One Knight in Product - E125 - James Mayes

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SPEAKERS

James Mayes, Jason Knight

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. This episode is sponsored by Skiplevel. Now ask yourself this... Do you struggle with communicate with dev teams and understanding technical terminology and concepts? On episode 98 of this podcast I hosted Irene Yu, founder of Skiplevel, an on-demand training platform that helps professionals and teams become more technical in just five weeks, or without learning how to code. You can learn the knowledge and skills you need to better communicate with devs and become more competent in your day to day role with the skip level programme. You can go to https://skiplevel.co and use code OKIP75 to get $75 off the programme by the 15th of June 2022. That's https://skiplevel.co code OKIP75. Check the show notes for more details. On tonight's episode, we talk about my old friends at minor product and why they sell themselves to my other old friends at Pendo. We talk about how the acquisition came about what each side gets out of it and some of the things that enables the minor product community to do. We also talk about the CEOs move into full time evangelism barley specifically evangelising and some of the topics on his mind around scaling and digital transformation. We also ponder whether the product world needs more evangelists in general and whether tonight's guest could beat John Cutler in an arm wrestle. For all this and much more please join us.. one One Knight in Product.

Jason Knight 01:30

So my guest tonight is James Mayes. James is a terrible bass player, former recruiter and erstwhile crematorium fitter who's helped put some fire in the belly of the product community as the co founder of Mind the Product. James loves the outdoors and hates being in the same place too long. He's taken the latter to extremes as he's recently moved from CEO of Mind the Product to a product-led evangelist for Pendo, who I'm sure you'll remember acquired Mind the Product back in February. And I'm assuming James has been steadfastly replacing all of his blue T shirts with lovely pink ones. Hi, James. How are you tonight?

James Mayes 01:59

Hey, Jason, thanks for having me on in it. Yeah, it's it has been a busy couple of months. And there's a lot more pink in the wardrobe than there used to be.

Jason Knight 02:06

I can imagine. And just for the record, despite my best efforts to avoid imposing gender stereotypes on my kids, every single last bit of pink Pendo swag that I've got is proudly on display in my daughter's bedroom.

James Mayes 02:18

Excellent!

Jason Knight 02:19

Anyway, so first things first, and I have to ask this, it's just a question on everyone's lips, or at least many people's lips. And with a caveat that I absolutely love Pendo. I've had a bunch of fine Pendo people on the podcast and have that app I mentioned pink swag in my daughter's room. But why did you sell Mind the Product to Pendo?

James Mayes 02:35

Fundamentally, as we survived the pandemic and came to the end of last year, we weren't actually sure what the business needed to be long term. We've had a very clear mission for a long time around bringing product people together, sharing great stories and furthering the craft. But we wanted to sit down last year saying of all the different things that we're working on, what are actually the really important ones, what are the ones that we should go harder on and maybe there's some stuff here and Mind the Product has been around 10/11 years, maybe some stuff we should sunset. So I spoke to a bunch of training providers and VCs, some of the sponsors that have worked with us over the years and Pendo is one of the longest standing sponsors around and outlet. Everyone's like, where do we go? And Pendo's response was, "so are you up for sale?" Well, technically no, but keep talking. Sure. Why not?

Jason Knight 03:15

If the price is right, right?

James Mayes 03:16

Yeah. So we spoke to about a dozen companies at the outset. And out of those actually, three or four came very quickly to that. Does this mean you're up for sale? Well, technically, no. But sure. What are you thinking, and Pindos, the alignment right out the gate from Pendo was

incredibly strong.

Jason Knight 03:32

Fair enough. Sounds like a match made in heaven. But of course, Pendo themselves have been active in the community for a while they've got the product love podcast themselves, they've got the Productcraft community, which claims to be the largest product community on the internet, just like all the other largest communities on the internet. Either way, it's fair to say there's some overlap in digital presence, at least I mean, obviously, aside from the software that they build, as well, there is that kind of overlap in the digital space. So is that something that you worried about, that there might need to be some consolidation or clashing between the things that you were doing in the community? Or do you feel that there's enough there for you to keep everything nice and separate and kind of not have to worry too much about treading on each other's feet?

James Mayes 04:10

It was certainly one of the things that we covered pretty early out the gate when the conversation started. And actually, the biggest focus at the time was more on the Pendomonium events, because then they're on their own conferences as well. And there's the line that Pendo took on this, which we really felt comfortable with was that Pendomonium is essentially a user event is there for Pendo customers, so they can learn more about the product more about the company or about where they're planning on going over the next year or two. Whereas Mind the Product is much more the open house where the industry comes together. Pendo will continue to support other product events, they're out there ... other conferences do exist. And likewise Mind the Product might work with sponsors from time to time who happened to be competitive for Pendo but the whole point of Mind the Product is that it is a relatively open house where we can all come and have these conversations together. And Pendo was very, very keen to see that continue.

Jason Knight 04:53

I was gonna say actually because when this first broke, I did speak to some people who were I guess you could say slightly worried, you know that Mind the Product has its own vibe, it's got its own contents, own history, its own community. And they were maybe a little bit worried that everything would kind of get swallowed up and subsumed into the pink world of Pendo. Now, based on what you've just said, that's not the case. So just for the record, we can say, then probably safely that mind the product is still completely editorially independent?

James Mayes 05:19

Absolutely. Editorially independent, the training curriculum, the workshop programmes, the conference lineup. The closest we get to any kind of crossover is where Pendo we're hearing things from their customers, and they'll say something like, product ops, it's a thing we're hearing more and more about, could we get more of that content out there into the world? That

seems to be a thing that people are hungry for? And we can absolutely use that intel? That's great research for us. Yeah, absolutely. We can go harder on that. But it's our editorial team and our curation team that continue to look at whose voices we actually elevate.

Jason Knight 05:46

That's fair enough. But I guess one question that I also have is, you've touched on it a little bit about like what you could be and kind of the origin story behind why you started entertaining offers, for example. But on a fundamental level, what does Mind the Product specifically get out of this aside from money, of course, that's always nice to have, you can use that to help you scale and maybe invest in areas that you weren't investing in before you get a lot of support from the wider Pendo organisation. But are there any other specific things that you're getting out of Pendo that are very specifically enabling you to do things that you couldn't do before? Or is it just more of the same stuff that you were doing before, but better with more kind of resource behind?

J James Mayes 06:22

The focus remains very, very similar for Mind the Product, that doesn't change, particularly, you know, our our key goal has always been to make more product managers and to make better product managers. And if we continue to do that, then Pendo wins in the long run anyway, I think the main bit of the crossover is actually Mind the Product has been over the last couple of years, 16-17 people running eight or nine service lines, we've been spread incredibly thin. And with bootstrapped background, very little in the way back office support, whereas now we have finance team, a legal team, a lot of that infrastructure, design stuff that can really help us do a lot more. So yeah, as you say, shouldn't necessarily change what we do. But it might enable us to do more of it.

Jason Knight 06:56

Right. I'm looking forward to more wonderful conferences, and maybe I'll even get an invite to one of them one day.

J James Mayes 07:02

I believe you're hosting the podcast soon. So that's a good stake in the ground.

Jason Knight 07:06

There you go. It's a small but meaningful step to my eventual takeover and domination of the space. But I spoke to one person who also who was particularly worried that in some ways, basically, we're just buying a massive list of Mind the Product users that they could start trying to sell Pendo to. Now I'm sure you're gonna say that that's not the case. And even if it were the case, you'd probably say that, but let's assume it's not specifically what the Pendo get out of

the deal, apart from maybe brand recognition and the ability to maybe show up at a few more events. Are there any specific things that they were looking to get out of this that you can talk about?

James Mayes 07:39

I mean Pendo are looking to learn more about the challenges that big organisations have, as they adopt for management techniques and software. A lot of the companies that we work with are enterprise organisations who are making that transition and say, you know, we've been doing digital transformation for 20 years, you still don't have a product manager. They are ideal Pendo customers, so they get to do more research through us and actually learn a little bit about what those customers are struggling with. But I think what were the salient point is actually the one that you touched on there regards brand. So we don't sit within the sales organisation at Pendo. We're not lined up with a marketing manager who's totally down in the analytics and looking at the conversions and things like that we actually sit within the brand organisation. So our job is to make more product managers, as we always did to make smarter product managers that just carry that brand with us and let people know that Pendo exists now. If Pendo is for you, great. If it happens to be someone else, that's also fine. There's more product managers in the world. And that ends up with, frankly, better software.

Jason Knight 08:31

Well, fingers crossed. I mean, you never know. But I guess... Yeah, the point is there that if you're making lots more exciting product managers and getting people good at the space, then I guess the Pendo angle there is that well Pendo make software for good product managers, or that's the goal at least. So if you have lots more cool product managers out there in digitally transformed companies that will potentially be at least Pendo customers, which is better than them being no one's customers, I guess.

James Mayes 08:55

Absolutely. That, you know, I think all we'd ask is that people's penned I've done a lot of supporters over the last few months and will do no doubt a lot more over the next couple of years. As a product manager. When you evaluate software, take a look at what Pendo have. That's it literally. That's the ask nothing more.

Jason Knight 09:11

No strings attached. But you've taken up a role now you've moved away from being the CEO of mine the product, and you're now an evangelist to product evangelist for Pendo. So does that mean that you yourself are moving away from direct involvement with minder products and concentrating fully on the Pendo side and the wider product advocacy? are you mixing up a little bit for the foreseeable future like how's that transition gone?

James Mayes 09:35

So I started stepping back from leading mine for quite some time ago. Then Emily Tate stepped up as our Managing Director, and probably two years ago now. That's an operational front. Emily runs it ... does a spectacular job of it.

Jason Knight   09:47
You were like the golden figurehead at the front of the ship!

James Mayes   09:50
I'm certainly the one that made a lot of noise. Yeah. So my conversion into an evangelist, it was kind of... it, it was a sensible fit. Pendo doesn't need two CEOs and I'm certainly not qualified to be in that kind of a role for an organisation of that size or ambition, but that idea of getting out there having lots of conversations, getting people excited about what product management is and where it might go in future, that's the kind of thing that I've always really enjoyed doing for my the product. And it was an opportunity for Pendo. To say, yeah, actually, we could use some of that, that sounds like a great fit. Let's do that. And we'll see how that goes. So at the moment, we're still kind of figuring out what evangelism actually looks like, for me in a Pendo. environment. And to your other point, yeah, it is bridging that gap of saying, Where does Mind the Product exist? Where does Pendo exist? Where opportunities that I could potentially help do good things for both organisations?

Jason Knight   10:33
Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I guess one of the questions was gonna be, and maybe you don't have 100% of an answer for that right now is whether you're very much an evangelist for the craft of product management, as you seem to be touching on or whether you also kind of a, an evangelist for Pendo. And its solutions, like, are you getting involved in any of the actual pushing of Pendo stuff? Or is that still very much like you touched on it earlier about the marketing organisation, the sales organisation, etc? Is that kind of very much explicitly outside your remit? And you're very much the servant of Product Management?

James Mayes   11:03
Yeah, I mean, I'm very much that to serve product management and raise the game for everybody. If somebody comes from the outside, hey, that kind of the thing that looks of interest, not hook you up to the right person. Yeah, they want to get involved in that conversation. That's not the bit where I should be playing. Where I can get involved is bringing together groups of product, people, facilitating conversations, bringing more people to the industry, raising the awareness for a particularly the legacy organisations as to why product management is valuable. And if I can get that conversation started, then I'm on the right track.

Jason Knight   11:30
Absolutely. But when I think of a product evangelist, you don't have to look far before you

bump into the inestimable shadow of John Cutler, who's obviously very popular on Twitter, he's very active all around the internet. He's kind of almost like the archetypal product evangelist, as far as I can tell, obviously, he works for amplitude are obviously a competitor dependent. So you say obviously, that you're trying to shape that role and try and work out what it means for you and what it means for Pendo? Has it been a case that you've kind of just looked at some of the stuff that John's doing and think that's what I'll be doing as well? Like, are you kind of just an alternative version of John? Or are you looking to bring a very particular James Mayes spin to this whole product evangelism thing?

Jason Knight 12:13

You know, there's obviously similarities in the title that we both carry these days. But there, I think, apart from energy levels, John, John and I are both full of energy as a result, we run into one another, we have a very, very different backgrounds. John is actually a dyed in the wool product manager, he's fought the battles, he's got the scars, he's been in the trenches, he's really done his time. Whereas my space in the world of products much more been around bringing communities together running events, figuring out how we might address certain challenges that the marketplace at large has. So I'm not going to sit here and tell people how to do product management or which approach they might take. Yeah, whereas John does actually have the background to do that, I think my place is much worse is around facilitating learning, facilitating communities, building those connections, and raising the visibility of the craft more than anything else. So there are certain areas where we certainly cross over but I suspect are very different backgrounds do have a part to play in that as well.

Jason Knight 13:01

So we're not gonna see like an arm wrestle conference anytime soon, where you're both trying to show who's the better evangelist or anything like that.

James Mayes 13:09

It is unlikely I suspect, there's no way I could catch on anyway. The amount of guy that the time that guy puts in on the tires, he's fast.

Jason Knight 13:19

Well, we'll see how that progresses as well. But I'm sure you'll be, what I'd like to see is like almost an arms race of content between the two of you so that you can both try and outdo each other. And in the process of doing that we just get better and better content. But you know, maybe we'll see what happens.

James Mayes 13:33

I certainly suspect that the game is raising for frankly, everybody in the product management world now, you know, there was much, much more focus on the fact that 10 years ago, the

right way to do product management was either to try something fail, try it again, or Google it. That was it. Whereas now you have well funded companies like Pendo, like amplitude and bootstrapped organisations like mine, the product, who are really gathering the stories, and they're not just publishing whatever they find, but actually running all over it and saying, Does this make sense? Is it a well crafted arc? Are there takeaways here that people can learn from? So I think that, you know, the quality of content as a whole is rising. And that's great.

Jason Knight 14:07

Well I'm doing my best to drag it back down again. But do you think that evangelism is a growing career path for product people as well? I mean, that's an interesting point, right? So if, for example, you're a product manager, you've been doing your time, like you say, with John, for example, you've maybe got 15-20 years experience doing product management, or like yourself, you know, very involved in a product community, working on advocacy and training and all of the stuff that you've been doing with mind to product. There are other people out there that could presumably do some of this stuff. Do you think that there's a growing need for this kind of evangelism outside of say, what you enjoy doing and the people that are writing the books like, your Marty Cagans of the world and stuff like that, a more kind of mid level, sort of in between super famous and not like someone who can actually go out there and speak up for the craft of product management and not necessarily Make sure that people do it, quote unquote properly because not 100% convinced the property exists, but at least be there as a voice for the law almost like the law of acts for product managers.

James Mayes 15:09

Yeah. Firstly, I agree with your point, there is no right way to do product management an awful lot of wrong ways and that most common answer ever have. It depends.

Jason Knight 15:18

Classic.

James Mayes 15:21

In terms of whether that's a route, whether there's more product, people moving into that, I do see a lot of people who've done their time in the trenches, product manager, head of product, Director product, those people are now moved. So we're moving into the VP product roles and starting to take on more advisory work or starting to write books at their own and developing content of various different types, whether it's on what are the sort of pay as you go training platforms, or whether they're putting things out through substack, or things like that, or super followers. On Twitter, I'm seeing more and more of this. And I do think it's a good thing, because I do think that the best way for people to learn is either try it and measure it, or look at the stories of the others who have gone before. Because the chances are, you're not making a new mistake, you're making the mistake that somebody else has already made, you just haven't read their documentation on it yet.

Jason Knight 16:02

It also reminds me a little bit of the kind of developer relations community out there as well, where you've got people that are employed by companies to basically go out there and help developers be successful with the products that they aim at developers. So it's not 100%, the same, but it's still this kind of same energy around your explicit role as an evangelist, for example, is to just be there to help people succeed, which I think is a really noble goal. I guess the flip side, which may be some companies that don't have these dev well, people and maybe some of the people that don't have product evangelist is whether they can actually draw a kind of clear ROI line between people doing that, and actually, the success of the company. So for example, you're employed by Pendo, John Cutler was employed by Amplitude, loads of other people employed by all these other companies. And if they're not seeing what they see as an ROI on that investment in your salary and your time, then I guess that's the problem. But as long as they can see that, then, hopefully, that should just grow and grow and grow.

James Mayes 17:00

Absolutely. And I know Pendo, as I'm sure many of the other large companies do, we'll do a brand survey. Once, twice a year. And actually look at where they've got brand recognition, what impact it's having for them, what is driving it and whether or not that's worth it at all. I don't think evangelism fits in that same sort of bucket. And there are going to be deals where they can track back and say, you know, we can see that there was an introduction to this client from an evangelism thing that James did. Not all of it's going to be trackable brand is an intangible thing in some respects. But we're working with a company, we're talking about Pendo, they are hot on the analytics, they're a very data driven company, they're gonna go a long ways of measuring this, that helps make sense of it. So I doubt it will ever be perfect. You know, attribution being one of the hardest things on the internet still. But there'll be something.

Jason Knight 17:42

There you go... well, I look forward to seeing the results of your labour. Speaking of which, I mean, let's talk a little bit about some of the stuff that you are specifically evangelising. Now, obviously Pendo, the founder, Todd Olsen, in his book wrote about product led growth. And you've kind of touched on that a little bit before. And you're also very keen to talk about scaling product teams. And you also mentioned product ops before in passing at least, I guess the question I have there, then is when you're talking about scaling product teams, and I think you specifically called out scaling product teams to tech, do you mean scaling out via literally the concept of product ops, which is obviously very, on trend at the moment, a lot of people are talking about the way that you can use that to effectively scale up processes and, and scale out strategy and all of that stuff? Or do you just mean generically, just making teams bigger?

James Mayes 18:32

I think there's a little both in there, some of it is around product ops, and getting smarter with what you've got. But some of it is also around the idea of actually scaling product teams themselves, you know, you go back 10 years, if you were a product manager in a London tech firm, chances are, you're the only one. Whereas some of the banks and they've got, you know,

50 to 100, product managers. So those teams are starting to scale. But a lot of the time, the people moving into protocols are actually people are moving out of engineering, or people are moving out of business analysis or something like that. And retraining, you're starting to see some university courses. Now they're addressing some product management skills, but it's still super lightweight. So what else can we do to bring people to the world of product management and actually grow it as a career. And it's things like, you know, if you've got an organisation where you've got a big team of engineers, you've got a big customer success thing, talk to an engineer. If that engineer knows somebody from the customer success team, by name, what you've just found is somebody on customer success. Who cares enough about the product and the customer to go talk to engineering? isn't scared of talking to engineering is able to explain the problem, right there. You've got somebody who has potential to be a product manager. So how do we start taking people from things like that and building them out? Putting those training courses in place to actually giving product people an actual career hierarchy? That makes sense. If I say to you, what's the difference between a senior product manager and a head of product? What's the difference between that and a Director of Product, VP of product or Chief Product Officer? If I asked five different people what a good Chief Product Officer looks like, I get five different answers. Right? That's not scalable.

Jason Knight 19:54

No, well, I think the thing that you've caught out there is actually valid and that's something I chatted about with Randy and Lily on your podcast or on their podcast, which is basically the fact that this, as I think I put it, like there's no ISO standard for product leader job titles, right? Like, in fact, I was reading a tweet the other day where some guy said that he'd been like a director of product to CPO, a VP of product and a senior product manager in four different organisations. And his role was basically the same in all of them. And I think that it's kind of testament, I guess, in some ways to the fluidity of the role and the kind of exciting mess that we will find ourselves in. But it's also a testament to the fact that there is no standard and lots of companies don't really know what they're doing when they're hiring or what they're hiring. And they kind of just, I think I've seen it put that they basically just choose whatever job title sounds good to them, or that they can pay the amount of money that they want to pay for to get some level of product experience. But like, yeah, maybe they don't want to make it a VP because I'd have to pay them more, they'd have to report to someone that I don't want them to report to. Yeah, but yeah, I do think that in general, the product leader, job title situation is a bit of a mess. Like, there's no consistency at all.

James Mayes 21:02

Not at all. So it's not just about scaling product teams. It's about scaling product management as a craft.

Jason Knight 21:07

Oh, no. Yeah, for sure. I think actually, it's really interesting what you say as well around this whole idea about getting people in from other parts of the company, because I've been speaking to a few people around, like how to get into product in the first place. Because of course, it's one of those chicken and egg situations you find a lot of time. Yeah. So for example,

if you don't have product manager experience, you can't get the job, but you can't get the job without product management experience. So then you start getting advice from some people around and advice that I share, to be honest, is like Well, yeah, go and get that adjacent role. So go and get that CS role, go and get that QA role, go and get some other role within the organisation, work really closely with the product team. But I guess, is that the only way that you think that people can get into product organisations without that experience, if they can't find too, if they're not lucky enough to get like an APM programme, or all that other kind of ways that they can sneak in and start to show the value that they can bring?

J James Mayes 21:56

I mean, there are a variety of ways. Some of the best product people I know, come from a background in customer success for sure. I've certainly seen some engineers move across the first product manager that we actually hired at mine, the product had originally been in marketing. Yeah, he said, I want to move into product management. And actually, his his initial role with us was kind of a sort of swiss army knife, we got him involved in a little bit of marketing, a little bit of event operations, a little bit of logistics, and then gradually started moving it more towards you're now taking on specific product management responsibilities, because you know, what we do you know, our customer, you know, where the bottlenecks are. And it's, yeah, to a large extent, he kind of engineered himself into that role by being omnipresent and able to make problems go away. That's what we do. That's exactly what you know. So you know, I think there's, there's a lot of, if you can find a company where you think you'll get good support as a product manager, and just figure out how to join that company. If he's got a leadership team that you admire, if he's got a product that you understand and you feel for it, there's got customers that you can empathise with, and you want to get started in product, get anything you can in that company get started, just make yourself useful, and touches many parts of it is possible. Because one of the things that I hear most commonly is that product managers are fundamentally the referee that sits in the middle. So if you suddenly become known to all parts of the organisation, as somebody who makes problems go away, you're on the right track.

J Jason Knight 23:12

But as far as you're concerned, what are some of the things that break first, then as you start to scale out? So if we assume that people are in the companies already, and we're talking very much about building up the organisation, getting more people building out the teams, maybe splitting across product lines and stuff like that, like what breaks first? And what are some of the things that you can maybe use as warning signs to tell you that you maybe have to nip something in the bud before it becomes an unsolvable problem?

J James Mayes 23:36

I think one of the first things that we see go wrong is that communications and alignment piece, because typically, when you get to the point, you're scaling a product team, you've got, let's say you've got 10 different people on the product team. They've got different education, different philosophical backgrounds, they've been through different tech stacks before different companies with different frameworks, different processes. They're all talking about product

management, and they're all talking about your customer base. But they're using slightly different language here, there and everywhere. Yeah, they they use sort of framework and process interchangeably. And they might talk about the same framework, but they might be implementing it in a slightly different fashion. So that, for me is one of the first things that we see falling apart when companies do start to scale as product teams.

Jason Knight 24:14

Yep, that's fair enough. But I'm sure that no one's going to sit there and say you can solve all of that with technology. Now not because of course, there's people...

James Mayes 24:23

I mean that was primarily an education piece.

Jason Knight 24:25

But what can you solve with technology? I mean, you said at the beginning that you wanted to talk about like, text scaling, so and yeah, without using Pendo as an example too many times because, you know, we want to be completely neutral. Like, what technology can you use? Or what solutions or what types of solutions can you use to try and help with that at least?

James Mayes 24:43

I think that this is a great point to throw back to one of those original quotes from one of those early quotes from Steve Blank. There are no facts inside the building only opinions. He's encouraging you to go get closer to your customers, right> But the last two years, not only have we been further away from our customers than ever before. We've also seen customer behaviour changed more in the last two years than we did in the last two decades. So that part about getting closer to our customers than ever before, is both more difficult and more important than it has ever been. That's the bit where data really comes to play. And you see a lot of trends. Now we're data being used to make more and more strategic decisions, the influence of product management as a strategic business function actually growing. But I still think there's an awful lot of organisations that have data in different silos all over the place. And actually being able to bring that data together into one cohesive platform is where it really, really starts to make sense. And the companies that I see building, sort of really interesting products for the future product managers are those companies who say we don't want to be a point solution for just one thing, we're going to show you a much more holistic picture of what's going on inside your app, what the users are doing, where they might be struggling where they might be going next. And short. Pendo is a good example of that. I'm sure other products are out there too.

Jason Knight 25:54

In the interest of balance, are the products are available! But you also talked before about the missed opportunity of digital transformation. Now I know all of these words mean, but what do

you specifically mean by the missed opportunity of digital transformation?

James Mayes 26:08

A good friend of mine actually hit the nail on the head with this one with a line the other day just didn't connect with a chatbot. And he said, The problem with most companies doing digital transformation today is that they're just scaling bad process faster. I kind of throw it back to that earlier comment about customer behaviour is changing. You look at a lot of organisations that are going through digital transformation. They're taking what they do, and they're putting it online. Cool. But you're still you're still solving that original customer problem that you identified nine years ago. Is that problem now? How valid is your solution now? Could you potentially solve it faster, cheaper, better? And it feels it feels to me like that there's an awful lot of digital transformation project actually just missed the opportunity of talking to the customer. And evaluating whether or not those behaviours have changed in a way that requires a fundamental redesign of the whole problem solution thing. Frankly, that's that's the missed opportunity right there. There's just a lack of understanding as to what customers are trying to do on a day to day basis and how they're living their lives. I mean, I don't care when you're talking about your groceries, or how you work or how you learn or how you shop or how you go on holiday. All of it has changed. And I don't see anywhere near enough companies actually recognising that.

Jason Knight 27:20

Yeah, I mean, I think that's the typical cliche of companies being stuck in the past. And I think a lot of that then starts to also kind of show up in this. It's not just about, for example, not talking to customers, or obviously, it clearly is, but it's also about the fact that they try to basically scale up all of their, as you say, processes that have served them for so long. And then they end up basically saying that they're agile, for example, but they use some horrendous Scaled Agile process or some product that to basically suck all of the agility out of it and just make it look like they can.

James Mayes 27:54

Let's be honest, here, we're talking about companies that do waterfall with stand ups, right?

Jason Knight 27:57

Well, waterfall with two lines, like just to get a Sharpie, and due two week lines on it. I mean, that's a really... I mean, it kind of feels a bit like a cliche, but I think it's also fair to say that it happens quite a lot. You don't have to go too far out into the community and speak to too many people to realise that that's still going on quite a lot. I'm sure you're seeing that. And you have seen that with the mind of product communities and some of the people that you've been speaking to the events and stuff like that. So it's a big problem. And again, I'm assuming that we can't just sit there and try and solve that with technology, because no technology can fix these organisations at their root, but like, Are there any ways or methods or approaches that

you've seen where if there is a company that's trying to digitally transform, and it's having a tough time of it for some of the reasons that we've kind of just gone through, like approaches that they can take to give them a little bit more success? Or is it so context dependent, that there's not really any generic advice or generic approaches that would work?

J Jason Knight 28:56

James Mayes 28:56

I think there's been sufficient transformation over the last couple of years that I don't care what industry you're in, you should be able to point to another organisation in your sector that has transformed and done well. So even if you just go basic on basic financial performance over the last few years, and then take a look at the digital footprint that runs alongside that. So start by just doing that benchmarking and saying who else in our sector has actually done this? And do we think has done it well, and then look at how they did it? Because an awful lot of the time, that's not happening in secret. People are telling those stories on blogs, there'll be podcast interviews. So go look at a competitor that you admire and say, what did they do? What works just like a horror story of something that went wrong as well, and that just saved you a landmine. So I don't think it's necessarily that hard to address those mistakes, and they are different from industry to industry, which is why I say there's a certain amount of benchmarking you can do in your own vertical before you even go outside that.

Jason Knight 29:49

But are you aware of off the top of your head any really strong examples of a massively successful digital transformation like one that sticks in your mind that you would use as an example to any One that says, hey, what's the digital transformation? Because whenever I think about it, it's always like, Oh, well, yeah, there's some companies that have done a bit and they've maybe adjusted the deck chairs on the Titanic or whatever. But they've not really, they've not really done it done it. But are you aware of any kind of exemplar companies that you would use to kind of say, Hey, this is how digital transformation should work based on some of the stuff that you've seen out there?

J James Mayes 30:23

How about an example of a major high street bank in the UK that did a really good job, up until it hit one particular caveat, so we can offer you a success story and a learning to go with. So here you go. They basically looked at the startups eating their lunch came to the conclusion that one of the reasons startups were able to move so fast, and so quickly, was these product managers at the heart, spinning many plates getting really close to customers, clearly identifying exactly what problems they could solve, and then building things that were really targeted on solving those problems for customers. So they set up this little innovation lab that is completely separate to the main bank, lose all the sort of the big bank overhead type stuff, and let them actually operate within the constraints of compliance as fast as they possibly could to ship product. And they did incredibly well. They released some mobile apps that started winning awards, they started picking up new customers as a result of it and it was going fantastically well. They then made a fatal error of somebody quite a way up in the bank, realising just exactly how many awards they were picking up. That's great. I'm gonna fold that into my division. Now you're part of the bank. Over about next nine months, they probably lost

about half the team and innovation slowed to a crawl. And I think you can probably figure out where the rest of that goes. But yeah, it started by saying how do we actually build product values at the heart of this? How do we understand what customers got problems with? How can we move at pace to actually ship things to customers and get real feedback?

Jason Knight 31:44

It's funny actually, it reminds me of a story from my past where company I was working for bought a small, urgent startup, yeah, they wanted to reinvigorate their own product line or whatever they wanted to bring in as new fresh thinking, get into new markets, new use cases and stuff like that. So very exciting. Pretty sure they spent about nine months trying to get them off of Amazon into some internal cloud service, none of that works, they spent nine months, they finally got there realise it didn't work, spend a little bit longer going back onto Amazon to try and basically recover from the technical problems that they've caused. And then they sold them. So like, there you go, that's the archetype or big company, buying a small company to try and make yourself better, failing utterly. I guess it's tricky, though, right? Because if you're in a big company, working in a big company fashion, and you buy some little urgent startup, to try and bring some capabilities, skill or technical now sin, like, the culture within that company is going to be so different to the culture in your company, I would assume the vast majority of the leadership team just want to get out as soon as they earn out period expires, it's really hard to buy a company to get that innovation, and actually maintain the culture. I mean, obviously, you've just been bought. So hopefully, you're gonna tell me a happy story about this. But like, it must be really tricky when you're being bought by not so much a Pendo. But more of a like a big corporate, that's just going to come in and smash all your culture to pieces.

James Mayes 33:07

Yeah, 100%. I mean, there were a couple of there were a couple of companies that we were talking to who had been around a little bit longer, and were significantly bigger in terms of CIO, and we kind of looked at them and thought, if we do this deal, this is going to end badly, they're going to destroy the culture, they're going to destroy the people who will have nothing left within six months. Whereas with Pendo, we're looking at say they've been around about the same sort of length of time, as we have, there might be 1000 people instead of mind the products 15 or 20 people, but they still got that move fast ship things get close to customers, there's still a lot of the right attitudes in there. And then from my team's perspective, there was an awful lot of, we're now part of this larger thing with credit career opportunities, different things that we can investigate different paths that we never thought might be appealing that we could go look at. So there's a certain amount of cross over there happening now. And it's like, I think there's some folks at Pendo, who quite happily look at my the product and say, I wouldn't mind doing a stint with that team at some point. So maybe there'll be two way traffic there in the future. Who knows?

Jason Knight 33:57

The cuckoo in the nest. So what's next for you then in your new evangelising career? Like are you now going to be out being a fixture on the conference circuit all summer? You've got a book in the works anything like that, like what's what's next for you?

James Mayes 34:12

There's a book in the works at some point, but that is a way off. I'm terrible at sitting down and carving out the time for writing anyway. And that doesn't that's just when it comes to a slide deck. So there's no way I should just yet I've got a number of conference things lined up this summer. And it's kind of it's a mix. Some of it is events where I'm actually talking about the mind the products, the Bible story, how we went from having our revenue completely wiped out at the beginning of 2020 to launching a premium membership subscription business and then surviving and going on to exit depinho. So there's a story of a company transformation in there to be told at some point. Some of it is you know, there's there's some curiosity in there in the communities you sort of outlined with the intro here today why? suspect there's a bit of that, and then there's a hunk of it, where frankly, we've got my the Product Tank meetups happen in about 220 cities around the world and a lot of to move in pretty dormant for the last two years or so. So there's a level of energy to be reinjected into there to reinvigorate those. So there's gonna be some time looking at that. And then likewise, looking across Pendo, and by the product and say, Where can we help each other out, because Pendo, for example, have a blue professional services team. But they're focused on training people to use Pendo. Some of their customers actually need good product management training. So there's an opportunity there for me to join some dots here in there. So I suspect on may actually becoming that sort of Swiss Army knife of something a little bit different on every day, which, to be honest, suits me best anyway, I have a short attention span this Be honest. So that idea of sort of, it's a conference today, it's a podcast tomorrow, then it's an internal meeting to figure out how we can join the dots in these three things. And hey, look, we used to do that two years ago, that's no longer fit for purpose. But maybe there's a different way we can breathe new life into that. So I suspect the next three to six months is going to be pretty varied. I think gradually out of that, we'll see some places where we can say, okay, James is really impactful here. That's really, really helpful. How about over there? Maybe that's not his happy place. I suspect my role has a little bit of shaping still to come. But I'm always happy to talk about it if people have got questions.

Jason Knight 36:06

Well, I'm still looking forward to the throwdown with John Cutler at a boxing ring near you.

James Mayes 36:13

More likely to get the bikes out so you can get up that hill faster. John and I are both a little keen on the cycling side of things

Jason Knight 36:21

OK well, we'll see if the metric and the Imperial cycles work together on the same tracks. But speaking of questions, if people want to find you after this and find out more about Mind the Product, or Pendo, or the evangelism stuff you're doing or any other product managers stuff they've got on their mind, where can they find you?

James Mayes 36:38

James@mindtheproduct.com is still me... probably will be for quite some time. I'm pretty active on Twitter or LinkedIn. If people can't see me sort of pick it up on a social platform. You want to find me there, come find me. I'm really not hard to find.

Jason Knight 36:51

Well, there you go, as we all hope not to be, well, how am I sure to link that into the show notes and then hopefully, you'll get some screaming fans rushing in your direction and finding out what it's all about.

James Mayes 37:01

That sounds terrifying and brilliant. Thank you very much.

Jason Knight 37:05

Well that's been a fantastic chat. So obviously really grateful you spent the time and cleared up a few concerns for the mind of product fans out there and interesting to catch up on some of the stuff you're doing these days. Obviously we'll stay in touch but yeah, as for now. Thanks for taking the time.

James Mayes 37:18

My pleasure.

Jason Knight 37:21

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to pop over to https://oneknightinproduct.com, check out some of my other fantastic guests, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app and make sure you share your friends so if you and they can never miss another episode again. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest but as for now, thanks and good night.