

Ryan Morfin: Welcome to Non-Beta Alpha. I'm Ryan Morfin. In today's episode, we're joined by Alonzo Bustamante in London, England. He's an ex-pat working there and going to give us a perspective on how the COVID crisis is playing out in the UK. This is Non-Beta Alpha.

Alonzo, welcome to the show.

Alonzo Bustaman...: Thanks for having me, Ryan.

Ryan Morfin: Good to see you. I appreciate you joining us. Well, wanted to pick your brain. The UK is a few weeks ahead of the US and has had some tumultuous times with Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, testing positive and Prince Charles. The NHS is spread thin. How are things going on the ground in the UK? And how are things affecting you?

Alonzo Bustaman...: Obviously, it's been a couple of interesting weeks all coming up on a month since you start reading it quite a bit about it in the news, but, personally, doing well. It's a different time. We're on lockdown or self isolation. The streets are empty. The supermarkets are regulated in terms of how many people can go in at the same time. So, adjusting to the new reality, working from home, as many people that can work from home are doing so.

So, it's an interesting time where we're all trying to adapt to a new reality that will set in for quite some time. It doesn't seem like it's going to last just the three weeks that were initially announced by the government.

Ryan Morfin: And so, how many weeks ago did people start working from home and has it been disrupting most of the business across the UK? Or do you think most of the UK economy can do the remote working productively?

Alonzo Bustaman...: Absolutely. So, I've been working from home about three weeks now. I work in the technology sector and I would say that the technology industry was probably one of the first industries or amongst the early adopters in terms of asking people to work from home. And, in terms of cadence, first working from home was optional, then working from home was encouraged and finally, the offices shut down. Having talked to other colleagues who work in the technology sector, I think the large companies, Amazon, Google, et cetera, kind of had the same regular timing. So it's been about three weeks. Only last week, it's been one week since the government officially mandated the people staying at home and only being able to leave their home once for exercise and day and once for groceries or essentials a day.

Ryan Morfin: And so, the law enforcement, the police there locally are pretty diligent about giving people tickets or are they letting people just walk by and not really bothering you as you go about your business?

Alonzo Bustaman...: So I have the data point of my neighborhood, because obviously I haven't moved around too much in the past couple of weeks, but I think you do see a police presence on the street, pretty lax. I wouldn't say that it's a visible and available all the time, but you do see policemen walking around. And they will casually ask, "Hey, where are you going? What are you doing?" But it's a pretty casual. I think, more than anything, they are trying to avoid people congregating on the street or people congregating in groups. So as long as you are walking alone, or as long as you're walking with somebody who looks like you live with them, you won't get bothered. You might get the random question or even a polite hello.

Ryan Morfin: So, a little bit of exercise and then hitting up the grocery stores to grab supplies. Has there been a run on a core essentials or is there any issues with supply chain or food access?

Alonzo Bustaman...: Before the mandated self isolation, yes. So before it became mandated, I think you did see a run on the supermarkets. You started walking into the supermarkets and it became quite evident that people were going for the usuals, anything that was cleaning supplies, anything, the toilet paper roll, some non-perishable foods, pasta was completely gone. So that was before the mandated lockdown. Once shelter in place started taking place, it's been a lot more manageable because there has been controlled entry into the supermarkets. Plus there's been a rationing so you are not able to buy more than two items of any particular item. So, actually right now, if you walk into the supermarket, it's better stocked than it was two months ago... Sorry, two weeks ago, because of those regulations.

Ryan Morfin: And in the US, we have a shortage of hospital beds. How is NHS handling this? And what kind of steps has the government taken to expand infrastructure in the healthcare space?

Alonzo Bustaman...: Yeah, of course, those are the real heroes in this story. The citizens are not being asked too much. We're being asked to stay at home, which I think is pretty manageable. In terms of the healthcare service, what you are starting to see is headlines along the lines of the government calling up reserve medical workers. So, retired medical workers are getting called back into action. Anybody who is a medical student is being called into action. So, you're starting to see that from a doctor's standpoint, but you're also starting to see that the hospital beds are being set up in different areas. So, for example, the London ExCeL, which is a large convention center, is being set up as a COVID hospital facility. And you're starting to see containment units being set up outside of hospitals to set up additional capacity for hospitals that might be overflowing soon.

Ryan Morfin: And what does the local media and health officials say? Are you guys at the peak right now? Do you think you're on the... That the case load is starting to slow down or has it been consistently steady and increasing?

Alonzo Bustaman...: No, I think it's been consistently steady and increasing. Both the media in its commentary and the government have been very careful not to signal the we are close to the peak just yet. Like I mentioned about last week, last Monday if I'm not mistaken, was when the official shelter in place order took place. And the initial guidance was that it was going to be for three weeks. Yesterday or the past couple of days you start seeing the government and the media start talking about that being extended. So nobody is signaling that the peak is nearing anytime soon.

Ryan Morfin: And what is the general population or the media's view of the Tories and Labour, have they been working hand in hand as one kind of solidarity government, or is there still sniping in the partisan politic in the UK?

Alonzo Bustaman...: For the most part, it's been pretty... The tone that you are hearing in the media and the tone that you are reading in the newspapers, it's very much of one government, one nation, a unity government where everybody is working together. There haven't been too many, at least reported, or the mainstream cases where there has been major disagreements. I think everybody understands that this is a scenario where there is a legitimate crisis that people need to work together and there have been less disagreements that have been publicized in the media than, for example, with Brexit or other issues that have been going on before this crisis began.

Ryan Morfin: And have you seen a major retooling of the British manufacturing base? Are they trying to produce more masks or ventilators domestically and what's gone on in that front?

Alonzo Bustaman...: Absolutely. You start reading headlines about, for example, Dyson, the famous vacuum company, is starting to retool their assembly lines to produce ventilators, to support the NHS. And you start reading more of these stories where some of the local manufacturers and industrial companies are looking for solutions, whether it's for masks, whether it's for ventilators or other different supplies that the NHS might need.

Ryan Morfin: And what is the business community's view? Do you guys think that you will be back at work here in May and June, or do you think this may be a prolonged posture for the business community and maybe a huge slump on the economy?

Alonzo Bustaman...: Having talked to a lot of the colleagues and friends who work in other areas and other sectors, I think people are starting to realize that there is a long haul for this. This is not going to be something that is short term. This is not going to be something that's going to last a month or a month and a half. I think, in terms of getting back and ready, the commentary amongst people in the technology industry and in other industries that I've heard, is that it won't be normal for a couple of months. If you read the Financial Times headline, I think it was yesterday, I think the government started leaking headlines that said something to the effect of it might be six months until the country really returns to full normal.

Ryan Morfin: Wow. Well, I hope that's not the case, but what would you say has been one of the toughest moments you had during this experience so far?

Alonzo Bustaman...: There has been two that come to mind. One of them is that first moment, that first weekend, when you realize that things were getting serious and you start staying at home and you walk to the supermarket. And now it's not only an image that you are being sent through WhatsApp or something that you are seeing in the news. Seeing the empty shelves, that's definitely a shocking moment, particularly because you're wondering if it's a short term issue or if it's a long term supply chain issue and that's certainly a moment that's concerning.

I think the second one has been seeing images of, like I mentioned, the London ExCeL, this large convention center being set up for tremendous overflow for hospitals not being able to cope with patients. So, those are two moments that just hit hard.

Ryan Morfin: And what about travel, the continental Europe? Have you guys shut that down yet or is there a lot of domestic travel or how is that being phased in?

Alonzo Bustaman...: ... Remember the exact timeline, but I'm going to say in the last 10 days to maybe two weeks, travel to Europe has been restricted. So, people are not able to go to Europe right now, nor are people, I think, too many people trying to move. I think there are some exceptions obviously for emergency situations, family situations, et cetera. But, for the most part, travel has been quite restricted unless you have important, essential reasons like family or others.

Ryan Morfin: And I know we've spoken to other guests on the show from around the world. There is a lot of Brits that are trying to get home. Has that made the news or is that just the foreign Commonwealth office handling business and keeping quiet about the movement there?

Alonzo Bustaman...: I haven't seen too much about that, but... I haven't seen too much about that, to be honest.

Ryan Morfin: Yeah. I think the Brits are mobilizing very quickly to get their people out from hotspots around the world. And so, it's making a lot of Americans trapped abroad feel a little jealous of British logistics. But, well, Alonzo, I appreciate you joining us today to talk to us about what's going on on the ground in the UK. And please keep yourself safe and we hope to talk to you again soon.

Alonzo Bustaman...: Thank you, Ryan.

Ryan Morfin: Thanks, Alonzo.

Thanks for listening to Non-Beta Alpha. Before we go, please remember to subscribe and leave us a review on Apple podcast or our YouTube channel. In our next episode, we'll talk with [Andrea Seller 00:00:12:06], who's based in

Berlin. He just got out of Nairobi, Kenya as the COVID crisis was hitting East Africa. And he's going to tell us about the emerging issues in Africa and how Germany is handling the crisis so well. This is Non-Beta Alpha and, now, you know.