there are also some refugees coming to the area. So, I wonder how the locals—especially the more conservative, more traditional minded locals—see this new phenomena of refugees, and perhaps they don't seem to be the most open people, however, I think it's anyway easy to find your people, even if it's just a few.

Maddie Duke 43:42

Yeah. I mean, it's an interesting point. And just for anyone who's not German-based, *Ausländer* means foreigner. So, with people moving to more remote communities, either for work or for other reasons, it does bring some business to the local community, for sure. But those of us who do have the freedom of choice to make a move to work remotely from somewhere because of lifestyle factors, it is important for us to consider the impact of our presence on the local communities and it's probably a balance based on wherever you go and the attitudes of local

people and whether there's a push for integration between the newcomers and locals. On that, do you overall feel welcome there?

Mauricio Disilvestro 44:32

Yeah, I do overall feel welcome. It's just that if you come from a multicultural city like Berlin, you will see the difference. I think this is also something normal to expect.

Maddie Duke 44:44

So what advice would you give to anyone considering a move from a city to a more regional area?

Mauricio Disilvestro 44:51

I would say that they should consider that something is going to be lost in the sense that you should give away something, which is perhaps the practicality of seeing your friends fast or organizing something quickly. However, what you gain, or at least in my case, is that now friends who come to visit me, for example, we spend more time together and we can somehow even get to know each other even more, which is something that perhaps in the city, with all the hecticness of the city, is a little bit more difficult. So right now, I'm talking about the emotional reasons why someone will stay in the city, rather than going to a more remote area. In the sense of work, if you are doing your work with a laptop, which is, for example, in my case, there is absolutely nothing that changes. This is, of course, obvious. And so perhaps there are some fears or some doubts and I think the best way to do this is just to try it. And then if it doesn't work, life is long. And you can go back to the steps that you take.

Maddie Duke 45:54

That's a great positive attitude that you've got. Would you ever consider taking a job that required you to go to an office?

Mauricio Disilvestro 46:05

No, absolutely not.

Maddie Duke 46:06

Not at this point? So a real remote work advocate. And what are your thoughts on whether this is a trend that we'll see happen? I know there was a report in The Guardian recently, about I think something like 60% of Londoners felt that remote work has made them reconsider their living situation and think about seeking a lifestyle change, moving to somewhere where there's cleaner air and maybe to the seaside or countryside. You're obviously someone who's made that kind of a move. Do you think that's something that we'll see more of, especially now, considering the pandemic and the fact that a lot more people are moving into remote work?

Mauricio Disilvestro 46:50

Interesting, I have mixed feelings about this. Because from one side, I would say strategically for my own interest, I would say, hopefully not! That there is not like a wave of people, perhaps

with IT jobs, coming to the countryside Because my idea would be at some point, also getting a small land here in the area. So if I see many people gentrifying Bad Belzig in the same way that Berlin was gentrified, then this will be harder. But I do expect that on some level, many people will start reconsidering why they are in the place they are. Especially because when I see right now, if you see it historically, you'd see that many people from the countryside went to the city during the Industrial Revolution, in a way to survive and to get money. So an economic factor was the main motivator for many people to leave the countryside and then go to the city. And this was only 100 years ago. So if we say, what's going to happen in 20 years? Well, it could be that for those who are not feeling the city as their one and only means to survival anymore, then I think this shift will happen. I think gradually. For some people it will still also be beautiful to live in the city.

Maddie Duke 48:11

Yeah, and I'm sure there are some other considerations for some people that need specific access to certain services that may not be as readily available. I guess we can only wait and see!

Mauricio Disilvestro 48:24

Exactly, and I can't stop recommending Coconat. If you allow me I would love to recommend Coconat also for people who want to just take a week out of Berlin and then join the coworking space, then you will find me there. I feel very focused when I work there. And also the food that they serve is absolutely excellent. It's this yummy vegetarian food, all you can eat, which is delicious.

Maddie Duke 48:53

Sounds great! It's been a pleasure having you on *The State Of Work*, Mauricio, thanks so much for joining us. If any of our listeners wanted to get in touch with you or have a look at some of your work, where could they find you?

Mauricio Disilvestro 49:06

Yeah, so my website is wpfreelance.berlin

Maddie Duke 49:10

We'll make sure to add that to the show notes as well. Thank you very much. And thanks for joining us on *The State Of Work*.

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