

Designing creative solutions for optimal remote work environments

with Karsten Kossatz, Founder at independesk

Maddie Duke 00:01

You're listening to *The State Of Work*, the podcast by Lano. *The State Of Work* is about finding your place in the changing world of work as an individual or an organization. In each episode, we dive into some of the benefits and limitations that we face when it comes to remote and flexible work. We discuss how we work, how we hire and manage people and how we live in this increasingly global workplace. I'm your host, Maddie Duke. And our guest this week is Karsten Kossatz, an entrepreneur and founder of independesk, an ecosystem through which any company can post its unused office space or empty desks and rent them out by the hour or day to people in the neighborhood—a bit like car sharing only for desks and workspaces. I chatted to Karsten about his founding journey and how this idea came about, as well as how he plans to expand into new markets and his visions for the future of the way we work.

Welcome Karsten, to the podcast, thanks so much for joining me.

Karsten Kossatz 01:05

Thanks for inviting me, hello.

Maddie Duke 01:07

How are you today?

Karsten Kossatz 01:09

I'm very good as I'm really excited these days.

Maddie Duke 01:13

Yes, yes. Awesome. Well I'm looking forward to our chat. Can you tell me first of all where you're joining from today?

Karsten Kossatz 01:19

Oh, I'm actually in my own office today, because we have a lot of team meetings lately and we do them in person.

Maddie Duke 01:28

And is that in Berlin?

Karsten Kossatz 01:29

That's in Berlin? Yes.

Maddie Duke 01:31

Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Great to have you here. Really excited to hear what you've got to say. And I thought we'd kick off just by, if you could tell me about yourself and about independesk?

Karsten Kossatz 01:43

Oh, yes, I love that. I'm Karsten, I'm 29 years old. I've been an entrepreneur for 10 years now, having had several ventures that I was involved in. But what really drives me is changing the world to make it a bit better place to, to change our lives, to make them better. That's what I'm fighting for. That's what I have been fighting for always. And, and so I think creating impact ventures is our startups, something that I really love. And one of the startups I founded at the beginning of last year - it's called independesk. So what does it mean and independesk - independent desk. It's basically a platform, it's an app, where everyone with spare desks can put them on the platform and subrent them, hourly and daily to people of the environment from the neighborhood. So it basically works like a car sharing app. And you can, you can easily book your professional, yeah, workplace, around the corner in your neighborhood by just going to the app and book a table.

Maddie Duke 03:17

Awesome. And so with that you're helping to enable people to work from different places and work differently to how we traditionally work.

Karsten Kossatz 03:25

Yes, yes, that's the idea. That's the idea. I mean, a lot of people are in the home office lately. And that's great. I think a home office is a wonderful thing. And I also think that the pandemic has brought a lot of focus to this topic, which is good, in a sense, because before the pandemic, especially in Germany, the companies were not really convinced that this was possible, and that people were productive in their home office. But as we could see, it's almost the opposite. It's working really well, and people are really productive. But there are of course, people who need an alternative to their home office because they really can't concentrate or their flat is too small, or they really want to differentiate between private life and company life. And that's alright. And for this reason for not having to commute to the office every day. I thought independesk fills the gap and brings an additional option, yeah.

Maddie Duke 04:41

Great. And when did you get the idea for independent school and how did it come to you?

Karsten Kossatz 04:48

There were different reasons actually. Before that, I've had an advertisement agency for several years. And of course, I was confronted with employees asking me if they could stay in their home office. And so I had to deal with this topic quite early. And quite often actually, because creatives are already creative in your work in looking for new workplaces and where to work from. So I thought, yeah, okay, probably the office is not the best place to be creative. And so I developed a concept, which is called the Outside Society, which is a container that opens to all sides. And that you can place wherever you usually spend your free time. So you can place it into the woods or at the beach, or on the mountain, and you have a meeting room there. So you can have meetings, you can have power from solar panels, you can have wifi, we even have a coffee machine in there. It's basically an office but outside.

Maddie Duke 06:14

Yes, I was curious to know about that.

Karsten Kossatz 06:17

Yeah, it is really, really a really nice product. And I really love that. It's just really, really not scalable. But nevertheless, I really adore the Outside Society. And it's been standing in Switzerland this summer.

Maddie Duke 06:39

Okay,

Karsten Kossatz 06:40

....so a summer product. So people come and co-work there during summer time. That was quite exciting, because that was close to Zurich. And it was just beautifully.... right beside a river and beautiful. And through this. I was explaining to everyone Hey, with the Outside Society, you can work from everywhere. But that wasn't really true. Actually, you can work from special places, but not really from everywhere. Then I thought, okay, it would be so great to have a platform that really enables you to work from everywhere. So now how does this work? How can this work, obviously, we could have opened a coworking chain, or we could have connected all the coworking spaces through a platform. But still, we wanted to be available around the corner. And there are not so many coworking spaces around, especially because they're mainly in the center of cities.

Maddie Duke 07:44

Yep.

Karsten Kossatz 07:45

So we really needed a solution that enables the existing office infrastructure to become coworking. And this is what we did through our independesk app. Because everyone can, can can their yes, sublets their spare desks, every company, basically, with an office.

Maddie Duke 08:11

What sort of spaces are there? So I understand there's some office space that's otherwise not in use, and maybe also partnering with some co-working spaces.

Karsten Kossatz 08:20

Yes, we're obviously co-working spaces are, are really, really nice for that because they already have this infrastructure. But we really do have a lot of medium and small sized companies that have just because their own employees are in the home office as well now, so they have a lot of spare desks. So they put it in a room or a meeting room or some tables in a big office. So we have come companies like advertisement agencies, we have event agencies on there. We have but we also have some nice studios and ateliers there....

Maddie Duke 09:05

Nice.

Karsten Kossatz 09:06

...like really nice. It's a great, yeah, collection of nice places. And also it's not just places. It's people running these places. When I book an independesk, I'm always surprised by how open the people are and how much networking it brings, also for me. Also, when people come here to work through independesk, I get a lot of input from them. And we're so interesting people we have freelancers, for example, I can tell the story of last year's Christmas party that we had to do remotely but I thought okay, what can we do and then I talked to this co-worker here who came through independesk and he is a beer sommelier. So what the deal was, I thought when I talked to him: okay, that's exactly what I need. So he made this Zoom beer tasting, which was amazing. So you find these people that really enrichen your life, and I'm quite happy about this, this community that just starts building up.

Maddie Duke 10:25

What a great utilization of space as well that would otherwise be unused.

Karsten Kossatz 10:32

Oh absolutely.

Maddie Duke 10:33

...If you've got an office that would be open with, you know, utilities running, anyway. Yeah, I think that that's a really, as you say, it's an impact venture. So it's a sort of repurposing of unused space.

Karsten Kossatz 10:42

Yes. I mean, what sense does it make that the people from the east of the city, let's just say east, west, or north south, let's say north south, the people from the north work in the south, and they drive there every day, half an hour back and forth? And the people from the south to vice versa? What sense does it make at all I mean, I understand we really need office space, we will keep on needing office space to meet each other in person. And that's quite a big important

thing for companies building their culture. But, but also, there are a lot of days where people don't have any meetings, or where people really don't need to be in a big, big company group. So they can just look for a table nearby.

Maddie Duke 11:35

Yeah. And so who are the biggest sort of what are the biggest use cases for independesk? Do you have businesses that want to give their workers a place to go to? Or is it usually individuals booking it for themselves?

Karsten Kossatz 11:49

Oh, actually, we have these two use cases. We have freelancers who really, um yeah, look for a place where they can have meetings with their customers, or just go out for working, so they don't have to work from home. So this is an important use case. But the other important use case is companies that want to give their employees an additional option to work remote.

Maddie Duke 12:23

Yep.

Karsten Kossatz 12:24

So we have these company accounts, a company signs up and then makes sub accounts for all of their employees, and they get limits, monthly limits, to what price they can spend money on independesk. And individual limits, so for example, I always say the intern should get a bigger budget than the boss, because the boss maybe has a working room or workplace at home and the intern is just a student who really works from the, from the bed, or wherever.

Maddie Duke 13:02

That's a really good point. And, you know, yeah, I think when we talk about the benefits of remote work, or working from home, I should say, a lot of people focus on that family unit and like, you know, that it's, you know, I get to spend more time with my partner, I get to spend more time with my kids this or that, lockdowns aside when when parents are having to parent while working. But I think that there is definitely something to be said, for those people who don't have that really traditional structure of living, where they might be in a WG like a share house with a number of other people, and they've only got one room and it might be quite small. And yeah, that's a really good point. And it's good to acknowledge those sorts of situations.

Karsten Kossatz 13:46

Right. And sometimes you just need a professional environment and you do any crying kids or our partners who also have a video conference at the same time. That has happened quite often, I guess, due to - throughout the pandemic. So yeah, I think there are a lot of use cases, a lot of situations. I always say, it is an additional thing, independesk. So we need home office, we need the company office, but we also need a third option. And that's independesk.

Maddie Duke 14:25

That's great. And I mentioned also, when we think about, you know Lano, we talk a lot about businesses that are expanding and growing a team internationally. If a business has just made their first remote hire, you know, maybe they're based in Spain or something and then they've just hired someone in Germany. But that person's their first employee in Germany supporting them with this sort of solution where they have a choice to go around the corner to the local independesk space.

Karsten Kossatz 14:55

Yeah, and they can also use it as a networking opportunity to get people to, I mean, their own employees are most of the time the best brand ambassadors company can have. So I'm not talking about going there and handing over your business card to everyone. That's pretty annoying actually do that. But, just go there and have a nice chat in the kitchen with some stranger or former stranger that is open to listen to your story. And that when you're open to listen to their story, most of the time, I would also I would actually say all of the time, you really get a lot of input from that. And yeah, that's quite valuable.

Maddie Duke 15:45

Yeah, that's awesome. And yeah, I mean, working from home and working alone is not actually for everyone. So a lot of people say, oh, working from home, I'm, you know, I can spend all this extra time focusing without any interruptions, but there are definitely people who work better when they're able to be sort of surrounded by a few other people.

Karsten Kossatz 16:06

Yeah that would be me. I really don't like home office, I understand the advantages. And I think for a lot of people, it brings a lot of added value to their life. But for me, it's just, I work a lot and the few hours that I spend at home, I really don't want to work, I want to sleep or I want to eat or I want to read a book. So in terms of getting this into my head, that home is home and work is work. I really don't like to work from home, sol just love to go somewhere else. Even if I don't chat with people, even if I just go there to work. It's important. Also, the way to go to the office is quite interesting, because I get a lot of ideas in my head - my head already already starts preparing for the office when I move to the office.

Maddie Duke 17:10

Yeah. How do you get to the office?.

Karsten Kossatz 17:13

That's different from day to day. Actually, if I book and independesk, I obviously walk because it's close by. I have a pretty nice agency that has put their office online. That is quite close by. I already love them so much. And it's my favorite place to work close by. But sometimes I go to the company office, then I take the bike. And sometimes I take the car if I know that I have a lot of official appointments where I shouldn't be as I don't know if I'm on the bike.

Maddie Duke 17:58

Yeah, dishevelled.

Karsten Kossatz 18:02

And not really not really business style, more startup style I would say.

Maddie Duke 18:09

And I guess, yeah, well, there is also sometimes something to be said for some amount of commute to really give you that boundary and that break between work and home, and also to give you time to listen to a podcast.

Karsten Kossatz 18:25

Yes that's right.

Maddie Duke 18:26

Lano makes it easy to hire the best talent on the planet, wherever they may be. From compliant contracts to global payroll, Lano has you covered. No matter the size of your business, you can hire and pay employees in more than 150 countries. Check out our global hiring guides by visiting lano.io.

You recently pitched your idea ... you pitched *independesk* to the investors on *Die Höhle der Löwen*.

Karsten Kossatz 19:02

Yeah.

Maddie Duke 19:03

Which... for anyone listening who doesn't speak German, or isn't familiar, this is like the German version of *Shark Tank*. So that's really exciting. Can you tell me about that experience?

Karsten Kossatz 19:14

Oh, yeah, absolutely. It was such a great experience. I mean, you apply for this. And then they call you and say hey, Karsten, we want you and but the investors still don't know right? They don't know until you really enter the door in the studio and you present your thing, your startup. So I was so excited going there. And then this day, I went there and they were super nice. They really loved my concepts four or five investors gave me an offer, basically.

Maddie Duke 19:58

Nice one, you could choose.

Karsten Kossatz 19:14

So I said even... I could choose - I could choose and what I did was I, I negotiated my first offer up. So I could even got even more than I had expected.

Maddie Duke 20:08

Congratulations.

Karsten Kossatz 20:10

There was such an opportunity - incredible. And it really gives us the power to now, yeah, develop independent to something big. And it's not only the financial aspect, but it's also the strategic aspect, because I got two investors that are really well known, and that have a lot of good contacts for us that they can introduce us to. And also they are strategic thinkers so we can develop our strategy with them. And that really, really is a huge opportunity and a milestone in our startup.

Maddie Duke 20:55

That's fantastic. Congratulations.

Karsten Kossatz 20:58

Thank you.

Maddie Duke 20:59

Is that your TV debut as well?

Karsten Kossatz 21:02

No, actually, last year, I already had during the pandemic, I made a project with friends helping the local stores here that have had to close down selling vouchers. And then I had already been on TV. But I guess this was the biggest TV format I'd ever been on because in Germany, like three or three and a half million people watch this. So it's a huge show, and it creates a huge impact. And we're now in this week after the broadcast. And there are a lot of new users trying out our app, and a lot of nice feedback. And people love it. So I am really happy to see this community starting to build up.

Maddie Duke 21:52

Fantastic. And I mean, you've told me earlier about how much the value of getting publicity, right can mean and I'd really love to hear more about that. And maybe some advice for other early stage startups.

Karsten Kossatz 22:08

Well, when I started with independent, I didn't want to tell anyone, because I always thought, mm this is such a great idea. And I, I don't want people to steal my idea. But..

Maddie Duke 22:24

I think that's a natural feeling.

Karsten Kossatz 22:25

It is, it is but in the startup world, what I can say now is everything is about execution. You have to get it on the road. And there is one thing that is important about getting things on the road that's telling people.

Maddie Duke 22:44

...otherwise it's a very lonely road.

Karsten Kossatz 22:47

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And it's it's sort of paradox because we don't want people to copy but at the same time, you need to get feedback on your idea and, and you need to spread the word and for this, the press is just a wonderful, yeah, multiplier or multiplier to, to tell a lot of people you probably don't have the reach that that the press has, the press just is there for their reach. And, if journalists are really convinced of your idea, they're also willing to support you with an article or a blog post or whatsoever so I say every publicity is good publicity. And you should really care for early early stage press releases, so people can already get to know your idea because what we feel is that we really want to change the working world and it's it doesn't it doesn't take only a month to change the working world. People who hear about independesk might download the app, but also it might take them another half a year until they really get activated to book a desk. So what I wanted what I want to bring across is that it's hard to change a mindset and to change only change your mindset by constant communication about the same topic, about your topic. This is why publicity is so important.

Maddie Duke 24:36

Awesome. Yeah, coming back to your experience with *Die Höhle der Löwen* and also just your experience in general, kind of getting this idea off the ground and really happening. For anyone that's listening, that that also might have like what they think is a you know, a really brilliant idea and then just sort of not really sure how to like what first steps to take, do you have any advice for those sort of new founders or potential new founders that are at the stage where they need to start seeking investment?

Karsten Kossatz 25:12

Well, the first point is to really think about the concept - how does it work - because this is how you can convince your first partners. And by partners, I don't necessarily mean investors, I also mean, strategic partners. In my case, it will be the first locations that were on independesk, also the development team that I had to convince to work with me. So these sort of partners, I mean, yeah. And then, by having this first concept, you can already make/design the first dummies of your idea. And with these dummies, you should go out and, and test it and get it tested by other people. And, and, yeah, this is the point where you could start communicating, hey, that's my project. And that's what I want to do. Because then you already create a fan base, or you have the opportunity to create a creative fan base.

Maddie Duke 26:17

Yeah.

Karsten Kossatz 26:18

And so, it's important to focus on the very idea in the beginning, in terms of making people want to support you.

Maddie Duke 26:30

Yeah. Awesome. Thanks. And also, I mean, you mentioned, part of the value of having these two new investors on your team is having a strategic partnership and opening up lots of new opportunities with new networks and contacts, and not just the financial value of that, but what did what like how do you see independence in the future now that this is happening, like do you say that your team expanding? Could you see independence launching in other countries?

Karsten Kossatz 27:04

Oh, actually, we are already planning the next launch, which will be in Austria and Switzerland, and next year, and then expanding all over Europe.

Maddie Duke 27:16

Great.

Karsten Kossatz 27:17

I'm looking forward to that. Because I think also for travelers, it's a quite nice feature to, I mean, everyone knows that you have this, this wonderful vacation, and then you have a very important email to write. And you don't want to do that from your hotel room, because your partner is there, and she or he wants to relax. So you would just go somewhere else, and book a table nearby. Also, you can connect to locals there. So we're building, yeah, building a bigger thing, because this really makes impact - creates impact. And of course, our team will grow. We have, we get a lot of a lot of feedback now. So our UX team will have to grow, our support team will have to grow - all these one man sections in our company that we used to have. So I mean, in a team of eight, you really have one person that is responsible for a task.

Maddie Duke 28:23

...for a specific area, yeah.

Karsten Kossatz 28:27

...you now have to build different teams, a location team, a company team, because we really want to support companies in getting remote. This is really important. And that's what we're at now. And I'm thrilled to see where it leads us. People don't stop downloading our app, they are really interested in seeing what it's all about. And so, I hope there will be more people coming and booking and giving us feedback, honest feedback. But as far as I can see, that's exactly what's happening.

Maddie Duke 29:10

Yeah.

Karsten Kossatz 29:11

I'm not here to say I have the perfect solution. But I'm here to say, I want to make the perfect solution for the future. And I can only do that with a lot of users that give me insights in how they use independent.

Maddie Duke 29:26

I think that's a really fantastic attitude to have when you're in this position of yeah, continually being open to feedback and finding out how you can improve the solution that you're already providing.

Karsten Kossatz 29:39

When you're huge as a company, then you can maybe afford market research. But actually to work with real users is way more fun and we don't have the budget to spend this on some research institute. We really have to stick close to our use cases, to our, to the people that actively use it. And that's really what makes a company valuable also for the users because it's developed by their needs.

Maddie Duke 30:14

Yeah, definitely they're going to feel much more of a sense of being part of what's happening and feeling part of the community.

Karsten Kossatz 30:24

Oh, yeah, absolutely.

Maddie Duke 30:26

If you're going to be expanding into some different countries within Europe, do you see yourself hiring someone, locally in those countries, or working outsourcing stuff to maybe some contractors or freelancers?

Karsten Kossatz 30:36

Yeah, we are definitely not in the time of centralized work anymore. And, apart from that, I also think that we really need people in the specific places or countries where we want to expand to, because it's a question of culture, it's a question of language, it's a question of acceptance, also, by the local community. And I think people from the specific countries or regions really, already bring that and they have an understanding for the culture or for the needs, way better than we will ever have it. And this is why I think we will build a decentralized organization. Of course, some people, some things will be decided, here in Berlin, or wherever we might sit in the future. But in general, we will be like a network company.

Maddie Duke 31:38

Awesome. And, like, if I can ask, how would you go about finding the right people to work with when you're dealing with, you know, bringing someone on board?

Karsten Kossatz 31:50

Wow that's the hardest question you had, for me, that's really, it's really hard. That's a challenge. finding good people is such challenge. I'm happy now that I have found good people in my team. I mean, now we are a people, and they're all really, really concerned, or they really care a lot. And they make it their project, which is, which is incredible, really nice. But finding other people, I think I would meet them in person. And this is something that even though it might be a distance, for me to travel, it's so important to get the vibes of the other person and to see really the attitude is, is corresponding to, to my attitude, or to the company's attitude. Yeah, I guess I would choose people who, who already seem to be convinced by the idea, and who really want to really makers, people who really want to change the world as well. I think you can't work in a startup when you have the attitude of just going to work and sitting there for your eight hours and then yeah, going back, you really have to make it your project. That doesn't mean that you have to work incredibly much. But you have to be really, you have to be strongly convinced and be amazed by this idea.

Maddie Duke 33:38

Yeah. You did kind of mention like wanting to change the world and kind of having an impact with the things you do. And it's quite clear, you know, that the world of work is changing right now. You know, even more rapidly in the last couple of years. How do you see it changing in the future? Or what's your vision for how it should be?

Karsten Kossatz 34:03

I think it should be... the working world should be more user centered. It has been for decades, decades, company centered, but it should be user centered. And not only user centered, but but probably task or project centered, or feeling centered. It should leave all these options open. I mean, having the same setup for every task I do is probably not the right thing. I should have different setups or the access to set up different offices for different tasks that I have. Sometimes I want to concentrate, sometimes I want to get inspired. Also, sometimes I'm not productive. Well why do I work then? Why shouldn't I just take half a day off and work in the evening. And we should make it as flexible as possible. But that's not only a tool thing. I mean, we are delivering the tool, probably. But that's also a mindset thing.

Maddie Duke 35:15

Absolutely.

Karsten Kossatz 35:16

So people have to allow themselves to be unproductive. But they should then focus at other times and make their lives, yeah, work better together with their workplace.

Maddie Duke 35:30

Absolutely, yeah. And I think I think you've mentioned before as well that people should match the space to their tasks. Is that kind of also what you mean? Like, if I'm, if I've got a day full of meetings, then I want to be in a particular environment. And if I've got a day where I've got a lot

of writing or researching to do that, I need that external silence, I might actually physically be in a different place.

Karsten Kossatz 35:54

Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Absolutely. Yeah. And also your, your own, or is it humor? No. what's *Stimmung* in English?

Maddie Duke 36:02

Mood?

Karsten Kossatz 36:05

Yeah, mood, yeah. Your own mood is quite important for where you want to sit today. And I think taking all these aspects into consideration by choosing a workplace really makes a difference and being productive and, and also in being happy.

Maddie Duke 36:28

Wise words.

Karsten Kossatz 36:31

I think we now have the once in a lifetime opportunity to change something. Old behaviors from decades ago can now be pushed away. And there is so much space for new ideas, and new concepts. And we should try them out. And yeah, change as much as we can. Because now after the pandemic, we have this once in a lifetime opportunity to change our lives completely.

Maddie Duke 37:05

Awesome. It's a very inspiring note to end on. Yeah, thank you so much.

Karsten Kossatz 37:12

Thanks for having me.

Maddie Duke 37:13

Yeah, it's been really great to talk to you. And of course, if anyone listening is interested to download *independesk*, please do and, and yeah, really excited to see what comes and thanks for joining me and thanks so much for your time.

Karsten Kossatz 37:25

Thank you. Bye bye.

Maddie Duke 37:33

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