

TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW WITH CEO BRENO DONATTI¹

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00:00 **Flavia Cáceres:** Okay. So, Mr. Donatti, are you okay with the interview being recorded and the later transcription of the recording for our use?

00:11 **Breno Donatti:** Yes.

00:12 **Flavia Cáceres:** Okay. Thank you. So, first of all, I want to start explaining who we are and what AnnexBox is. We're an IT startup company whose main goal is to provide global teams with support and solutions in order to enhance synergy and productivity among them. Now, I'll hand it off to Pablo.

00:37 **Pablo López:** Hello, thank you for being here, and thank you for taking the time to join us. We really appreciate that. I want to start by congratulating you because we were looking into your business, and let me tell you that going over your website makes one hungry. Everything looks delicious.

01:07 **Breno Donatti:** Thank you.

01:11 **Pablo López:** Well, we will be discussing today some topics related to virtual teams and remote working since everyone is now working remotely because of the pandemic. We are doing research about the most difficult parts of working

remotely, so every type of insight is valuable for us. That's why we want to know about your experience. How has it been to transition from a face-to-face work setting to a completely remote setting? And what are the challenges? We'll be discussing that, and the information you will provide us is of great value. Be sure of that. Let's start with the first question now. Let me start by saying this, we are a remote team. We've known each other only through the screen. We haven't met each other in person, so we know working remotely is completely different from a face-to-face setting, and it has its own challenges. In your experience, we would like to know, what are those solutions you could apply or have applied when working remotely?

02:43 **Breno Donatti:** Yes, it's actually pretty shocking to me that you guys are a totally virtual workforce. That's pretty incredible for me. I'm very anti-virtual. I'm not going to lie. I couldn't wait for May of last year to get back to the store. I encourage all my customers and vendors to do everything face to face. I think there's a very intrinsic energy that goes with being in the same room with someone. I feel like virtual meetings, at least in my experience, haven't really cut it. You can't recreate the real-world interactions. I'm here and we could be in the same virtual room right now having this meeting, and there's just something missing that we're not sitting in the same chair. You can tell me that maybe it's not as valuable as I make it out to be because it takes time to go from one place to the other and to prepare yourself, to get ready, and to make it to a meeting together, but it's really invaluable to be in the same room with other people. The energy that you feed off of each other and the solutions that you make when you're looking at somebody else's eyes face to face, they're just so much better. So, yes, you waste a lot of time getting to and coming from and getting ready, but I feel like you can achieve your goals so much quicker in a real-life scenario. Obviously, there are some things that we have done virtually. For example, we are opening stores in different states now, so there's less face-to-face interaction. And

obviously, we have to do Zoom sometimes, we have to do phone calls, but at least for my company, we can't go too long on Zoom. We can't go more than two weeks on without a real meeting. I also don't like that Zoom just reminds us of a pandemic and disease. I feel like Zoom has attached itself to a bad name and a bad reputation because of that. So, every time someone goes like, "oh we're going to have a Zoom thing," I'm like, "when you have a real one, call me, and I'll be there." For example, we have commerce meetings in Westport, Connecticut, and I've been telling the president I will not attend any of the Zoom meetings, but I will be there as soon as there's an in-person meeting. So this month is the first in-person meeting and I signed up. I'll be there. There's just nothing like networking in person; it's so much more invaluable than virtually.

06:02 **Pablo López:** Yes, I agree. I understand what you're saying. Your type of business requires that, and I cannot imagine working face-to-face with your clients, having this connection, as you mentioned, "this synergy," and then completely losing it, like going through the Zoom meetings and the virtual world. So, how has it been for you? How was your experience, I mean, like at the very beginning, we're talking about April, May, that I suppose your business was completely closed. How did it go?

06:35 **Breno Donatti:** Well, in 2020 when the pandemic hit, we closed in March and April and half of May of last year, and then we reopened on May 15th, 2020. Since then, even last summer, we put many, many events, live music, and we tried to make everything as normal as possible. We never really stopped, except for that time from March 15th to May 15th. So, for me, the pandemic was over last year in May. It hasn't been back since for me. I mean, thankfully, I know a lot of people and I live in places that also agree with that. My kids have been going to school maskless and we've been going to church with a thousand people maskless as well. None of that pandemic word that's out there. Actually, one of the biggest compliments that I get from customers is: "Oh, every time I come to

one of your stores, it reminds me of normal times." I always thank them because that's what we try to do. As soon as the mandates were down, I told all my staff to take their masks off because people have to see a smile. So, that's basically how it's been for us, I've been pushing back against it. They told us to have two weeks to slow the spread and I feel like we did that back then. It's over, now back to work.

09:54 **Pablo López:** Okay. Great. Thank you. Let's move on to the second question, please.

10:00 **Breno Donatti:** Sure.

10:03 **Pablo López:** We're now going to talk about productivity. Well, productivity is always important in any company and now that everyone is working remotely, there has been this discussion of, are we working less, or are we working more? Some people believe that because we're in our house, we're working less or just being lazy, but others think that working remotely is like working more. So, how has it been for you?

10:28 **Breno Donatti:** I think working remotely puts more pressure on people, and you end up doing more work than you would at the office. I opened my first company 12 years ago, so for 12 years, I've always been on my phone. It's always a pressure to be working all the time. I have two little kids, and most of the time I'm reading emails and things like that, but you have to make time for family and wellbeing. So, yeah, I think people probably end up working more when they're remote, without even realizing that. But a lot of people that work in the office five or six days a week also work from home one or two days. I feel that the change of scenery probably helps. You're not going to the office day after day, and maybe if you break it up and you go like: "Oh, on Wednesday we work from home," that might be nice because you can wake up a little later and don't have to dress up. I

mean, that's great, right?

11:47 **Pablo López:** Now that you mentioned that, well, in your experience, I'm kind of guessing what you will answer to this question, but now that you mentioned that it's good to combine working remotely with in-person working, would you say that, after everything is back to normal, you would still maintain some things? Zoom meetings, maybe not, because we will remember the pandemic. But there are some things that we have learned working remotely that could also help us. So, would you still maintain that, or would you eliminate it?

12:21 **Breno Donatti:** Yes. There's training that we've put online that kind of helped cut the training time. Before, for example, we used to do ten in-person coffee classes and people would have to travel to them. We can probably do half of those online and still be very efficient. So, training will be something, a part of it would still be done online. When an employee starts working with us, they can already go into the online courses before they even start.

13:07 **Pablo López:** That's also a good thing about working remotely. It helps us a lot with saving time. I think that eventually, when everything goes back to normal, we will maintain some of these habits that we have now. Okay, I think Victoria has a question.

13:33 **Victoria Gálvez:** Yes, I do. So, first of all, thank you for making the effort to join us on Zoom, because based on what I've heard, it kind of depresses us due to the current situation. So, thanks again. You're going to be getting a lot of thank you from us, and also, I know you sent some answers to these questions in advance. So, I read them and I wanted to ask if these training courses that you have mentioned are that 20% of virtual interactions in your company or whether there are any other types of tasks or things that you have kept in a remote setting, maybe not because you wanted to, but maybe because you had to, I'm

not sure.

14:25 **Breno Donatti:** I think that's the only thing. There are other aspects of working remotely that we have done, but I feel like they're even pre-pandemic. The group texts, for example, on the phone, we used to do that before the pandemic hit. It's just a little quicker to communicate. Also, scheduling software, we had that before the pandemic. So, it was not caused by the pandemic, it was just a desire to make things more effective, by using the cell phone a lot, using email a lot, I think those are things that were already there. But from the pandemic itself, I feel like the training definitely. Oh, and also, our online systems for ordering online for customers have increased a lot. A lot of people would just like the convenience of ordering on the app, which is very good for us as well.

15:27 **Victoria Gálvez:** And then one more thing. So, productivity is also, I think, closely related to trust. So, I know you mentioned that you had to close the physical business for two months and a half. I wanted to know if you still managed to have your team doing some tasks while they were at home, or if they stopped working at all. Because I wanted to know how you handled trust, trusting that your team was still being productive, even if they were working just a few hours each day to maintain that flow until it was time to go back to work.

16:13 **Breno Donatti:** No, during those two months, people did not work, and it was just voluntary if they wanted to do some more training. We did a weekly Zoom meeting just to catch up and see how everybody was doing, but that was also voluntary. Not everyone went online for that.

16:39 **Victoria Gálvez:** And when you went back, did you notice any changes in terms of their engagement in the business or was it all normal?

16:48 **Breno Donatti:** Yes. They were a lot more eager to work. Like a lot more. Yes.

16:55 **Victoria Gálvez:** All right. Interesting. Thank you.

17:15 **Breno Donatti:** A lot more engaged.

17:18 **Pablo López:** They wanted to work more.

17:20 **Victoria Gálvez:** They recharged batteries.

17:33 **Pablo López:** That's awesome. Let's move on to the third question. So, let's talk about culture. Culture in a company is essential, but some believe that maintaining or enhancing the culture of a company in a remote setting is difficult. What is your experience? You mentioned this training you're doing. Has it been difficult for you to keep the company's culture training in a remote setting? For example, maybe a new employee that has recently come to the company needs to understand and get familiar with the company culture. By doing this training in a remote setting, do you think it's more difficult to get what the culture of the company is?

18:10 **Breno Donatti:** That's exactly right. What I mentioned before about the intrinsic value of being in the same room and the energy that you get from each other, that you feed off of each other, the name of that is culture. In one word, that's what you probably call it, culture. And I feel that, at least for our business, there's no way to fully embrace the culture online. You must talk to the customers in person, serve them and see the neighbors, and water the plants outside.

18:54 **Pablo López:** Right, I get your point. A business like yours is always face-to-face, so it's important to have that. Okay. Let's go with the fourth question that is related to employees. Well, for every business and every company, there are some vital values and skills that employees need to have. Especially in your business, I guess they will need to have good interpersonal skills, right? So, when working remotely, have you noticed if they've lost this type of skill or if they have acquired new ones? Let's say, for example, that in the beginning, they had those

skills that were good for the company, but after the pandemic or working remotely, they have been losing those skills, and now they are working less, or they are not performing as well as they did. What do you think about that?

20:17 **Breno Donatti:** Yes. I think the number one skill would be organizational skills. Making your own calendar, I feel that's crucial for someone to be able to be successful in a remote team. It's your own empowerment, right? You're sort of your own boss in a way because you have to follow up by yourself. You're not in an office where you can be reminded of things to do.

21:04 **Pablo López:** So, what about your employees? What are the skills that you need for your business? Let's talk about this question so that we move on to Victoria's question.

21:15 **Breno Donatti:** We are a customer-based company, so you know that the customer has to leave with a smile, no matter what. You have to be a self-starter as well because we're a small company, so you have to make decisions on the fly sometimes. And I always say to anybody that anything that costs no more than a hundred dollars, they can go and make a decision and make sure that the customer is happy. Anything above a hundred dollars, then you have to ask permission from a manager, but otherwise, you have to be a self-starter.

22:13 **Pablo López:** Okay, Victoria, go on.

22:16 **Victoria Gálvez:** Okay. Here's my question. Did you have to do any recruiting online?

22:23 **Breno Donatti:** Yes, I have had a lot of online recruiting.

22:28 **Victoria Gálvez:** Did you get to conduct remote interviews as well?

22:33 **Breno Donatti:** I have, and only in cases that the person was still in school

and coming back in a week. Only if needed.

22:44 **Victoria Gálvez:** Okay. And how would you describe the experience? What were the challenges you encountered?

22:50 **Breno Donatti:** No, I think that actually for interviews, that's an effective way of doing it because again, you are in your work pace and you don't have to do much. You literally put a Zoom link and it's good to get to know a person like that, especially when it's the first or second interview.

23:13 **Victoria Gálvez:** Okay. Cool. So, one of the skills that you say you prioritize in potential candidates for them to be a part of your team is interpersonal skills. So, I'm curious about how you manage to get accurate, let's say, data as to whether this candidate fits with what you expect for the role.

23:41 **Breno Donatti:** It's their energy, how outspoken they are in the interview. But again, that would be one interview. I haven't hired anybody based solely on online interviews, but one thing that impresses me from online interviews is how much research they do before talking to us. Do you know what I mean? Like, how much do they know about our company before coming?

24:12 **Victoria Gálvez:** Yes, that's true. In a way, it has facilitated that because they have everything online, it's all available.

24:21 **Pablo López:** How come? Do they go more prepared for online interviews than in-person interviews?

24:28 **Breno Donatti:** Yes, incredibly.

24:39 **Pablo López:** Interesting. Okay, let's go with the next one. This is our last question. Let's talk about motivation and engagement. Well, even in a conventional office environment, some people struggle with motivation and

engagement. If you think about it, people struggle with motivation and engagement inside the company, working in person, so how has it been for those types of people to maintain their engagement working remotely? Have you experienced something like this? Have you yourself lost motivation and engagement in your business or any of your employees?

25:26 **Breno Donatti:** Yes. That's a daily battle, right? It's a daily battle, but I think it comes from the top. If I'm engaged, then my managers will be engaged, and then the rest of my staff will be engaged. There are times when I'm less engaged, or maybe I'm paying more attention to one side of the company and neglecting other parts of the business, and that shows a very immediate response where the quality of the work of that side of the business that's being neglected might just start to slide down a little bit. So, I don't know how else to keep people engaged besides myself being engaged. If you guys have tools for that, I think that that will be extremely valuable to any company.

26:30 **Pablo López:** Well, yes, I think engagement is difficult for everyone. Plus, working remotely also has its own challenges. So, how did it go for you, those two months that you worked completely remotely? Did you struggle a bit, or did you find yourself again?

26:53 **Breno Donatti:** It was a nice pause, I got to say. It was a very nice pause, but I can't sit quietly for too long. I don't have a problem having to do things. All we did was the weekly meetup to check in on people. I also texted back and forth or called people to see how they're doing. But it was really on me, reaching out to people and keeping them engaged.

27:24 **Pablo López:** And how was it, those weekly meetings that you had?

27:28 **Breno Donatti:** It was good. People were excited. They also wanted to know about any news. Anytime that the company has something else going on,

everybody likes to hear about it.

27:44 **Pablo López:** Did you have any structure for these meetings? Because some people have these events called *zocktails*. Have you heard of that? It's having cocktails via Zoom. They don't gather in a house, but they gather via Zoom to have a drink or something. Have you done something similar?

27:46 **Breno Donatti:** No.

28:07 **Victoria Gálvez:** I was about to ask the same thing, like if you ever tried any of those initiatives that became popular, such as virtual happy hours, virtual scavenger hunts, those sort of things that people were trying just to see how much they work.

28:26 **Breno Donatti:** You know, doing that, personally, makes me feel like a loser. Because I'm kind of giving in online, being actively physical. I'll bring people out and pay them for a whole theme park experience, but doing a scavenger hunt online, it's just, that's tough for me. It's a little depressing.

28:58 **Victoria Gálvez:** I mean, I do understand, but did you ever give them a try?

29:04 **Breno Donatti:** I have a group at church, and we did that, and I was in charge of doing some of those things, the icebreakers or different things like that. I did it, not with my company, but in the church setting, it was okay.

29:25 **Victoria Gálvez:** Something was missing, probably the energy.

29:31 **Breno Donatti:** I feel like it's always disappointing.

29:37 **Victoria Gálvez:** Okay.

29:38 **Pablo López:** Well, we can now wrap up the interview. Do you want to add anything, Victoria? Flavia? Do you have anything else?

29:47 **Victoria Gálvez:** Yes. Well, I'm just grateful because it's really important to have different perspectives. Some people are crazy about remote work or perhaps a bit more optimistic, but it's always good to be down to earth and get different insights. At the end of the day, what we want is to offer something that works, that's what we want, and that's why we're getting into the research. So, this has been great. Thank you again.

30:14 **Breno Donatti:** Absolutely guys, anything you need, just let me know. You know how to contact me, and I hope your project goes well, much success, and come up with some great tools that can activate more of this side of things and make organizations more effective.

30:34 **Victoria Gálvez:** And we hope we can go visit your place once.

30:38 **Breno Donatti:** Totally. You're welcome anytime.

30:42 **Pablo López:** Awesome. Thank you so much for your time.

30:45 **Flavia Caceres:** Thank you so much.

30:49 **Victoria Gálvez:** Have a great day. Bye.

—End of Interview—