



The Insiders

Episode 4

"I think every single organization should start at a very, very small level. For us, the first group that I care deeply mostly about is the team, the people that are in the organization. That's my number one priority. Then ultimately, as your organization is growing and maturing, you consciously have to ask the questions, what value are we adding? What value are we adding to our team? What value is our company, our product, are adding to our customers? Organizationally, what value are we adding to the communities that we live in, the cities and the world?"

Welcome to the Insiders, a podcast on the latest advancements, challenges, and successes in innovation and technology. With industry leaders sharing their personal stories, we humanize the world of innovation and inspires listeners to push their boundaries and celebrate real humans shaping our collective future.

Marc

Hi, and welcome to the KPMG Insiders Podcast. I'm your host, Mark Low, head of KPMG Ignition here in Vancouver. And my guest today is Mo Asgari. Thanks so much for joining us, Mo.

Mo Asgari

Thanks for having me. Good to be here.

Marc

It's fantastic. So just to give the viewers and the listeners a little bit of a background on Mo. So 25 years in the technology game, senior leadership, led to a successful exit in at least one of the companies. We'll talk about that a little bit today. The things that I know about Mo is his passion for leadership and creating inclusive workspaces and really creating the space for people to blossom and shine. And part of that is the things that lead to innovation and allow people to be creative and bring their best selves to work. So looking forward to a great conversation.

Mo Asgari

Great, thank you.

Marc

What was that first foray into technology? You mentioned that you did the comp-sci degree at SFU and you did a co-op, and that kind of got you going, in terms of those first steps into entrepreneurship and leading teams and that kind of stuff, where did that start, did it take flight for you?

Mo Asgari

Well, I think really, and by the way, I had no idea that I was going to be in technology. And this is interesting because many, many, many years later, when you get a certain point in your career, you start asking yourself questions. It's like, "Why am I doing what I'm doing? I don't understand this. Where's this all going? Where am I in the process?" And that slowing down forces you to do some reflection on where you came from and the decisions that you made throughout the process. And for me, I knew I had that engineering mind, always breaking things apart, putting things together.

Marc

You were the kid that took the toaster apart.

Mo Asgari

My dad bought me a beautiful watch, and literally within a week, I took it apart.

Yeah. To me, that engineering mind in terms of how does it work was always there. We didn't have computers. I loved playing video games, but I loved to build. And when I got into university and I got exposure to technology and other technology people that were building hardware and software, the software side of technology attracted me more than the hardware side of it. And that really started. And then I think the whole coaching part of it was just ingrained in who I am. You can definitely go and learn how to coach, you can definitely learn how to become a leader. You'll understand the attributes and people will talk to you. This is how you should

think or this is what you should do.

But I truly believe a lot of the great coaches and leaders that are out there, there's something in their DNA in terms of the way they think, the way they sense, and this might sound goofy, the energy they feel amongst other people and energy where they sense trouble or issues, they know what questions to ask, they know facial expressions, body positions, all those things are slight tells that hey, something doesn't feel right or something's moving in the right direction.

And if you see those easily in your life and you have those senses around people around you, I think you either recognize it and you move, or other people recognize it based on your actions and sort of pull you in that direction. So I don't know exactly when it was. Again, I think I was in my 40s when I had the chance to really slow down and reflect on that whole journey where I realized, I'm a people's person. Yes, I love technology. All of that is fun, I love to build. But it doesn't matter what I'm building, as long as I'm amongst a bunch of similar thought minded people that are exciting, diverse, and were thinking, being creative and trying to build or do something together.

To me, that was the exciting environment that I wanted to be in. And that was really my passion. We could be digging a ditch, building a building. My career could have let me in many different directions, but understanding who I was, that being the people's person and bringing people together, unifying that focus, that really just, I think, what I sensed, and it made my life a lot easier afterwards. And there was a common thread of all the different jobs and projects was that, it was about the people.

Marc

There was an interesting thing. You referenced the tell. So I know there's a poker thread, we'll come back to that one a little bit. I know you're working on some interesting stuff there. That combination of the engineer's mindset to be able to see the playing field and think strategically about where the business needs to go to be able to translate technology to business and vice versa, and then to lead teams, that's a powerful combination right there.

So let's roll the story forward a little bit into the MonkeyMedia days, and tell us a little bit about what the genesis of that sort of project was. That was an amazing run that you had just in that organization alone.

Mo Asgari

Yeah. We joke it should have been half the amount of time and four times less the money. Anyway, but hindsight's 20/20

always. I was introduced to my, at that time business partner, Erle Dardick, through a very good friend of mine, Horatio Kemeny, who I'd worked with in a previous project, which comes back full circle to the project that I'm working on today.

Horatio had brought me in and I met Erle, entrepreneur, truly many different businesses throughout his career. And he had bought this deli, Tony's Deli in Vancouver, and realized that there was an opportunity, what he called in his backdoor business, which ultimately ended up his business of business catering. And in Tony's Deli, upstairs, there's a couple of software web development guys that used to come down and have lunch.

Marc

Naturally, as you would find in any deli.

Mo Asgari

It's crazy, right? Serendipity. So they used to come and have lunch, and then Erle was talking to him about the framework that he developed to optimize how he was able to feed a bunch of people out of his back door, yet still managing his retail business. And through that exercise came the software that was really designed for manufacturing. But yes, it was web-based, internet-based software, and the software did magic for Tony's Deli. Allowed Erle to drive high volumes, communicate, create for his deli, for his restaurant, operational reports to create efficiency. And when he sold Tony's Deli, because there was so much excitement around the software that he created, he decided to start the software company, MonkeyMedia Software.

And I think what we've realized in the process, and this is important for a lot of technology companies to appreciate and understand, a lot of times it's not about the technology. The technology is just a tool. Understanding the business framework and education side of it, maybe some consulting, we called it education, not consulting. Really aligning that perspective became really what our focus was. So our mission statement had nothing to do about software. But how do we help restaurants make more money, grow their sales at becoming experts at where they feed their guests, where they live, work and play?

So it was about off-premise for restaurants, and once you align with that perspective and that business framework, then there was only one technology, one software platform in the world that solved it for you. And that was our magic. So we really focused on content, educational content, and developing a community. And that really became Erle's focus in the business because he was outward facing as an entrepreneur, he was the face of the company. And myself,

his partner on the inside, was operationalizing that whole experience so that when we delivered on that promise, it was executed flawlessly, end to end.

Marc

It's a great story. And for those of you that are listening, really encourage you to go do a little bit of web creeping about Mo here, because as you watch that journey, you go back in time. I saw photos of you from 10 years ago, you guys were kids, right?

Mo Asgari

Yeah, we were.

Marc

Kind of come coming up together, and it's a really personal human story about this journey of somebody bringing a technology lens and a business lens, coming together and then trying to navigate these market dynamics. You mentioned this idea of the business context. I'm sure the business evolved over time. How do you guys think about how you broke down the market, how you were then tasked with creating the technology to support the opportunities that Erle was chasing? Are there some dynamics there or you can touch on?

Mo Asgari

Yeah. We worked very, very closely together. And in our partnership, Erle was the idea guy. And not that I didn't have my own ideas, but really, he was more market facing. Together, we were in front of customers, but he was a restaurateur. So the software really came and these ideas were his.

Marc

Scratching his own itch, right?

Mo Asgari

Exactly, exactly.

Marc

In a previous episode, we talked about this idea of the power of scratching your own itch, of understanding intimately what a market need is and then building a solution for that. And when you do that work in a lab, quote, unquote, it's like we had often talked about the business model Canvas. You've got your distribution channels and your partners and your operational structures and all that kind of stuff, but it's very theoretical. You guys were in the market testing and validating stuff. So tell me a little bit about the experience of,

by the way, that's rolling out a new feature, trying a new market segment, how you test it and validated and iterated, right? Because the process of building technology is hopefully not waterfall, where you're just building with a 12-month deadline and unveiling the statue. So you're learning iterating all the time.

Mo Asgari

Absolutely. And this really all ties, come back into innovate and how do you innovate? But getting in front of our customers and working with them. I recently left that organization and I had a little article that I wrote and I specifically called out our partners and our customers because without them, our solution would not have been the way it was. So we were solving for their world, and that meant that we couldn't do that from an arm's length away in some small city in the world in Vancouver where 99% of our customers were in the US, we actually had to be on the road visiting the customers, visiting our partners. And I know vividly the pivot points that our company took, where our software went from what it was to something exponentially better, was the moments where we had a customer where, you know what? We were solving 85, 90% of their needs, but that five, 10, 15%, we actually had to standardize, we had to productize. We didn't build anything custom, but we had to productize that experience.

And that meant being on site with customers, visiting their franchisees, seeing how the solution was working, and then having the structure and the team and the processes back home who were taking all that feedback and turning it around as quickly as possible into usable software where they could see their world in our world. And that was really the magic.

If you're in the B2B software business, understanding your customers and being in front of them and understanding how their customers are interacting with their businesses, it becomes very, very important. Very complex, but it can be done. The big thing about all of that whole experience is that if it aligns with who you are and your passion and purpose in life and the work that you kind of love to do, it doesn't feel like work. So the traveling, yes, there was a lot of travel, but we were very passionate in working very closely with our customers. So it was like part of what we were doing.

Marc

Incredible journey. From a deli with a couple of software developers in the back to growing this significant organization. Ultimately that leads to an exit to a company named ezCater.

Mo Asgari

Correct.

Marc

Talk to me a little bit about the way that the dynamic shifted for you. So you guys had built something, now you're inside a much larger organization with different cultural dynamics. The innovation culture, I'm guessing is going to be different. You've got different stakeholders in play, all that kind of stuff. How did that shift for you? How did that change the nature of what you were doing?

Mo Asgari

It did change. I'll be the first one to tell you that it definitely changed it because you're going from a team of 50 people to now being part of this organization of 700, 750 people. But we were so lucky because ezCater, they're based out of Boston. And I'm not sure if people know, but from a cultural standpoint, there was a lot of similarities between how the team at ezCater were thinking about their world and how they value their team members, their organization and their customers, the value and the impact that they're having in their communities and the value and impact that they want to have in their communities to the way we thought about it and what we did. The big difference was that our solution, to some extent, was complimentary to what their solution was. It wasn't ultimately their core business, it was an add-on to their business. An important add-on.

So the perspective change was that we're no longer primary, we're kind of part of this larger thing, and we just have to focus and do our thing to make sure we're adding value to their business. For some of us in the team, it could have been a three-month thing. For me, luckily, I ended up being at ezCater for close to four years, learning about their business, working with their team, doing my part in adding value.

But yeah, when you get acquired, yes, there's a celebration in that process, and then you always have hindsight 20/20, was the timing right, was it not right? And we can get into all of that, but the timing was right. It was great for a majority of our team and for a lot of our team members that are still there, it's really the next generation of their careers in growing and maturing. So it was a wonderful experience, but it was very different because there were larger. We were much smaller Canadian versus US. Thankfully, culturally were aligned. We had the same values and perspectives, which helped, but our solution was a much, much smaller piece of their overall business.

Marc

So March of 2020-

The world changes, shuts down, core to the business that you're in. So massively disruptive for everybody, but especially for your business. Talk to me a little bit about what it was like to lead teams in this period of incredible change. It always feels like in the rear of view now, in ancient history, but what was that?

Mo Asgari

It was very interesting because I know when we were going through the process with ezCater, Erle had the question... Because ezCater is a marketplace. So imagine like a DoorDash marketplace, but they're really focused on business catering or food for work now that as they pivoted because COVID. So the question was, "Hey, what happens if you lose 20% or 25% of your market?" And they're like, "Oh yeah, we've got other volume," blah, blah, blah. It was a good conversation, but no one knew that because of COVID, in a matter of two weeks literally, that 80% of that business, food for work volume would disappear. And that's exactly what happened.

And huge credit to the ezCater leadership where... And I don't want to say it was a fire drill. I think it was important for all of us to recognize, thank goodness there was money in the bank to make sure we can survive. But it's those times of stress when the environment, things like that happen where truly creative ideas and innovation come into play. And as leaders, really in those tough situations, our job is not to panic because everyone around you is looking to you for guidance most of the time. And you to might not have any of the answers, but you have to be stable and be calm and then start asking questions and inquiring and together, creating momentum in terms of what are the different ideas? What should we try, what should we not try?

And as we're going through that, we realized that, okay, as work has changed, the concept of work has changed with people working from home, now majority, they're not going into the offices. But as they're coming back, there's days that they're going to offices, how do we get food to them? Not in a group setting, but on an individual perspective. Then ezCater had some software that they were playing with that they ultimately evolved and really created this new experience, which allowed them to have a rapid comeback, regain a lot of their transaction volumes.

But it was a tough time because when you're there and as a team, everyone's kind of shellshocked, no one knows if they're going to have their job, their friends are losing their

jobs. And as leaders, you have to create a sense of calmness, be completely transparent, and understanding the facts, communicating the facts, being true about your intentions and building trust. I think the trust piece is super important because if half the people in your organization just lost a job, how do you know that it's not going to be you? You don't know that. But there's trust in that relationship that, listen, if we work together, yes, we're a smaller team and we put our heads together and figure this out, we're going to come back out of it much stronger, weather the storm and much better as an organization. And that's exactly what happened.

And I think focusing on the ezCater piece and how they're able to pivot and innovate a few different times during that time was that the organizational dynamics, they had created an environment with their culture. And we had done that the same, again, there was a lot of similarities between the two organizations and our cultures. They created a culture where people were first, the environment was idea driven, ideas win. Ideas are important, not necessarily where they came from, challenging those ideas. And it was a kind of safe environment for people to be who they are, creating an environment where you could do your best work wherever and however you think is going to be most effective, and it's going to allow you to add the most value.

That foundation allowed us, when that stress happened, for us to be able to rally and because we had that framework and that foundation to be able to innovate. But if you don't have the right people, you don't have the right environment, you don't have the right experiences, the structures, you can have the best idea and you can go in a room for days and say, "Okay, let's come up with an idea." It's just not going to work.

Marc

Well, I'll tell you, we're getting close to time, so there's a couple of things that I definitely want to touch on before I let you go. But just on that topic of the culture that you created, again, for the people that are listening, I invite you to check Mo out on LinkedIn. You can read his letter, once you had officially resigned from ezCater, first of all, a lesson in terms of how to do it, mic drop moment in terms of leadership and giving thanks. It's a lovely gesture and very well written. But the expression that your personal brand is what people say when you're not in the room, there's like 160 something comments from people giving you your props. And so that to me spoke to the type of culture that you had created when you were there, which I thought was really, really cool.

Mo Asgari

It was. And it's not what I expected, to be honest with you. You don't do the things you do for that kind of response. And it was just my way of saying thank you to everybody for this journey. It was an experience of a lifetime and it was just wonderful, and I just wanted to say thanks. And it was very surprising to me, the people that came out, it was not just previous MonkeyMedia employees, current MonkeyMedia employees, but it was people that for four years that I'd worked with at ezCater. It was customers, it was partners. And I said, you don't do the things you do for that. But it kind of helped me slow down and say, okay, what is your legacy as a person when you start a job and when you leave a job, what value, what impact have you had?

My legacy, the legacy that I'm trying to have is internal because my impact was on our team, number one, and our organization. But then our organization, based on that experience, but then was turning around and creating a wonderful experience for our customers and then our customers, because of that, were then turning around and creating a wonderful experience for our company.

Marc

Two things that I want to touch on before we wrap. So one is I noticed that you're busy with some new ventures now. So one of them is in the poker space.

Mo Asgari

Yes.

Marc

What is it about poker that caught your attention? You mentioned in business, the idea of tells. So there's something in there that that's got Mo written all over it.

Mo Asgari

Yeah. Actually, when you change a project, I'm going to call it, I'm not going to call it a job, when you change a project or initiative, you kind of look at different industries or other things that are coming up. It's natural for me to go back to the restaurant industry because I've been in there for 15 years. And my journey, before MonkeyMedia Software if you remember, was I worked on a project that was in the gaming industry. And that couple of those same people have come back full circle, almost 20 years later and saying, there's an interesting opportunity because as regulation is changing on a state by state or province by province perspective, the opportunity, not to be an operator of a platform, i.e. we're not going to build another poker site because the last thing that this world needs is another poker platform. But how do we

empower people that are in that business with the right technology that's configurable?

So essentially, poker as a service platform, the models and the worlds are almost identical to what we were doing 15 years ago at MonkeyMedia Software, with the restaurant industry. But the conversation was, there's an opportunity. The opportunity is that because of regulation, all the operators or casinos, land-based casinos or other online casinos that are out there because of this regulation, now they're going to want to create experiences online for their customers from a retention perspective. So they're not running off to other sites. And can we create and innovate around that idea and create a platform which we can then empower these operators with.

So that was a genesis and idea that kind of formulated. And to make it even more interesting, my son is graduating from university, from U of A. He's actually going to be driving home in a couple weeks, and I'm not sure if he designed it on purpose, but he's almost ran the same path in his work, much better than I was and am. So he's an amazing software engineer, technology guy, and I'm saying that about my son because I'm his dad, but I'm actually putting a different hat on.

And we all thought, wouldn't it be interesting and fun if we actually create a new venture focused on this idea? But then my son was part of it, and a couple of the people that I've worked with in the past that we had a great experience were also part of it. So it all comes back full circle to what I was saying earlier in terms of my passion is about the people first, and then it doesn't matter what we do. That to me was the key piece of it, why this idea around this poker lab idea was interesting to me.

Marc

I love it. Well, we're going to have to have you and your son back to break that one down for us because sounds like there's some really cool market dynamics there and a whole technology-

Mo Asgari

Family dynamics.

Marc

For sure. Last question for you. So you're involved with an organization called Conscious Capitalism.

Mo Asgari

Yes

Marc

And as I was researching that organization, it certainly aligned

to the ways that we like to think about the work that we do, thinking beyond just bottom line as the main motivator that we want to be thinking about, the impact that we're having, the legacy that we're creating. I'm a new dad, so for me, I think about the type of world that I want to leave him. Tell us a little bit about that organization and your work there.

Mo Asgari

And the scale of that could be something very little to something huge where your organization is adding huge, tremendous amount of value to the world. But I think every single organization should start at a very, very small level. For us, the first group that I care deeply mostly about is the team, the people that are in the organization. That's my number one priority. Then ultimately, as your organization is growing and maturing, you consciously have to ask the questions, what value are we adding? What value are we adding to our team? What value is our company, our product, are adding to our customers? Organizationally, what value are we adding to the communities that we live in, the cities and the world?

And again, it doesn't have to be huge. You don't have to say, okay, we got to have a world changing thing. It's like the first thing could be is like, okay, every year or four times a year, we're going to get the team together and using our energy, I always say, your energy is far more valuable than your time, using our energy, what can we do in our communities? And if it's a fundraising effort, it's just about giving back and doing what's right for the world that we live. And again, the scale of that could be small or large.

That to me, what's attracted me to Conscious Capitalism, because I think if you dedicate your energy and focus on doing the right things, it doesn't mean that you're not making money, you're still in business, you're trying to make profits, you're trying to feed the organization and the team that's part of it. But beyond that is that let's make sure that the work that we're doing is going to have some positive side benefits. And if that's allocating some money to a charity or using that money to go as a team to go buy gifts and then create donations during the holiday season, it shows itself in different colors and different shapes.

But it really comes back to, as an organization, we need to add value to this world, to our communities. And that's what excited me in becoming involved in Conscious Capitalism. And yeah, again, there's multiple frameworks around it. Conscious Capitalism is one structure. They've done some great movement. They're inviting other leaders, people are sharing their ideas, how they're adding value to their communities and to the world. So it's a learning experience for all of us. But ultimately, it starts about, let's focus on doing

the right things. Let's not be silly and have a negative impact on our people, on our organization, but more importantly, in the communities that we live in.

Marc

That's a great place to leave it. Mo, what a story from Iran to Greece to Vancouver. We're very proud to call you one of ours. Congratulations on all the success.

Mo Asgari

Thank you.

Marc

And thank you for joining us.

Mo Asgari

Thank you.

Marc

This has been Marc Low for the KPMG Insiders Podcast. Thanks for listening.