**Globally Speaking**

**Podcast 80 Transcript**

**How ASICS is Running to Global Markets**

**Featuring Alessandra Binazzi of ASICS Digital**

Michael I’m Michael Stevens.

Renato I am Renato Beninatto and today on Globally Speaking, our guest is going to talk about the challenge of mixing multiple cultures. And these cultures have to do with business cultures and cultural aspects of different countries and different languages. Very interesting conversation, wasn’t it, Michael?

Michael It was, and all of this is happening in the midst of the digital transformation for retail. So, a number of our listeners are going to be able to relate to the ever-changing business landscape, and then there are also some really high aspirations and hopes set out for what’s achievable with voice translation.

Renato So, let our guest introduce herself.

Alessandra I am Alessandra Binazzi. I am a consultant in the localization management field. I mostly work with small- to medium-sized companies entering the field of localization; companies that have either no existing localization program or an initial program that they want to mature and develop to the next level.

 I actually also have taken on the role of Director of Localization at ASICS Digital. I have been in this role since June of 2017 and I support the organization’s efforts in driving the digital transformation of ASICS Corporation. ASICS is a fitness athletic company; it’s mostly known for its running shoes and apparel. That is the main market that ASICS is known for. Of course, we also service the wider fitness industry with products that support users in reaching their fitness goals. We do have other core performance sports that we focus on, for example tennis, volleyball, wrestling.

 ASICS is based in Japan, so it is a Japanese company, which adds to a lot of our challenges, especially on the localization side. And the reason why I’ve taken on this role more full-time versus as a consultant is the mere scope of the project that ASICS is faced with in terms of localization.

 It is a program that has to fit within a much larger and complicated environment in the digital transformation journey that ASICS is going through.

Michael What did you do as a consultant in localization?

Alessandra I did have a focus in my consulting practice mainly to work with companies that are at the beginning of their localization journey, so we’re talking about companies in the first or second level of maturity, if we’re looking at the localization maturity model, that really had some processes in place already, but they don’t often have any streamlined processes, they don’t have any kind of organizational buy-in to the localization process. There’s no centralized tooling, often there’s no centralized forcing, and so, really stepping in to support companies on this journey, understanding how to optimize localization efforts, because as we all know, if you manage your localization program kind of in an ad-hoc basis, there’s a lot of inefficiencies that you encounter.

 As a company scales up in supporting other markets, inefficiencies can become very difficult to manage. So, many companies are faced with this challenge and they’re not really sure how to get to the next step.

 That’s where a consultant like me would come in and will bring a lot of expertise. We’ll do also a lot of education internally; that’s a big piece of what I think a consultant can bring to the table. Because of their exposure and their experience, they have all the resources to be able to educate an organization, not only on best practices for localization, internationalization, but also in terms of general awareness of other cultures and other languages and how we must best set up our content, but also our systems, to be able to service all these global markets in an efficient way.

Michael It sounds like definitely taking companies from this ad-hoc methodology to one that is much more tactical, and then, hopefully as they continue to grow, into a very strategic, proactive place.

Alessandra Yeah, and that’s really where it becomes a little more challenging, and that’s why I think it was important, for example at ASICS Digital, to really be part of the organization in order to be able to go from just the tactical implementation to a more strategic view of localization, and kind of move localization up in the decision levels.

 It’s a challenge if you’re not within the company structure. And, really, depending also on the complexity of the operations of a company, it’s challenging to achieve as a consultant, versus being directly involved with the executive levels and all the other stakeholders within an organization, to be able to really understand the strategic needs of the company.

Renato There is an element that is traditional manufacturing and retail and it’s Japanese, and there is a part of it where you’re working right now that is American and software and digital and mobile. How is this digital transformation—to be using a term that is *en vogue*—how is this digital transformation an element and how does that affect localization? So, you have an element of culture, you have an element of language, but you also have an element of two different business cultures and two different cultural environments.

Alessandra Yeah.

Renato How do you combine all these variables?

Alessandra Absolutely. And that really has been probably the biggest challenge facing ASICS Digital. Like you said, ASICS is a Japanese company. It was founded in 1949, so about 70 years ago, in Kobe, Japan. The philosophy behind it is that at ASICS, we believe that movement makes us happier, healthier and more in tune with the world around us.

 So, the collective mission of the organization is really to provide products and services that allow people across the world to live better lives through sports. And this is really the mission that applies to all the different parts of ASICS. So, this is a mission that can be applied to the retail world as well as the digital world. And this is what we try to keep at the front of our minds in everything that we do, despite the fact that our operations are so different and culturally we are so different, we are all really working towards this common mission.

 This is also kind of the reason behind the name ASICS. ASICS is an acronym and it stands for *Anima Sana In Corpore Sano* which is, of course, a Latin theme which translates in English loosely to ‘*A sound mind in a sound body’*.

 I think one of the things that you pointed out, Renato, is really the difference between the retail world and the digital world. The challenge that a lot of retail companies are facing these days is how to make that transition from a traditional retail model, where you’re working a lot through partners and a channel of retail outlets, whether they’re owned by the company or whether they’re owned by partners that the company works with, to a more direct-to-consumer experience where you have a direct connection with the consumer and where you can have a direct conversation, actually, with the consumers. That’s a big shift, especially for companies who have traditionally really focused on the manufacturing side and the distribution side.

 As if that wasn’t enough, we do have the cultural challenge of working for a company that is headquartered in Japan, and so, you know, the main directive and the main philosophy comes from there. We all know that there are huge differences culturally between Japan and especially the US: almost mirror-opposite cultures in terms of how we view success, how we view quality.

 That’s been and continues to be a challenge for us. We need to consistently adjust our communication and our interaction to make sure that there is a clear understanding between the two sides.

Michael Yeah, it seems to me that these two challenges of suddenly having direct access to customers and having a business culture that maybe you’re less familiar with can be a superpower as well, because when you look at some of the top brands in the world, a number of them are Japanese. They’ve been able to sort of harness these two things and take a message that could categorically be seen as opposite, be shown as something that’s very appealing for clients. How have these tensions practically worked out in the language part of what you deal with?

Alessandra One advantage, of course, for us is that we do have a lot of Japanese resources, and so we can rely on them quite heavily in terms of honing our message and also understanding the Japanese market better. This has happened a lot, for example, with our app Runkeeper, which is a running tracking app.

 The Japanese market has been particularly challenging for us with Runkeeper, but really having the Japanese stakeholders step in and actually take charge of some of the pieces of the app is really helping. It is a process that we have recently started, so we haven’t seen too many of the results and how Japanese users are changing their view and their appreciation for the app, but we are already seeing small signs of improvements, and that really is because of the involvement of the Japanese office, specifically in helping us to formulate a message that would resonate with the Japanese user.

 So, for example, Japanese users seem to be less interested in the social aspects of the app where, for example, in the US, that’s a very important part of the app, how you can share your experiences, how you can highlight your achievements.

 With the Japanese users, we see a lot more of a focus on the actual performance piece of what the app offers. So, for example, we see that our users use the app a lot more to actually train for races and usually for longer races, so more for like 10Ks or half marathons or marathons. So, they are much more interested in the performance aspect of the app rather than the social aspect.

 And so, based on this information, we can kind of change the approach for the Japanese user, because Runkeeper does have all those different features that we can offer to the runner. It really is just a question of leveraging what the actual user is looking for in the app more than, you know, the American user.

Renato I am a user of the app and I love it. I know that traditionally, maps are things that the Japanese user consumes in a very different way than the Western consumer. Is this something that you take into consideration? Is that one of the usability elements that are different, how busy the map is? Runkeeper maps are quite plain, they track where you go and so on, but I wonder how is that for the Japanese?

Alessandra We actually haven’t looked at maps as a differentiator for the user experience, but that’s certainly something we should probably start to consider a little bit more. One fun fact about our maps is that we do have a very loyal user base and one thing that has come out from our users is actually some map art. It’s basically the different routes that people take while they’re running and then turn that into some kind of visual art, which has been a really fun user story that we were able to find out through our user base.

Michael And Alex, are you able to share the scope of languages where the app’s available?

Alessandra The app supports 12 languages including English, Spanish, French, Italian, German, Brazilian Portuguese—Brazilian users are fans of Runkeeper, it is one of our best markets by far—Japanese, of course, as we talked about; Swedish and Dutch, which are also pretty big markets for us, and we also have Russian, Korean and Chinese Simplified.

 We do have some audio included in the app experience as well. Of course, as you’re running, you may not want to be looking at your phone every few minutes, so we do have audio cues that tell the runner their progress during the run. And we’re adding audio to the app quite a bit. We have some audio-guided workouts, for example.

 And this is something that we’ve only started in English, as one often does, and you fine tune in English and then you start adding other languages. So, this is actually something that we’re looking to do this year. We are going to use audio workouts that we have for English and see how to adapt those to other languages.

 But, in our case, when we’re talking about audio, in many cases it’s not really just a localization of the audio file. We really try to make it a more engaging experience for the runner, and we do that by using running coaches.

Renato I remember at some point I had Samuel L. Jackson telling me, “Good job, man!” or something like that. You use celebrities occasionally, right?

Alessandra We don’t use celebrities, but we use special voices. So, for example, in the app we have the Boston fan, so you have somebody who’s talking you through your workout with a really strong Boston accent.

Renato Yeah, it was really very annoying, yes.

Alessandra [Laughs] Depending on your preference, that may not be the best choice. We also have a voice that is more of a drill sergeant, for example. Maybe some people need the extra motivation, so, you know, that’s a good choice for them. What I’m talking about in terms of the guided workout is that we’re really trying to find running coaches or also professional runners.

 So, of course, ASICS has a big pool of professional runners that we partner with. We want to leverage them also in our audio workouts. It increases the engagement with the user, and we do have access to these running coaches all over the world, so we do have the availability of voices, also, in different languages. And these are usually running experts and coaches that are known in their own markets. They usually also have their own social following, so they add to the attraction for local users as well.

 So, the plan is not to just look at the audio as a pure audio localization exercise, but really to engage running experts or running coaches that will also attract their audience to the apps and to the ASICS brand in general.

Michael And does ASICS Digital have the same support as the Runkeeper app, or is there some variance there?

Alessandra It is not exactly the same as the Runkeeper language support. We do have another app called ASICS Studio. This lives completely within ASICS Digital. We own the fitness app experience completely. The rest of the ASICS environment is really more about collaboration with the wider ASICS organization. We are responsible to centralize the digital transformation for the whole organization.

 So, we operate on a few different levels. First of all, the ecommerce platforms. ASICS Digital is centralizing ecommerce platforms for all of ASICS. We’re doing that in a phased approach. We have several different regions that we service around the world. We are prioritizing the different regions, and one-by-one we’re basically migrating their ecommerce onto a centralized platform.

 Until now, ASICS has operated in a very decentralized manner, especially when it comes to digital. So, each region was really owning that whole experience and so, of course, we are dealing with a very fragmented landscape in terms of systems, in terms of processes and even in terms of capabilities in the local offices.

 The language coverage, when it comes to the wider ASICS environment, is really following this migration pattern. For example, the first region that we have tackled in terms of the migration efforts is Europe. And of course, Europe has one of the broadest variety of languages. In the European market, we cover seven languages.

 The next region is Japan, so, of course, a single-language market, and then there’ll be Korea, the Americas, etc., etc. So, the support of the languages is going to follow basically the migration path that ASICS Digital has for the ecommerce platforms.

Michael Okay. Well, it sounds like an incredibly exciting place to be with all of the changes that are happening in retail related to the whole digital transformation piece, having a well-respected global brand that you’re working with and then having some of the digital products that you have available to you. It sounds like there’s a lot in store, and we barely scratched the surface of what voice could be in the future for you all.

Alessandra Voice is something that we’re starting to dabble into. Our app, for example, ASICS Studio, is available on Alexa, so you can say, on Alexa you can say, “Open ASICS Studio,” and you’ll have access to a free workout a day. It’s an audio-led workout so it is completely done through the Alexa interface.

 We are working with Runkeeper on finding ways to introduce audio a lot more in the app. You want to make sure that you allow the user to have hands-off guidance in their workouts and in their fitness efforts. And so, audio is definitely something that we’re going to be focusing on in the near future.

 We are still very much building a foundation at the moment. The past two years have been focused really on setting up the infrastructure to be able to have a direct interface with our consumers globally, and also kind of setting up the foundation so we can start doing more and interesting things, you know.

 One of the big missions of ASICS Digital, of course, is data. Until now, ASICS didn’t really have an important plan for data gathering and analysis. So, again, the different regions were gathering and tracking data in different ways. And we never really had one view of the ASICS consumer. And we’re starting to have that now, as our data analysis team builds the systems and dashboards that allow all our different regions to have access to important information on the entire user journey of the ASICS consumers, from the apps to the ecommerce sites to the membership program. We do have a membership program called One ASICS which is basically where we’re trying to have this single view of our consumer, through even the retail stores. So, a big effort is trying to digitize our retail outlets. We’re trying to blur the lines between retail and online experience more and more with initiatives like, for example, Endless Aisle which is when a user is in-store, but of course a store cannot store everything that you possibly want…

Michael So they can and find exactly what it is they’re looking for.

Alessandra Yeah. And of course, a store doesn’t always have everything available, but we don’t want to really miss the opportunity to service that customer well when they’re interfacing with the store directly, so, of course, giving them options to continue their interaction with the brand online. And, also, you know, get the product that they want even if it’s not in the store.

 ASICS has a lot of really loyal, historical customers, and some customers are big fans of a very old model, for example. ASICS goes to great lengths to really make sure that those customers will continue to find what they want and what delights them the most.

Michael Well, you have two avid fans of the Runkeeper app in this podcast, in the co-hosts, and it would be a very interesting experiment to have our listeners join and connect with us. It also could hold us accountable for our workouts. So, they can tease us if they’re not hearing from us for quite a period of time.

Renato I recommend a feature that you can take a selfie and it makes you look buff and good!

[Laughter]

Renato That’s what I need!

Alessandra Or maybe it makes you look like you’re flying through your runs, right?

Michael Well, Alex, this has been great, and we thank you so much for the insight that you’ve given us into this most recent journey of yours.

Alessandra Well, thank you very much.

**End of conversation**