One Knight in Product - E48 - Gibson Biddle

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netflix, people, product, company, strategy, blockbuster, frameworks, called, gib, talks, startup, question, nps, year, big, bought, build, models, write, essay

SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, Gibson Biddle

Jason Knight   00:00

Hello, and welcome to the show. I'm your host, Jason Knight. And on each episode of this podcast, I'll be having inspiring conversations with passionate product people. If that sounds like you, why don't you pop over to OneKnightInProduct.com right now, subscribe to the mailing list or go to the podcast app of your choice and subscribe so you can never miss another episode again. I'm also trying something special this week and doing an NPS score. So if you can check the episode description and click on the link and give the episode a score, that'd be much appreciated by me and my guest. On tonight's episode we'll be speaking about amongst other things, NPS, and how my guest has used this to experiment and optimise his content as he's given over 140 talks in the last year. We'll hear a few stories about how my guest started out a little known streaming company Netflix then went on to smash Blockbuster into a million tiny pieces we'll find out how to make a good impression as a product leader when you start your new job., some of the things you need to do to make it a success once you're there, and how to work out when, hey, it's just not working out and maybe it's time to go off and find something different. For all this and much more please join us on One Knight in Product. So, my guest tonight is Gibson Biddle. Gib is a former VP of Product Management for Netflix, where he helped drive a stake through the heart of Blockbuster video before moving on to CPO at Chegg where he revolutionised the world of education. Nowadays, he's an in demand product leadership and strategy speaker working with companies around the world and helping them make wicked hard decisions. Also recently stepping into email business with new Substack mailing list Ask Gib, where he answers product questions twice a week. He's also from Boston, which if Matt Damon has taught me anything means I'll have to have my bleeper ready. Hi, Gib,. how are you doing tonight?

G   **Gibson Biddle**   01:43

Great, Jason. You make me sound real good. Thank you.

Jason Knight   01:48

It's always good to build people up so that I can slowly knock them down as we go.

G Gibson Biddle 01:52

Go ahead, give it your best shot.

Jason Knight 01:56

So first things first... Ask Gib. So a fairly new venture on Substack? Although actually, I think it's been around since around December. Why should product people sign up to your newsletter?

G Gibson Biddle 02:07

So Ask Gib I focus on answering questions that product leaders have. So I answer questions about product, about business, about strategy about culture, careers. The way I work it is I put out a it's a Slido form... folks ask the questions, and then they upvote them. So for me, it's a way to make sure I'm writing about relevant things. So that's my focus. You know, most of the time I'm answering a question that was uploaded 100 times. It's really fun for me... my journey as a writer, I was a big chicken five years ago, I would edit and write for 2, 3, 4 weeks, I'd have like eight friends read something. And then I publish it on Medium. And I wrote for a long time on Medium. But then, at some point, I wanted more relationship with the readers. So I did start about three months ago on Ask Gib on Substack. And I do do about two to three essays a week... it depends on my schedule. And I asked the most upvoted questions, it's really fun for me. And now I'm essentially building an email list. So I've got close to 4000 subscribers. So if you believe in the wisdom of crowds, you know, there's 4000 people out there who don't think I suck. And if you know me, I'm kind of a freak about feedback systems. So I have a net promoter score survey link at the end of every essay, and most of the time, 70 or above. And for me, that's the threshold for world class, and to reflect on my writing journey. Now, I just hit the publish button when I'm done. But I write hard. I mean, I work hard. I do like 10 drafts. So it's really been great fun. And for me, it's a creative challenge. And it helps me to focus on the the issues and the problems and the challenges that product leaders have today. I'm 59. So I'm always in danger of becoming irrelevant and ageing out. And this exercise helps keep me young.

Jason Knight 04:08

Do you ever get any questions that get upvoted that you look at you're like, Oh, God, I do not want to answer that, or I don't know how to answer that. Or I shouldn't answer that. Or have they all been fairly standard things that you're pretty comfortable with.

G Gibson Biddle 04:23

It runs the range. So I'll give you one of those instances where I finally answer the damn question. And the other one that's still haunting me. So one of them was, hey Gib, what do you think about project based roadmaps versus outcome based roadmaps? And for me, that's a

very process heavy question. You know, to my mind, use the tools, the models and frameworks that work for you. And don't use the one that don't. And most of the tools models and frameworks that I share, I have just found them to be helpful. Anyway, So I in that case, I did a little bit of work, I reached out to a pal of mine. His name is Bruce. And he had written a book on Roadmaps Revisited. We spent some time talking about it. And, and I shared how to build a project based roadmap. And then an outcome space roadmap. That essay has an NPS, like 88. People really love it. It's been shared, like 40 times within Substack. And it was great for me because I learned a lot. And then it provoked this, you know, for me, what I'm trying to do is build sort of a community around Ask Gib. And so if you get on LinkedIn, you'll see like 40, or 50 different points of view, and whether this is a good thing or a bad thing. So that was an incredibly positive experience for me. My negative outcome, there's a question if you go to the Ask Gib and you look at the questions that have been asked, you'll notice that one of them has been up voted like 90 times and I haven't answered yet. And it's really the simple question, which is, how do you think about pricing? You know, when you first price a product, how do you think about it? And I've hesitated for a couple reasons. First, that's not a field of expertise for me. And second, it's so situation dependent, you know, that sometimes I worry if I give advice, I'm going to give bad advice to one person because their situation, their context is different and good advice to another person. In that case, I reached out to a couple of my friends, you know, they're pricing experts, and then I tried to see if I can slowly reel them in and get them to write a few paragraphs for me. Anyway, so this is just the fun of it. And actually, the thing that's delighted me, if you look at my career, I've had lots of successes. And of course, I've had lots of failures. But one thing I've never done well, is build community or engage in a social strategy. So if you look carefully at Netflix, there were multiple failures to try to engage a community to build social features. And then this'll crack you up. Chegg is the textbook rental and homework help company, it is for college students. College students are inherently social, and I somehow failed to build a social strategy that worked at Chegg. Okay, so that's, that's like a mind blower. So now you start to see a little bit of the community brewing around Ask Gib and, you know, a year from now, it'll be it'll be very evident. So that's what makes it fun. I'm hoping that third time I can, I can get it right.

Jason Knight 07:32

But you said, quite rightly, that you're in the content business. And actually, I looked at your website before this. And it said, you've done something like 140 talks in the last year. Now, that's a lot of talks. And I have to ask, how do you keep up the pace and do 140 talks in a year?

Gibson Biddle 07:49

So my last pre COVID year, I did 80 talks, and 40 of those are free. That's sort of my top of funnel. That's how I build awareness and trial and 40 are paid. Those are the paid talks, workshops, and executive events. When COVID hit me first week of March, I knew I wasn't going to be travelling, I wasn't going to be doing those live events. So I just spent a week or so just thinking about it. And my very short analysis, which I'm proud of it was right. I said this year, I'm going to need to do 120 talks, and 80 will be free in order to deliver those same 40 paid events. And I was right. And then here's the cool thing, Jason. I don't have to hop on aeroplanes. So if you think about it, 140 things is not that demanding, I can do three or four in a day, easily. What was really fun was all the learning. So I had figured out how to make my, my things, an NPS of 70 or above, I'm really bummed if I can't get a 70. And of course, being

virtual has a lot of disadvantages. You know, everybody has Zoom burned out, etc. So the quest I was on with talks, the workshop and exec events, was to figure out how to get to 70. And I figured it out, you know, all through experimentation. And I'll just simply tell you that the key to it, it's all about engagement. So I now use a combination of Google Slides, with Slido integration. And I can ask a question, it shows up on my slides, you know, should Netflix launch Netflix party feature or not? And I'll instantly get yes and no. And I know that everybody in their chair or their bathtub or wherever they are, is engaging, right? I can see them pushing the buttons. I can do things like you know, word clouds like what makes Netflix hard to copy for a fun question. Where are you joining us from today? And you see that people are all over the world. So that's an engagement tactic. Of course, I have learned you know, stories, you know, stories are what bring people along. And so it's all about how do you create this engagement with the audience through different tools and tactics and techniques. And yeah, yeah, I've done... now it's been a full 365 days, a little bit more than 140. And gosh, I mean, occasionally I suck, right? As a result of some new experiment. But it's now the case, if I quickly look at the NPS.. if it's not a 70, I'm really bummed. There was something else interesting this past year, certainly the first half of that time period, people were really craving a way to interact with others. So all my workshops, I use these virtual breakout rooms on Zoom, and I dropped them into rooms with their peers, three or four people. And they just love that. Right? You know, and then the balancing act of how much time do you spend in the main room with me? And then how much time do you spend with your peers? Now, it's, it's 12 months, you know, when I've known is I've realised that after a year, even the folks that are craving the social interactive in the small breakout room, it's just not, you know, they're ready to go back to a real world.

Jason Knight 11:16

Yeah, I was gonna ask a question, which I think you've kind of answered, but I think it's still an interesting thought experiment. I always had this image of Mick Jagger playing Satisfaction for the 150,000th time on stage. And how he keeps that interesting. It feels like you said it kind of touched on that a bit like, it can be wearing to do the same thing again, and again, but it feels like that you've really found a way then to break that up and make it interesting every time.

Gibson Biddle 11:42

Yeah. So let's just talk about creative work for a moment. So one of my role models is the Beatles, not Mick Jagger. You know, why were they successful, right? And the wild thing is, if you look at them, for creative work, I have this, this framework, I call it the TURF model, and the T is for time, the U is for urgency, the R is for repetition, and the F is for focus. And so if you think about my last year, I had the time to experiment. So for instance, going back to the Beatles, they sucked at the beginning, right? They would play like the local restaurants. They were over in Berlin, right? Just doing the local bars. And when they came back to the UK, now they had developed those skills, and by that time gave them the practice of engaging with the audience the call and respond, etc. The urgency, and I had a lot of this in March, April a year ago, like, what the heck are you going to do Gib? You know, you have to shift from an in person model to a virtual model, and that drives creative work. And then the benefit of doing something for 140 times is the repetition. And every time I do something, I look first, I look back at the NPS data from the last time I did that talk. And then I'm thoughtful about what are the experiments, what are the new things, I'm going to try to see if I can get better. And then the last thing is focus. And for a lot of creative people, focus is a real challenge. You know, as

product leaders, I will often say this, I can do anything. I just can't do everything. So as a product leader, you might have 100 things that are important for your product. The real key is what are the 10 things? So this past year, I said to myself, my focus was going to be virtual talks, workshops, executive events, and a little bit of writing. And that's all I did. And that focus was really energising and then to know me is to understand, I'm like a freak about data and feedback systems. So I've recorded the, you know, the NPS score for every talk, you know, I have another metric it has to do with money. That's really how I value my time, I don't like it if people waste my time. And so that's really why I charge people. I've got my NPS and then, you know, I'm trying to get a sense of impact. But for instance, I, I was able to use my voice with about 40,000 people last year through those 140 events, which is cool. It actually the main reason I'm engaged in writing is my belief, my theory is that will give me even more leverage. So I can write an essay, and 100,000 people will like read it, okay. If you're a teacher, I mean, at the heart of what I do, I am a teacher sort of in a... in a new way. And it's all about leverage, and how can you truly be helpful to people in a leveraged way, and my belief is writing will do that. And of course, I'm... I refuse to do things in a traditional way, which is one of the reasons I haven't written a book yet. Probably the other reason is I'm too lazy and too undisciplined to write a book. So I don't want to say anything bad about people who have written a damn book. I'm almost jealous and envious of them.

Jason Knight 15:10

There's still time. But on to some of those things that you teach, it'll be interesting to, to look into some of the concepts that you do teach, and also some of the experience that you've had, it would be ridiculous of me, not to mention, at least in passing Netflix and Chegg. So when you joined Netflix in 2005, Blockbuster had just launched or tried to launch, I think, Blockbuster Online. Netflix was still doing DVDs at the time, but moving towards streaming, as the internet caught up with the vision. And then you come in as VP of Product Management. at that scaleup stage, massive changes, big opportunities ahead. You're a product leader coming into that? How do you make an impact in your first 30/60/90 days? What did you do to really land and make that impact?

Gibson Biddle 16:01

I've showed up as a leader at a new building a lot. So even in the last five years, I was the three day a week leader, product leader at NerdWallet. Just in FinTech. That means Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays for a year. I did the same role at a mobile company called Life 360. And I did the same role at a per month or pay as you use it, car insurance company called Metro Mile. So like, just by definition, I've showed up, I'm the new leader all the time. The way I think about it is... my job is to make sure that we have the right people in the building, that we have the right strategy, it's the simplest way to describe it. And then we have the right way of doing stuff. And that might be a little bit of process. And it might be a little bit of culture. So to answer your question, when I came in the building at Netflix, there were a lot of dead bodies in my role. So the average tenure for the VP of product at Netflix was like six months. And I realised this and so I spent a lot of time trying to understand why. This is before I showed up, before I said yes. And the simple answer was Reed Hastings, very bright CEO is a second startup, engineering driven. I had asked him in an interview what he wanted his legacy to be. And his answer was not to create a worldwide streaming behemoth. His answer was to make this idea of consumer science happen. And what he meant was, he would say something very

humble. Like, I'm not like Steve Jobs, I can't tell you, you know, passion or taste. But consumer science is really the scientific method, we can experiment with lots of things quickly and easily, and learn what customers value and what they don't. And if we can create this machine of consumer science, really good things will happen. All of that was true. So it turned out when I looked at the organisation in place, it was a team of starters, starters love to build stuff out of, you know, out of nothing from scratch. I love starters, I tend to come in at, you know, into startups for the proof of concept that are ready to scale. And sometimes those starters are not the right people. In fact, the starters in the building didn't believe in A/B testing. They didn't believe in consumer science, right? And they had never scaled companies before. So in that first year, I had to rebuild the team to find the builders. So that's just to give you a sense of people. On the strategy, I usually give myself about two weeks to do a SWAG , a stupid, wild ass guess, a SWAG of a product strategy. And I use all the tools, models and frameworks that I've shared with everybody. But I do it purposely quickly. And then I'll share it with one person. And then you know, what can I learn from this? Because I know in two weeks, there's a lot of stuff I don't know about the company or the industry. But rather than start from scratch, I say here, here's what I think what do you think? But usually, by about a month in, I'm ready to share the product strategy for the whole organisation at an all hands meeting. And so people, and then there's the strategy, and then that third thing I sort of lightly referred to process or, or culture, I don't like the word process. But for instance, at Netflix, we had to build that consumer science system, right. So there were some early A/B test systems. There wasn't a lot of belief in you know, how to articulate a strategy or how to assign a proxy metric to a strategy or how to align projects or tactics against those strategies. And so I spent most of my first year with the personalization team, you know, this personalization swim lane, and my intent was to create a role model team and help them with all these things. And then after they started delivering results, I would reach out to the merchandising team or the help an account team. I wouldn't tell them what to do, I wouldn't tell them how to do it, I would say, you might just drop in on one of the personalization teams monthly strategy meetings, you'll learn something, you know, and that's how I did it. So there's the three vectors: team, strategy and how you build stuff. Later at Netflix, I created this quarterly product strategy meeting, which was my answer sort of on steroids of how you ensure fast pace independent decision making, how you help people to understand what it means to, to have the skills and behaviours that are consistent with the Netflix culture, and how you share results and learnings quickly across an organisation. And I've written about that, you know, how to run a quarterly product strategy meeting? Doesn't that sound like the most boring essay in the world? Right?

Jason Knight 20:57

I'd read it. Don't worry, I'll read it.

Gibson Biddle 20:59

It's the... it's the first essay I wrote on Medium. And it's got like, I don't know, 6000 claps or something, right?

Jason Knight 21:08

I'm not sure how that translates into MPs. But it sounds pretty good

Gibson Biddle 21:11

Yeah, yeah. Well, actually, I know the title of the NPS for that essay is 84. So I know that So your question about 30/60/90 days, you know, focus on the people, focus on the strategy and then help people quickly and efficiently get worked on. The 30/60/90 days, you know, I don't give a lot of precision. My only thing is, develop§ the SWAG of the strategy super fast, okay? You are never going to be right, like 10 of my high level hypotheses at Netflix, five failed and five succeeded. That was over five years. Like that's typical. So don't, don't try to do the perfection thing, where you polish and shine and wait till six months in. There's one other nuance... companies hire you because they're looking for some source of change. And so in those first two weeks, they'll kind of like, okay, maybe he's right. But if you wait to try to make an impact six months in, now, you're just like part of the team, you're like part of the furniture, your opportunity to achieve real change is not nearly as great. And that's why I really encourage folks to move quickly on that SWAG for the product strategy.

Jason Knight 22:27

Have you ever been in a situation though? I mean, obviously, you've worked at Netflix, which was startup scaling up at the time, you've worked at Chegg, which was a startup, you've worked at some other companies as well, bigger companies, but have you ever been in a situation where you've come in? You tried to do that you try to move fast? You've tried to institute some of the stuff that you just said, and you've got basically resistance to that type of change? Or have you always been lucky enough that as a dint of the fact that they've got you to make that change that they've always been receptive?

Gibson Biddle 22:56

Change is really hard, right? Or, you know, there's a neat book Who Moved My Cheese, right? I'm resistant to change too, right? Gosh, honestly, Chegg, I came in... Chegg is a textbook rental and homework help company, it had never done an A/B test. In that instance, Optimizely had just been born. You know, it was four people in sleeping bags under a desk. And we were one of the first users of their software. And actually, people loved it. They loved, you know, having kind of an answer to what was working, what was not. I did have some people that I thought maybe they'd have the skills. But honestly, I would describe them as arrogant. And I, you know, the debate for me is, will they, you know, figure out this new pace of consumer science, etc? Or should they just go somewhere else? I mean, the odd thing was, you know, of course, I'm thinking of some people, and I won't reveal them. But, um,

Jason Knight 24:06

You can do that afterwards

Gibson Biddle 24:08

Yeah, yeah. You know, I guess the other thing is, sometimes people, as companies change,

their culture evolves, and they're not a great culture fit. I'm actually thinking Chegg of people that I didn't actively squeeze out who left the company, and I was glad that they left. And it's the people issues that that are always the hardest, the hardest for me. My worst case, I did two failed startups. Now.. I did one very failed startup. And then the other one we actually sold but from an entrepreneurial point of view, it didn't feel like any big deal to me. The first one was a... it was for folks to have dyslexia. It was neuro performance technology, this kind of wild device that you would wear. It had to do with the autonomic nervous system. It was it had quote, clinical trials. I got in there and started spending more time with the data and became convinced that it really wasn't working. And so in that case, the change that everybody wanted to happen wasn't happening. And the best thing to happen was the for me not to be there anymore. Because I wasn't on board. I wasn't positive. I couldn't be enthusiastic about the opportunity. You know, the change that everybody wanted didn't happen. And the most helpful thing for was for me to realise I was the wrong person. So this goes multiple directions.

Jason Knight 25:37
And how long did you leave it before you exited? There?

Gibson Biddle 25:40
It's probably three or four months.

Jason Knight 25:43
Okay. So pretty quick.

Gibson Biddle 25:45
Yeah, pretty quick. Yeah.

Jason Knight 25:47
Yeah, I think that one thing I have seen is this kind of desire for people to stay and fight the good fight and try to change the company somewhat against its will. You sit there and you think, if only I do this, then it's going to be okay, and everything will start to move in the right direction, then it doesn't. And then, as you said, you start getting into a negative mental loop because the things you're trying aren't happening, and then eventually you're just sitting there, and you leave, which probably, to your point should probably happen quite a lot sooner. Because I think I've read a quote from someone saying, life's too short to work for companies that don't get product, if you want to do that, for a job probably makes sense to find somewhere where that's actually appreciated.

Gibson Biddle 26:34
You know, I did think of one thing, which was that there's some shared things between Netflix

You know, I did think of one thing, which was that there's some shared things between Netflix. Netflix, we got big on DVD, and then we'd let streaming and then we could go international, I got to Chegg. Chegg, we are getting big on textbook rental, these big orange boxes went back and forth in the mail, just like a Netflix.. these red DVD envelopes went back and forth. And of course, my hypothesis for the next stage of the company was we would go from getting big on textbook rental to leading e-textbooks. Y'know, very analogous to what happened at Netflix. In that case, my hypothesis was wrong, that the timing for e-textbooks is still in the future, right? So it's really hard to make these guesses especially about timing. And that left me kind of on my heels, like, cuz the challenge of textbook rental is it chews up a lot of cash, you're actually buying textbooks, and then hoping they'll go back and forth at least three times in three years, which turned out to be true. But that chews up cash, and cash is like fuel for startups. And so we knew that we needed to invent a high margin digital service, we thought it was going to be e-textbooks, we were wrong. That one was really interesting. Because we actually bought six companies, that's the fastest way to experiment, you buy a little startup, they're already going. And then you know, luckily, you know, one or two of them worked out. And we had this little proof point about this idea of homework help, initially was tied to textbooks that we call them, textbook solutions, all the answers in the back your book, not just the odds, but the evens as well with the step by step solutions, right? And then that eventually worked. And then the third step for Chegg is to connect them with other students services, like helping a student find an internship or a job. And it's the early days for Chegg there. But the thing I was reflecting on was at Netflix, the timing of those transitions felt pretty big in education and in technology, the industry does not move as quickly. And so you know, after five years of Chegg, that was really the thing that caused me to, I'm going to experiment with some new approach, because the pace of innovation in education, it's just not nearly as fast as what I like, or what I had found at Netflix.

Jason Knight 29:01

That's fair enough. But it's interesting, because you touched on something there around the number of acquisitions that Chegg went through, because you wanted to make sure that that you were able to experiment quickly. And that's not something that all product people are necessarily... they don't necessarily have that skill set. They've not necessarily worked if they're not been a startup person themselves, like they've not actually founded their company, they've not worked in a company that's done any kind of M&A activity itself. Is that something you were good at from before? Is that something that you had a very active role in? Or did you kind of help with the evaluation, but left it to other people to handle that? How did you? How did you contribute to that?

Gibson Biddle 29:41

Yeah, it's a great question. I've never written about it. I've never talked about it, and hopefully you'll find this interesting. So I've been doing this for 30 years, right? So in 30 years, a lot of stuff happens. So I think my total tally is I've been bought four times. And I probably bought 30 companies, right? So I've seen a lot of this. To answer your question at Chegg, it was the fastest way we could think of to experiment with these different vectors. And then Dan Rosensweig, he was the CEO. He was my boss. He said, "Hey, Gib, I just want to know from you. If it's a yes or no, because he knew that product part was going to be important". We were buying teams... people. But he said, "Don't worry about the valuation", which was, this was super helpful to me. Turned out Dan Rosensweig was the COO of Yahoo, he had brokered a

deal to buy Facebook for $1 billion. Okay. And the board said, "No, it's too expensive". You know, of course, Facebook's worth like $500 billion today. And that was this point, it's really about yes or no, and not to worry about the valuation. So we move quickly on six of those companies. You know, the main thing that I've learned about acquisitions from both sides, cuz I've been on both sides of the equation, I will nicely say to the leaders that I want you to be ambivalent about this. So Jason, if your company got bought, I'd say, Hey, Jason, I want you to be ambivalent about this. And most people think ambivalent means in the middle, it really doesn't, it means there are some things that you will be wicked excited about. And there are some things that you... that will suck for you. So for instance, when I got bought by The Learning Company, we got bought, you know, at the time, we had maybe 5% share of the kids' education market. And we were joining a company that had like a 40% share. They were going to open us up to retail stores for shrinkwrap software, that was a huge opportunity, lots of resources, maybe for me, career opportunity. And then on the sucky side, of course, you've got all his new HR processes, we had to move, we had to move from Redwood City to Fremont, that increased my commute by 20 minutes, right? That's the sucky stuff. But in the end... so that the main coaching is some people only consider the good, and then they're totally bummed by the bad. And some people get so consumed by the bad that they can't remember why, you know why they sold themselves. And then I'm pretty good at you know, I'm pretty tuned into people. Like from a leadership point of view, I consider a leadership an inspired vision of the future. The management is all about the hiring, organising, developing teams. So I enjoyed it. And then to your earlier point, understanding when it's your time to go, you know, for me, it was always going back to the next startup with a proof of concept that was ready to scale. Like, how do you know when? You know that's, that's a really tricky one. It's usually when you're fully invested. Jason, when you're fully rested, invested,

Jason Knight 32:52

Exactly, rested, invested. When you when you've done you announce, when you've been bought and stuff like that, then it's all good.

Gibson Biddle 32:57

Yeah, there's usually a one... there's a one year no lockup, whatever. A stay bonus. That's it. That's it.

Jason Knight 33:05

There you go. Now, another thing that you spoke about earlier was around getting the stuff done as, sort of, part of the what you need to do as a product leader. Like, we won't call it process, but you know, getting the actual day to day work done. And we also spoke about in passing before this call around frameworks. You were talking, for example, around TURF as a framework, but there's obviously a bunch of different frameworks for prioritisation, and strategy and canvases coming out your ears for this stuff. What do you think some of the pros and cons of frameworks versus more, I don't want to say gut feel, because that has connotations. But like working it all out more subjectively, and more fluidly. Do you think that frameworks are always positive? Or do you feel that they can be overused?

Gibson Biddle 33:55

Yeah, that's a good question. So, you know, here I am trying to help product leaders all over the world to learn stuff in a leveraged way, right? But product leaders all over the world have different issues, different skills, different kinds of companies, different products, you know, how could I possibly be helpful to all of them? They're so different. So that's the the beauty of tools, models and frameworks. So and I'll just give you a little bit, I actually spent quite a bit of time with a bunch of professors at Northwestern, and most of them were consultants. And then... so to understand consulting, you use tools, models and frameworks that are absolutely non transparent. Because you want to help your clients but you want your clients to need you. The worst thing that could happen is they would take your tools, models and frameworks and apply them on their own. So from a teaching perspective, I'm the opposite. I try to make these tools, models and frameworks, understandable, memorable, and then let people apply them on their own. So for instance, in that little check story, Earlier I shared with you the GLEE model, the GLEE model, it really nicely reminds product leaders to think long term because in the long term anything is possible. So the first the G in GLEE is to get big on that's your initial big beachhead, you know, what is your first subset of customers and products? But, you know, five, maybe 10 years out, you're going to take that next big step, step function innovation. At Chegg, that was a Chegg study and all digital Homework Help Service. And then what's the E the way to expand even further? For Chegg that's going to be connecting students with internships and jobs, at Netflix, get big on DVD, lead streaming, expand international, expand into original content, you know, they're actually engaged now in the fifth possible step, which is interactive stories. And so that GLEE model that the purpose of it is to force people to think in the long term because the long ... all things are possible in the long term. The danger of tools, models and frameworks is that people apply them blindly. Right? That without doing the real thinking, and without, you know, the worst thing is you actually try to copy the Netflix model, right, which, in a way...

Jason Knight 36:17

Or the Spotify one.

Gibson Biddle 36:18

That's... yeah. And so this is the debate. You know, the other thing for me is, I don't know why. But these tools, models and frameworks, personally, I try to... I find the world to be very chaotic. And so I try to organise them in ways that are helpful to me. And so that the tools, models and frameworks that I share with others, are the ones that are helpful to me. And luckily, I've gotten rid of all the ones that, that suck, or you know, were not helpful. So that's the two sides of the equation. You asked about intuition. So imagine I'm interviewing leaders. Now to be a Head of Product, there's a number of skills I'm looking for. But one of them I call it high business maturity, and high business maturity, what it really means is they have great judgement about making decisions about people, product and the business. And the interesting thing is, it's not nearly as correlated to age as I would hope as a 59 year old, right? So think about the decisions that Mark Zuckerberg was making at Facebook when he was 23. I mean, he was showing high business maturity on a lot of issues. Okay. So how do you form that? You know, for me, in careers or in product, I actually think that we are products as people, you know, just building a product and building a career are almost the same thing. You have a

hypothesis, you test it, you see what happens, you apply judgement, you do the next thing. And so in all these things, the whole idea is to be 1thoughtful and disciplined about that, to have a hypothesis, to have a strategy, to have metrics that help you evaluate what's working, what's not. And then it's all about high cadence experimentation. And so with every revolution of experimentation, with every learning, you're, you're helping to build your intuition just a little bit better. And so for instance, you can get from guessing right on high level product strategies, hypotheses, 50% of the time, up to 60 or 65%. That's frickin awesome, right? Here's a little pop quiz for you, Jason. So I work a lot with exec teams and help them with their decision making. And I nice to say, hey, I don't my goal state, like if you got to 75 or 80%, you know, and getting it right, that would be awesome. But shoot me, if you get it right, 90 or 100% that then I'll know that I failed. You have a sense of what I'm worried about there?

Jason Knight 38:51

Maybe their ambitions are too low.

Gibson Biddle 38:53

Correct. They're not taking enough risk. Right? And that's the whole thing. Like you're going to be operating in this balance between maybe 50% and 70%. Getting it right. If you get to the 80, it probably means that you're essentially over optimising right, you're, you're placing lots of small bets. And of course, you're going to get it right. So go back to that GLEE model, you know, forcing people to think big and to think long term, it's really a way of forcing them to make big bets as well. Right? Because without somebody whacking you on the head that force you to do that, most people will sort of optimise to getting it right more often with putting much smaller bets on the table. So here's the weird thing. As companies get bigger, sometimes they start playing it safe. And this again, this way is the GLEE model to force them to take on the same level of risks that they did when they were a punk startup, even when they're 20 or 30 or 40 years old. So if you go back to Facebook, Facebook went public. The first thing they did was they bought Oculus, for like, I can't remember, 5 billion. This was them taking on the same level of risks that they had as a startup, despite the fact that they had just come of age by going public. I mean, I really admired that it was cool. So then in careers, right, so look around you. So in careers, I'm nicely coaching people, you know, people always ask that same question. Like, if you were talking to yourself 20 years ago, what would you say? And I'll say, take on more risk, right? You know, it probably translates into, leave that job a little sooner, you know, go back to the startup a little sooner, you know, be comfortable taking on risk. I mean, what I've been doing the last five years, if you think about it, it's a little audacious. You know, I chose to be the product leader three days a week for one year at a time for three different companies. That was really cool. I mean, it's sort of for me predicts what the future of work is. My dad worked for the same company for 25 years, right? My average tenure is three to five years, you know, startup, proof of concept help it to grow, you know, and then just shoot me, you know, at five years, because as much as I'm a builder, I'm not a starter. I'm a builder. I'm not a superscalar. Superscalars work at big companies. And that's when it's time for me to go on to the next company.

Jason Knight 41:17

So speaking of big companies, do you think you could have saved Blockbuster from their

inevitable fate if you'd have joined them as their VP of product or some form of strategic lead? At the same sort of time that you joined? Netflix? Or do you think that it was literally inevitable?

Gibson Biddle 41:34

Well, certainly, I wouldn't have made the difference. But, but um, here's the, here's the challenge. Like I was at Netflix, right. And everybody sees this animal called YouTube growing like a weed with lots of community based stuff, right? It's not pro content, pro videos. And then they noticed that Amazon's doing this IMDb thing, where you can get, you know, amazing amount of content about a movie or not. And then there was another company, again, growing like a weed. And it was called Rotten Tomatoes. And my team saying, you know, they're a threat to us, you should need to buy them, we need to be doing that. Right? And so the tricky thing at a company, is you sort of want to set up this perimeter where you're observing lots of different companies, potential threats, but there might be 50 of them. And the real judgement is to try to make a guess about one or two, that really might be a challenge to you. Okay? So that was... take the perspective of Blockbuster, you're at Blockbuster. You see all these potential threats of course, one of them is Netflix.ou've gotten big, you got a big brand, you've got 15,000, retail stores, huge business, right? It's all going great. And then, you know, you see this punk kid called Netflix, like, what are you gonna do? Right? I'll tell you what they did. They actually copied our service. You know, they could do DVD by mail, too. And it was by about 2007, sort of two years for me into Netflix, they got serious about what they were doing. So they had 15,000 stores. And then, where we had about 5 million members for our DVD by mail service in 2007, they had about 1 million, and they went heavy after us at Netflix. They announced their Total Access Programme. So not only could you get your DVDs in the mail, you could walk into a store and trade them right there. So, you know, some of our customers get get like 10 or 20 discs a month, amazing value for our customer. And they went from one to 2 million, like within six months. Like they're looking hugely threatening to us. Right. And there was a lot of debate about what we should do. Should we lower our prices? Should we invent, you know, swap boxes, whatever it was, and we know how it, how it turned out. And it turned out poorly for Blockbuster. It turned out great for Netflix. What we ended up doing was we launched streaming, right that was... we were going to do that anyway. But you know, how do you deliver discs quicker? You you push a button and you stream? Right? And by the way, our product sucked. We only had 300 titles available at the time, you know, our customers called steamy romance, which is code for something else. But we sort of nicely ignored Blockbuster. So what was their real challenge? They had so much invested in their way of life, these retail stores. They had a brand that actually wasn't beloved because Blockbuster was mainly known for its late fees. And just think about the culture and the skill and the talent. Imagine if you were Blockbuster that was your legacy. And you're trying to recruit talented engineers like It's nearly impossible, right. And there's one other thing. And this is probably the most important. It had been bought by a takeover artist, and they really didn't have that much access to cash that... that the parent company was... they just didn't have enough money to invest in the things that we were doing. So they were sort of fighting us with one hand behind their back. So here's the interesting parallel, it's 2012, you're Netflix, you have international streaming, you know, and you're growing like crazy. Maybe you're at 80 million customers by 2012... 2011. And in the United States, you have 10 million customers that are getting their DVD by mail, right? And you're like, I don't want to be Blockbuster, right? I like, I don't want to be the person who over invested in DVD by mail, when we know this is all about streaming. And in the future, we're going to be competing with Amazon and Google and Hulu and Disney plus. You know, what are we going to do with that damn DVD thing? And so the answer this is Reed Hastings,

was we're gonna throw all the DVD people out of the building, we're going to create a separate company. And then we'll do what we do, we'll do Netflix streaming. And that separate company will be called Qwikster. And so, if you're a customer with DVDs, you'll go to Qwikster for your DVD by mail. And if you're the 70 million that are doing streaming, then you'll be at Netflix, nothing changes. So Reed announced this. And within a week, they were ridiculed like on Saturday Night Live, you know, the name was stupid, etc. They actually didn't even execute the plan. But the customers were so pissed off that 800,000 customers cancelled in one quarter. The market cap for the company went from $40 billion down to $10 billion. Right. Huge. That's bad, right? And so that's the Qwikster debacle. It was actually Reed being very thoughtful, very smart, about, you know, understanding the future, investing in the future, and chopping off this DVD by mail, and it failed. Now, if you look today, there's probably less than a million DVD by mail customers, they love the service. They rave about the service. And then there's like 210 million streamers. It sort of worked out. And you know, obviously perfect hindsight, Reed wished that, you know, he had just let the DVD by mail business go through natural obsolescence. I'm just pointing out in these David versus Goliath battles. It's really hard. I mean, there's actually a neat book called David and Goliath, by Malcolm Gladwell. What he discovered... he believes that Goliath was literally blind. And that was one of the advantages that that David had, which is set, you know, think about, you know, the apparent advantage that Blockbuster had, with its 15,000 stores, you know, it's like blindness, right? So anyways, this is a hard world, you know, navigating these, these platform shifts, navigating these huge technology shifts, it's wild. And it's hard. And it's what, what makes being a product leader, a lot of fun, as well.

Jason Knight 48:24

Also puts few grey hairs on your head.

Gibson Biddle 48:26

I don't have any grey hair, do I?

Jason Knight 48:27

Yeah, no, no, not you.. puts grey hairs on one's head. But it also reminds me of that book, The Innovators Dilemma, where there's the argument that actually, even a really well run company, incumbent could eventually fail anyway, because it makes absolutely no business sense for them to do what the startups doing until it does. And by that time, it's too late.

Gibson Biddle 48:49

I love that you brought that book up. That was the Bible at Netflix. We used to reread that book every six months and talk about it. No, but you're right, it's really worth reading. One of the stories they talked about was they built these big steam shovels. You know, these are the things that dig out foundations. And it's all about how big a bucket it is. And these little devices came along. And the steam shovel manufacturers didn't ... they didn't worry about these little

devices that were digging trenches from the house to the street, these little teeny devices. I mean, looking back, they're essentially bulldozers, right? And if you look around, you know, you can't find a steam shovel, but the world is full of bulldozers.

Jason Knight 49:33

Exactly. So it feels silly to ask since we talked about it at the beginning, but where can people find you if they want to catch up with you have a chat and talk about product after this? I guess Ask Gib would be a good starting point. But where else?

Gibson Biddle 49:45

Yeah, I'll just tell you my... where I'd love people to go and it sort of lines up with my creative challenges. So I'd love them to Google search Ask Gib - A-S-K-G-I-B and Google is awesome. It will take you to my product newsletter. My other little passion project, you're gonna laugh at me. I'm on Instagram. I've been on Instagram for one month, I now have gotten to 200 followers, which I'm just so excited about. The reason I'm on Instagram is there's a younger audience there. And it's substantially less male. Okay, so I am so tired of all the men on Twitter, I'm so tired of all the men on LinkedIn. And honestly, to my view, I feel like it's 80% women on Instagram, and it's really fun. And talk about ageing gracefully. Like, I've got my my 23 year old daughter, you know, shitposting me right, telling me, you idiot dad, and your goofy brand is all wrong. And I can't believe you... you're you're posting way too much. You know, so Ask Gib, and then AskGib is the same on Instagram. And then there is a website called GibsonBiddle.com.

Jason Knight 50:56

There you go. It's been a fantastic chat. So yeah, genuinely, thanks for spending some of your valuable time. Hopefully, we can stay in touch. But yeah, let's call that a wrap and, yeah, thanks for taking the time.

Gibson Biddle 51:09

Thanks for spending time with me, Jason. And I hope folks enjoy listening. And I hope they learned something. Just one thing, gosh darn it!

Jason Knight 51:19

As ever, thanks for listening. I hope you found the interview inspiring and interesting. If you did, again, if you could pop over to OneKnightInProduct.com and sign up to the mailing list or go to the podcast app of your choice and subscribe, and maybe check out some of the other fantastic episodes that will be much appreciated. And do remember to go and give the episode of NPS score so we can check how that worked out. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest but as for now, thanks and good night.