

One Knight in Product - E128 - Andy Budd

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SPEAKERS

Andy Budd, 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 skip level who have asked me to ask you this interesting question. Do you struggle with communicating with dev teams and understanding technical terminology and concepts? On episode 89 of this podcast I hosted Irene Yu, founder at Skiplevel, an on demand training programme that helps professionals and teams become more technical in just five weeks, all without learning how to code. You can learn the knowledge and skills you need to better communicate with developers and become more competent in your day to day role with the Skiplevel programme. Go to <https://skiplevel.co> and use code OKIP75 to get \$75 off the programme by the 15th of June 2022. So you better get cracking, and you can check the show notes for more details. On tonight's episode, we talk about the value of product design, how designers can help us to get the product market fit quicker and why it's important to get them in early before companies get set in their ways. We talk about some of the problems designers and product people have with going into the top table some of the ways they might try to get there and how product people aren't playing the same game as the rest of the leadership team. We also ponder when it's time for founders to move on why they should consider doing that and whether some will hang on to the bitter end regardless, through all this and much more. Please join us on One Knight in Product.



Jason Knight 01:29

So my guest tonight is Andy Budd. Andy's a design leader, startup advisor coach and investor who says he believes great design creates competitive advantage. Andy is also a published author who once co wrote CSS mastery, but these days is trying to vertically and horizontally align organisations around the impact of design. Andy says he once went diving in an active underwater volcano. So he's clearly well used to pressure and he can breathe and eat fire. So I'm really looking forward to some hot takes on design and leadership in this interview. Hi, Andy, how are you tonight?

A

Andy Budd 01:58

I'm doing really well. And Jason that was a, I think that was possibly the best intro I've ever had. I loved all of the things you kind of pulled together. That was brilliant. In fact, I might need to get a copy of that and use that as my official bio from now on.

**Jason Knight 02:11**

You go. I can get myself up on Fiverr and record it to music if you if you so desire. Right. So first things first when I spoke to my product design colleagues recently and said I was speaking to Andy but they were amazed. They're excited. They couldn't believe it. So am I right in assuming you get the full Beatlemania or shall we maybe call it Buddmania effect at US conferences?

A

Andy Budd 02:33

Oh, crikey, no, were that the case? I mean, I think I think I've definitely, I've had my moments throughout my career, when I think maybe sort of, kind of like late noughties sort of 2009 2010 2011 when user experience design was like, really at its peak clearleft, the agency I used to run was one of the best UX agencies in the world with one best agency of the world and number of times, and I used to speak at a lot of events around the kind of topic of UX. And so I I guess I was fairly well known. But we've got a whole new generation of designers now a whole new generation of product people how new generation of product managers, they've got no idea who they left is, and they've got even less idea who antibodies. So I think I'm sort of a very, very small niche of maybe slightly ageing UX people, like have a clue who I am. Most people, no idea.

**Jason Knight 03:23**

So now all of those people that I said, we're excited are now going to think that they you think that they're ageing, but I'm sure that'd be fine. But it's okay, we'll bring you to the consciousness of a new, a new cohort of designers on this interview tonight. So let's talk about clear left. And so you first came to public consciousness, as you said, through your work with clear left and the profile you bought up there, that was a digital design agency, you founded it back in 2005. But as you've pointed out, you've you've now left or I know that you're not left, you're still part of the non executive team, you're still there kind of helping out and consulting, but you're not part of the day to day operations anymore. And I'll read the blog posts you put up when you announced that you were leaving. And it suggested it was very much a case of to put words in your mouth kind of escaping the confines of business and almost becoming one with the force of UX like being more of a seven to UX community and moving away from that day to day grind of company management. Is that the long and short of it have I massively oversimplified that.

A

Andy Budd 04:19

I think you might have massively oversold it, because again, you've made it sound like it was a much more virtuous thing than it probably was. I mean, I guess like I so I've been running clearleft for sort of 15 years as CEO, I think most CEOs or MDs or however you want to kind of

define it, that leading role have a certain lifespan. Yeah. And I think that I had naturally come to the end of my lifespan. I think the first five years in any role, but particularly running a company is exciting. You're getting the band together, you're solving all these problems, and they're the first time you've ever solve these problems. It's very exciting. I think the next five years, it's a sort of a time of sort of consolidation, you're you're optimising. you're improving. You're you're making the He's efficient. I think my last five years, not just mine, but I think a lot of people's last five years in a big role like that, things start to become repetitive to some extent. Yeah, but you on your 50s Pitch your new 20th or 200 proposal, your 20th conference. And so I think I started looking ahead and it started looking very samey. And so my goal was either like to keep myself interested was to grow the business. And, you know, that was one option. But it was also slightly selfish option, because it was a desire to grow purely to meet the founders ego. And I just came to the realisation that actually maybe the company is where it wants to be naturally wants needs to be. And actually me trying to kind of get things moving and growing bigger, was selfish, and not really benefiting the team and where they were. So I guess I came to the realisation that if I wanted to do new things, rather than having clearleft be the vehicle to do new things, I can actually literally let go its own path. And I think I could go off and explore other areas, and wouldn't be doubly. I think the other thing is I, I've always sort of had this philosophy of, well, I've had this philosophy of as a leader, I think leaders to try and make themselves redundant. Yeah. And in the short term, what that means is freeing up all the things that anyone can do, to allow yourself to focus on the things that only you can do. So in the early stages of many tech companies, the founders are maybe not in the early stages of the product people. But then they hire amazing product people, and then they go off and they start raising money, and they start doing the sales and the marketing. And then they hire a great salesperson, a great marketing person, and then their operation on the highway operations person. And each step, you removing yourself from things that anyone can do, or specialist people can do, to free yourself up. And so I had this philosophy throughout the whole career of clay left. And the inevitable kind of endpoint of that is one day you wake up and realise, actually, you don't really need to be there, you've got an amazing team of people who are looking after the company, really well, probably better than you could alone, you're specialists. And then you find yourself well actually, like, what am I what is the value I'm delivering here. So I just got to that stage. And so I spent the last three, four or five years of my time actually left kind of slowly, testing my hypothesis that if I leave left, nothing dramatic would happen. So I took a took a, you know, my, my partner went to do a yoga course, for a couple of months, I joined her and, and so that was a couple of months off. And then a couple of months, a couple of years later, I took a six month sabbatical, or maybe four months medical over summer. And each time I sort of step back, not only did the company not explode, but it probably worked better, because I wasn't there meddling and poking my nose into things. And also, by stepping away, it forced other people to step up. Yeah, and I think if you find yourself in a situation where you make people or allow people to really, really show you what they can do by stepping out of the picture, it forces them to take ownership, because if you're always hovering around like, on my day to day, normally people will be constantly coming up and asking me questions. Andy, what should we do? Should we do this? Should we do that? Should we do something else? And obviously, like most CEOs, you want to be helpful? So you answer that question. But by answering those questions, you don't let those people make the decisions himself. Whereas if you're like, you know, and he's on the other side of the country, and can't be bothered, people make the decisions. And often they make them better than you would have done. Yeah. And, you know, I'm incredibly proud of my team, because I look at my team, and it's like, hey, you know, I helped build this team, but they are making better, smarter decisions, and I probably ever would. And so I feel really, really vindicated that it was the right decision and the right time, and, you know, allowing other people to be part of that journey. I think the other thing, and then we can move off of clearleft, if you want. The other thing is I wanted to kind of

leave a legacy at clearleft. And the best way of leaving a legacy that it goes on beyond you. Yeah, I would love to be in a position that the company so going in 510 2030 years, and isn't relying on me to do that, you know, it'd be great if it became a something other than me. And so I took it through the first part of his journey, but I think it's open to other people now to to navigate in the next however many years



Jason Knight 09:17

And bon voyage to them and all who sail with them. It's fair to say that not all founders are prepared to take that leap that you took to make themselves redundant, move on off and go do something else and everyone else take over the company and take their creation on. And obviously a lot of that could be down to ego or maybe they just don't trust anyone else because they just think that they're the only people that run this but what's your advice to such a founder who's maybe maybe overstayed their welcome just a little bit, and maybe hadn't seen that? Like, is there a kind of a, almost like a test or a set of benchmarks that founders can use or signals that they can look forward to but Basically point out to themselves that it's really time to move on. Or do you think that this is something that certain founders will just always have a, like a cloth err, that means that they will never get to that.



Andy Budd 10:12

I really think it's not just limited founders. But I think everybody has to have like a high EQ, I think everybody has to be aware of their own skills and limitations, and has to listen to what's going on in the market, and what people are telling you. I think, most people, when they join a company, like there's a period of time where they're at their best, you know, you might be an amazing designer or developer to get a company off the ground. But that might not mean you've got the skills necessary to run a five or 10 person team, or a 50, or 500 person team, and being aware of what you're good at, not presupposing, that you should be great at all parts of that journey. But understanding what you enjoy and what gives you energy and what you're good at, I think it's really important. Typically, you tend to find in more traditional companies, where the CEO isn't the founder, CEOs have a kind of like a five year kind of lifespan. Yeah. And actually, you want to constantly be bringing new blood in, to have different ideas, you know, because quite often you get quite settled and quite overly comfortable. Otherwise, I think founders in my experience, often 10 years is a really good to the timeframe, because over 10 years, you can grow in and scale a business. But after 10 years, you know, you particularly if you're looking at startups, startup founders might be the great person, you know, great to get you to that sort of, who knows, you know, you might be a great person to get product market fit, you might be a great person to get series A Series B, you might even be a great leader to kind of take you all the way up to IPO. But that doesn't actually mean you're the right person, you might have been the right person to manage 100 person company, you might be an absolute disaster for managing 1000 person company. And being aware of that being conscious of that I think is is really important. So whether you're a founding developer, or designer, or a CEO, I think awareness of your limitations, and also what gives you joy and energy, I think is really important.



Jason Knight 12:03

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I think there's a certain Interview with the Vampire vibe

there with the getting the new blood in every few years to keep yourself grounded and young. So nice to get a bit of horror reference in there as well. But let's talk about now move away from horror. So on Twitter, you've got a pin tweet saying something along the lines of, you're essentially doing two things. Now, you're advising startup founders how to create thriving product businesses through the lens of design, and you're helping design and product leaders become more influential in their business. And you also say you see these as different sides of the same coin. Now, I might say that that coin is somewhat unfairly weighted in some startups. And I hear and see a lot of chatter around about how design and frankly, product management as well don't really get a good seat at the table. So what's it like out there with those companies that you were advising and some of the people you're coming across? Some of these founders that maybe haven't even started thinking about design yet?

A

Andy Budd 12:54

I think all of these things are gradation. So somebody said, I mean, one of the reasons I started clearleft was because I you know, I generally am why I speak at conferences, and why I write books and stuff is because I genuinely believe in the power of design. I think design can make people's lives better in a small regard, you know, talking kind of world changing, but we've all experienced really, really frustrating interfaces, we've all experienced things that have been poorly thought through, and good design. Hopefully he thinks through those problems thinks through the frustrations users have to make their lives marginally better. So I'm not curing any kind of major diseases or illnesses or solving world hunger. But because I'm a designer, I can help make things slightly less frustrating for people. Also, I believe that design has a big role to play in Product Market Fit product market fit the holy grail of my startups, which is trying to create a product that customers love us or convert to and use every day. And so I think a lot of startups mistakenly think that the way to put a market fit is to engineering effort, and through the genius of the founder. But I think there's a process, you know, there's a really, really well tried and tested process that includes research includes customer development, it includes coming up with a range of different ideas to solve a particular problem, rather than just jumping to the first one that looks the most credible, it involves often trying out a number of different ways to solve that problem. But then deploying the one that you have the most confidence in, and then obviously seeing how it performs in the market in iterating. And I think by engaging designers, at an early stage, companies can shortcut a lot of missteps, coldest acts kind of, you know, brick walls, and that can serve everyone a lot of time and a lot of hassle. And you can get to Product Market Fit faster, you scale faster, and you can start delivering value faster. So I'm a big proponent of that. And so my journey at clearleft was trying to teach that mentor to business owners. Back in the day when we founded clearleft we were the first UX agency in the UK. People hadn't heard of UX before people were just the state of art of design back in the day was make a pretty picture on Photoshop. Make a bunch of pages look roughly similar And so we were talking about how to do some of this stuff, which is later been divided into custom development and researching yada, yada, yada. And I would argue that we were very successful, I would argue that going from nothing instead of 2005, to maybe reaching peak UX somewhere between 2009 and 2012. Now that process have become so natural and normal, that actually, the term UX has become meaningless. Because before it was used as a term to differentiate from the bad way of doing things. So the good way doing things now, because everyone does things to a certain level in the same way, it doesn't really make sense to even use that term anymore, because we're all largely sort of following that same philosophy. And I've seen designers in the corporate world really thrive. You know, I've seen, if I look back 5678 years ago, most of my friends were in small design teams, the design work, the

really interesting design, what was being outsourced to agencies. Now I'm seeing design teams grow, I'm seeing a large number of designers and practitioners turned into design leaders. This is why I started leading design the conference and also the community. Because suddenly, 567 years ago, we were having all these new teams blowing up. And people leading those teams never lived before and another leading teams of 510 50 100 200. We're seeing people with titles like VP of design Chief Design Officer, while you know, I would definitely say that design is now has in many places earned its seat at the table. I think in many places, that seat is still a high chair, I think PISA the executives don't fully appreciate the value that design can bring. I think often they say they do, but there's a classic quote around, don't tell me what you value, show me your budget. And I'll tell you what you value. And I think still, if you look at teams, design teams are usually under resource when it comes to engineering or product or marketing, particularly, or sales, or pretty much any other team. But I think largely that battle, if it's not been one has at least been with existing teams is going in the right direction. But one of the realisations I had is, through my coaching work I coach, a lot of design leaders, again, has directors VPs of design. And what they've been finding is that when they come into companies already established, they've got a bit of an uphill struggle, because they're trying to convince a company that's been around for five or 10 years, or sometimes 50 or 100 years to do things slightly differently than they've done before. And the challenge that is the way they've done before has led to the success of where they are today. Yeah, so being a design and established company, is harder to try and convince people to change direction. And it's possible and it's happening. And it's happening slowly. But I came to the realisation that if I wanted to have maximum impact, rather than trying to help companies that are already established change slowly, I should try and go back to the source. And the source is effectively two founders in a room with an idea and a laptop. And so I've moved into as well as coaching design leaders still, I've moved into the world of venture capital. So now I work at a company called see campus, a venture partner. And my role on the surface is effectively to source and review startup ideas. So when people come and pitch to us their ideas, Amin members of the investing team will review those ideas and choose which companies wish to invest in. And once we've invested in them, then I will support a number of those portfolio companies, which basically means talking to founders every couple of weeks, helping them solve their problems. My secret kind of like stealthy mission now is I'm wanting to help those companies, not from the perspective of a lawyer or a finance person, not from the perspective of a engineer or even a product manager. But from a design perspective. Yeah, so I want to help those founders appreciate design, I want to help those founders find amazing design talent. I want to help those founders baked that talent in at the earliest stages of their company so that they are solving problems in the right way. So that when that company does scale to five designers, 10 designers, 20 designers, when the product team goes to 100 200 people, the lessons are baked in from the start, rather than having to change the process and the culture midstream.



Jason Knight 19:20

So I would assume from what you've just said that you would advocate getting design leadership into a startup as early as possible. Is that fair to say?



Andy Budd 19:30

It's fair to say, I mean, obviously I'm biased. And if I was a product manager, you might say, Well, we definitely did get product management in and as a marketer, you'd say, well, you definitely to get marketing in. And if I was a finance person, I'd probably say well, you definitely

didn't FD. So I'm not saying that my approach is right. But it is my approach based on my own personal lived experience. So absolutely. Like, I love companies that have a founder or co founder who comes from a design background. Yeah, I love companies that don't but we realise the importance of design early on want to find a founding designer, their first designer that they want to hire, not in the first year of the company, but maybe in the first weeks or months. And those early designers can help navigate those founders through the very, very complicated process of coming up with a product. Yeah, because the ironic thing is, most company founders have never done that before, from soup to nuts from start to finish. But a lot of designers, especially designers, and agencies that are used to doing zero to one projects every single day, and will iterate through maybe half a dozen, zero to one projects in a year. If you hire someone like that, that's three or four years in and is designed 20 or 30 projects from the start. They have a process and a platform and a way of thinking they have an appreciation for user needs have appreciation for customer discovery, they have an appreciation that the first solution might not always be the best solution, but it might be they have an appreciation which one of the biggest problems, particularly when I'm talking to founders and product leaders, is prioritisation. You know, how do you prioritise a backlog? How do you decide what you're going to build next? And designers and product people in general, have answers to many of those questions, or at least have a process with which to judge the answer. And so you're not sort of you know, if you have those people in the room, when you're making those decisions, you have structure, you're not just throwing features at a wall and seeing what sticks, which is often the perception of founders, I don't think it's entirely true. I actually think one of the weird things is, I think a lot of founders have done a lot more customer discovery, and a lot more research than people give them credit for. But it's just incredibly informal. That research comes from them eating their own dog food, because they're solving a problem that they deeply understand. It comes from them talking to lots of people before they even started solving the problem to understand what the problem is. But a lot of this stuff is hidden, because it's done before the product people come on board.



Jason Knight 22:00

It's not in Jira.



Andy Budd 22:01

Yeah, no, it's not in Jira. And it's also done in a very ad hoc way. Yeah, it's not a beautiful, well designed process is often a little a bit kind of scrappy. But startups a little bit scrappy. And so I think, yeah, for me, I think one of the challenges happens, though, is in the first year of a product, realistically, the founders are the product managers. However, as they start moving away from only building the product, and start looking at building the business, have less and less and less time available. So their first product hire is usually more of a product administrator, which is frustrating because it's more of a short order chef. Yeah, they still want to decide what gets built. But they didn't have the time to deliver it and put the processes in place. So they kind of needed a product ops person to take that up and put all the operationalizing of the process in place. But the longer that goes on, the more divorce the founders off and the product process. Also the more divorced they are from customers, because they're dealing with 101 other different things. And so over time, tension tends to build between the founders, and the early product people. And obviously, the early product, people want to own the process more they want to be not just being told what to build, but

they want to be going out and deciding themselves. This is what we've been taught at school at university. Yeah, this is what we've been taught by listen to podcasts, like yours and going to conferences. And so this tension emerges. And helping product founders and design leaders and company founders navigate that challenging time, I think is one of the biggest things I found myself doing over the last kind of year or two. Helping founders. And this goes back to your other point about me slipping away from clay left, helping founders realise what they don't know. And realised when they need to bring experts in and realise when they need to step away. And the frustrating thing for those founders is what almost always happens is if they step away, everything slows down. Because, yes, because they're the owner, they can make decisions off the bat. Or they don't have to kind of validate those decisions. They don't have to make sure those things are perfect, because they're the owners. Yeah, if it crashes and burns on their head, because it's their money, right? Yeah, the reason a lot of us have to go off and do a lot of this research is because if we screw up, we might be out of a job. Whereas if it's their money, if it's their their business, they've got a little bit more responsibility, but also a bit more freedom to make those decisions. And so anyway, you have this tussle, and this founders have to learn how to let go. Yeah, they have to learn how to give more responsibility over to people, they have to realise it by handing that responsibility over decisions will take a lot longer, and...



Jason Knight 24:44

Better! Better decisions.



Andy Budd 24:46

Yeah, well, possibly, hopefully, possibly, but possibly not. I mean, probably maybe this is a weird thing. I mean, there's a lot of conversation at the moment around kind of in the industry around product sense. It's all very well having a process but a lot of the times people lean on a process because they don't have a sense of what a good product is. And weirdly, a lot of founders have an innate sense of what a good product is. But they have absolutely no process. Yeah. So you get this process group of people, and this intuitive group of people clashing. And because the intuitive group of people also, at the end of the day can hire and fire people, that clash can often become very, very challenging. And actually, I think the reality is, you need people in the middle, particularly in early stage, later stage, very process driven, early stage, you need product leaders that have got that sense of feeling of product quality, and you need founders that are willing to give a little bit more rope to allow the design and product team to go through the motions of understanding the context. Because actually, I think this is a key like, I mean, this is a classic phrase, I know if people talk about this in more general product terms, but designers, there was a famous architect, I think in their 20s or 30s, want to get the details wrong could could say it. And he said something along the lines of in order to design a chair, you need to understand the room. In order to design the room, you need to understand the building. In order to understand the design the building, you need to understand the city block. So designers and product, people naturally want to zoom out to understand the context before they can zoom back in. And that can be that can lead to much, much better solutions. Yeah. But for a founder that is running out of money in six months time, they just want that chair to be designed. They don't want you to spend ages zooming out and looking at the room.

They're just like no, deliver the chair, you deliver the chair, we'll figure out where the room is, and we'll stick it in the right room. But that is incredibly frustrating to people that want to do good design work.



Jason Knight 26:46

No, absolutely. And I think that there is a certain opinion that I've heard from certain people in the past around the fact that everything does slow down, just because people are never happy with the amount of research that they've done. And they just gotta keep going, and they gotta keep going, and they gotta keep going. And they get past the five why's to the 10. Why is that a 15 Why's just because they want to check and have complete certainty about everything. Although, I guess based on what you said earlier, there's this argument that maybe if they were given a little bit more rope to hang themselves with that they'd maybe make decisions sooner, because they might not get fired for making a decision. Rather than feeling that they have to have a certain because they believe that if they make one bad decision, they're out of nowhere.



Andy Budd 27:24

And there's a sweet spot, you know, I think most companies need to put a little bit more thought and do a little bit more research than they currently do. But I also think most designers need to realise that they can probably deliver 80% of the solution. Yep, which is a really, really high level of the solution by doing a little bit less. And if both parties can come together, then you find this optimal sweet spot. The challenge is that in that situation, there were a group of people that have the power and a group people that don't have the power. So power dynamics come into play. And it's these power dynamics and get incredibly frustrating.



Jason Knight 27:59

Absolutely. But we've talked a little bit about the struggles that designers and product managers can have, I'm going to bucket this in the same bucket there because I think we should be we should be friends, right. But I assume that we're both part of the same broad conceptual team. And it's not just designers that have this top table problem, there's a big movement around lightwell soda product managers like getting even a VP of product at some sometimes can feel like a bit of a struggle. Now, let's assume for a second that this is because of some lack of executive presence, whatever that is, or leadership acumen, or whatever you want to call it. And it is pretty much a supply side problem, and that we've got product managers and designers out there that may be missing that special sauce that gets them to that top table. Like they can't just become better individual contributors. They've got to do something to get to that top table. What do they need to concentrate on, in your opinion, to maybe represent that top level and get past being that really good individual contributor?



Andy Budd 28:57

Well, I think that's that's sort of quite a complicated question. And I think a lot of it depends on the size and scale and maturity of the organisation. I think in the early stages, when you're hiring designers and product people, they need to be very delivery focused, they need to be

hiring designers and product people, they need to be very delivery focused, they need to be very pragmatic. Because what you're trying to do is you're trying to, from the founders point of view, we have 12 months worth of runway to prove that this product works. And once you run out of money, we need to go back to our our investors and be able to demonstrate enough value that we can get the next 12 months for the next 18 months. Yeah, and so most founders are basically jumping from feast to farming. And so they need pragmatic designers and product people that can help them get to that next gate. I think the challenge with a lot of designers and product people in general, is they actually want to build the best product possible on the market. Yep. And that is what the company will end up doing hopefully, but it ended up doing it over five or six years and using millions and millions of pounds. I think a lot of product people could quite happily spend 12 or 18 months, building the perfect product. But at the end of it, you've got a lovely product and no customers. Yeah, and it's very difficult to convince people who are investing, that that's going to be a sound investment if there's no evidence that people actually want to use a thing and are using the thing. So you have to balance your desire to deliver perfection, with a pragmatism around delivering customers and growth. As a finding product people and designers it can meet that balance. And what I tend to find is I tend to find that designers tend to massively skew towards, I want to build the perfect product out of the box. And to do that I need to do a tonne of research a tonne of design work a bunch of different variations. And that's understandable, because that's how we're taught. And you know, ultimately, that is the right way to do it. If you are living in a world of abundance, unfortunately, startups tend not to be living in a world of abundance. The challenge with product managers is product managers tend to be a little bit more realistic when it comes to what's needed for the business. They tend to be in more of those conversations, they tend to often be the go between between the business and the owners of the company in the design and digital teams. And so some of the time, they're just passing messages back and forth. Yeah, often, they are blamed by both sides for their role. Their bosses are blaming them for not delivering fast enough, quick enough, delivering the results. The designers and the engineers are blaming them for not giving them enough time to do the perfect work. And product managers are often stuck in the middle, which is why I regularly say that I think in some regards, product management is the hardest job in our industry, because you've got all of the responsibility, but none of the power. Most CEOs are put up to No, no, absolutely, it's really tough. And particularly if you're CEO is the head of product.

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Andy Budd 31:51

De facto, you've been told that you have the responsibility, but you don't really have the responsibility. Yeah, and you're told you've got freedom. And you've got all these lovely OKRs. But really, you're being told what to do, you're in a bit of a feature factory. So it's a tough job. I just came back from Stockholm, and I gave a talk from visitor buttons. And the talk was basically trying to encourage designers and product people, but mostly designers in general, to be slightly more pragmatic, to take a little bit more time to understand the business goals of the company, which sounds like it should be kind of a 101 stuff, that you'll be amazed at how infrequently designers really understand and I don't just mean like, have a conversation and a couple of KPIs down but really understand the stress and pressure and goals that their stakeholders are dealing with. They're really good at understanding that from the customers perspective or the user perspective. But I think using our empathy and our research skills to apply that to our business partners, our stakeholders, and if as a designer, you can use your amazing design skills, your amazing problem solving skills to deliver what the business and what your stakeholders want. The idea is that your business, people and stakeholders will appreciate you for delivering that they will trust you more, they will give you more authority

where you can then build the case for doing the things that you want to do. So it's really, you know, a lot of people talk about kind of like in a case of show don't tell. Yeah, I think a lot of us designers, our natural instinct is to put up a shiny deck with references to Jared Spool saying like, you idiots, this is how you meant to do it. But all that does is antagonise people, yeah, what you actually need to do is you actually need to figure out a way that you can show your business that for every dollar you give design, we give you five back. And if you can prove that every dollar you give design, you get five back, you're going to be showered in dollars very, very quickly, because you're showing that you're an engine for growth. And once you've been given that growth, then you can start on the side building a case for research, building a case for good customer discovery, building a case for quality, for working down your designer, UX debt, all of those good things which you know, are important. But again, things like that, like we talk about UX day, we talk about engineering that I think a lot of teams want to and expect to be working constantly at zero debt. Their goal often is to is to optimise for zero debt. But the whole concept of that is it's stuff that we borrow now to pay down later. We borrow it now and pay down it later. Because we didn't have the time and the runway to pay it off immediately. So we're growing the business, we're greeting customers, we're getting money, then we're using that money in six months or nine months time to pay down some of the debt that we spent, you know, a year before. We just need to realise that.



Jason Knight 34:43

Yeah, so to paraphrase or sum up, and it's something I've definitely been thinking about and tweeting about it from time to time. It's about dialling back the idealism, not just reading books at people and saying this is the way that things should be or blog posts or whatnot, realising that you work for business because you do. And that business has its own goals and its own problems. And being as pragmatic as possible to make sure that whilst you do have these ideals, and you do want to get where you're going, and you want to get there the best way possible that you may have to take a little bit of tech debt, a little bit of product debt, a little bit of design debt, even a little bit of organisational debt, just to get stuff done, so that you've actually got a platform to move on to the future. And hopefully do all the things that you wanted to do once you've actually built that bedrock to go from.



Andy Budd 35:28

And I think also, another way of looking at it is, I think a lot of designers and product, people think they're playing a series of games of chess, chess, the way you win is to be better than the opponent. And as long as you're better than the opponent, you can win every single time. So I think a lot of designers go into the into the process thinking we're just playing three or four long games of chess, and after we'd be in all of the opponents, and we'll win. And the reality is actually it's more like a series of hands of poker, and you're playing dozens and dozens and dozens of hands in a game, and you're playing dozens of games in a tournament. At actually, you're not trying to win every hand, what you're trying to do is you're trying to minimise your losses of bad hands, you're trying to maximise the gains of good hands. And the reality is actually, you can have a run of losses of 10 or 20 hands. But if you play the right hand, right, you can you can clean up. And so I think most businesses are playing poker, most product teams are playing chess. And it's his understanding that actually the game you're playing his poker. And it doesn't matter if this particularly game wins, because you've got another hand and another hand, another hand. And you're not optimising for reducing loss, or reducing sort

of waste, you're trying to maximise the upside. And I think that's the key. founders are trying to maximise the upside, product teams often trying to minimise the financial downside. The difficulty there is also trying to minimise the downside on users. And we do have to remember that any game of poker, particularly if we're playing with users data, emotion, attention whenever has a negative effect on users. I also understand why designers particularly don't want to play so many lost pots of poker, because it has an effect on customers. But it's balancing the two. That is important.



Jason Knight 37:18

Absolutely. And what's one piece of advice you would give to maybe a struggling designer in a company that doesn't quite see their worth? Maybe they are working in a feature factory, maybe they are just being seen as pixel pushers, or people that do colouring in, as you've memorably put it before, they want to be seen as true strategic partners for the rest of business value creators that \$5 for the \$1 or five pounds for the one pounds, depending on your exchange rate. What can I do like one first step of which I'm sure there could be many, but like one piece of advice to help that designer, get on the way to be that true strategic partner.



Andy Budd 37:51

Again, I don't know if there's an easy one piece of advice. I mean, recognise it it's a marathon, not a sprint. Yeah. recognise that the work you do is not going to be perfect and get comfortable with imperfection, but knowing when to push and when not to push, building up your profile by delivering great work and delivering great business results. Build up your relationship with your business partner. So they see you as a facilitator, not a handbrake. And sadly, a lot of product teams see the design team has a handbrake because they're constantly moaning about, we can't do this, we shouldn't do that. And I see a lot of product teams, particularly marketing teams going outside externally to other designers and freelancers because the design team has built itself into a bit of a handbrake. So be a facilitator, not a impede of progress. But also realise actually, like the reality is that, you know, some, most restaurants are not Michelin star restaurants, most restaurants are some kind of short order chef, you can't join McDonald's, and then suddenly wake up one day and trying to change McDonald's to be a Michelin star, boutique restaurant. So have a level of realism about the companies you're going into have a level of realism about how much you can change. Realise actually, like, you know, and this is gonna sound a bit sad, but like, you're probably never going to be doing the level of strategy that you want to be able to do or think you can do, because that's just not where the commercial market is. But there are options. If you really feel strongly about the design processes, I do. The best way to implement your vision is not to go and work for another company where you're having to deal with their vision is to start your own bloody company. Oh, there you go. So you know, I want I want to see more designers put their money where their mouth is and say, hey, look, I'm frustrated. We're being told how to do it. I'm gonna go and start my business. And I'm going to show all of those other people that if you do it this way, it works really well. So start your own company, or at the very least move into a company where maybe go and work in an agency where you're iterating through lots of projects really faster, learning really faster, like ending up being one. If you're going to join a big tech company and you're one of 100 designers, you're going to be iterating a tiny part of a bigger product. The other thing to do is like, go and become a founding designer, go and be the first designer through the door, go and be that designer, it helps educate the founders, it sets the

culture that sets the tempo that builds a product from zero to one. And also what happens is like, if you're lucky, and you pick the right company, or not only picking the right company, but if you use your design skills, to turn that company in something valuable, you might find yourself owning one or 2% of a billion dollar business. And if you own one or 2% of a billion dollar business, and that business IPOs, you have freedom to do whatever the hell you want. And if you want to set up your idealised, next product, if you want to build an amazing team of designers, if you want to be a freelancer, if you want to just sit on an island somewhere making clay pots or whatever you want to do, you can do that. So I think being a, an even if that doesn't happen if you go and start. And if you go and join a startup as a founding designer, and that company doubles in size every six months, very, very quickly, you're gonna be leading a team, and then a team of four, the team of eight and a team of 16. And if all goes well, you are going to have such an accelerated career that it will open up your options. Because ultimately, we are in a seller's market at the moment. There is so much demand for designers, designers can increasingly pick and choose where they work and who they work for. If you find yourself in a situation, which isn't serving your needs, look elsewhere. That wasn't true. 10 years ago, it might not be true in 10 years time, but at the moment, demand is high people value design, if your current company isn't working for you go to another company that is or start your own.



Jason Knight 41:34

Right, absolutely. Excellent advice. But speaking of what you could do next, what's next for you? Are you planning to do more conference talks, maybe start up another firm of your own or maybe even write the next version of your CSS book?



Andy Budd 41:46

Oh, I mean, like, the CSS book was was great. But I'm well past CSS.



Jason Knight 41:52

Back to tables now!



Andy Budd 41:55

I would love to do a book at some stage in the future. Another book, I love speaking at conferences, I'm totally up for speaking more conferences. I mean, we've had a challenging couple of years, that conference world. Yep, I've done a few online events. But I love being in person, I think we're going to see a little bit of a spattering of conferences pop up over the next six months. But my hope is or my expectation is 2023/2024 will be where a lot of the old conferences will come out of mothballs. And a lot of new exciting conferences will come up. And so yeah, if any of your listeners want a, a hopefully eloquent, opinionated speaker, to kind of come and speak at their conference later this year, or early next year, I'd love to do that. And in terms of other things, you know, I'm enjoying coaching design leaders, I'm enjoying using the knowledge I've gained over the last 20 years of my career to help them solve the problems that they're tackling in bigger companies. And I'm really enjoying helping founders in the VC world, build better businesses. So I think for the next couple of years, I'm going to be

doing what I'm doing now. But I wouldn't be surprised at some stage, I get itchy feet on wanting to build a team. And obviously, having spent a couple of years in VC, are being a really great place to do something else. So there might be something next on the horizon. But I'm really enjoying what I'm doing at the moment.



Jason Knight 43:09

Oh, good for you. And what's this space? And where can people find you after this if they want to chat about design, or startups or entrepreneurship or see if you can still remember to vertically centre a div.



Andy Budd 43:20

For my blog on my website, <https://AndyBudd.com> is probably the best place to come. If you want to read some articles. If you want to kind of understand about my coaching and mentoring, or advisory work. I'm mostly very, very prevalent on Twitter. So I'm just @andybudd on Twitter. And I'm going to be on Twitter, until you know Elon Musk takes it and crashes in the car with a bunch of sort of right wing, Nazi white supremacists. So who knows when that will be it could be next week, it could be next year, it could be never, but I really enjoy Twitter as a platform. It has its challenges. But I think removing moderation and allowing hate speech, either skirts, the edges of what's legally acceptable, is not going to make it a nice place for reasoned discourse. So yeah, I'm on Twitter until, you know until it goes so downhill, that it's an unpleasant place to be.



Jason Knight 44:19

Yeah, no, I think there are many problems that you could fix at Twitter if you had the chance. And I don't think those are the ones that need to be fixed first. So we'll complete with you on that one. Well, I'll make sure to link that all in any way and put that in the show notice and hopefully you get a few people heading in your direction, maybe even revive that bad mania. Well, that's been a fantastic chat. So obviously really glad we managed to set this up and talk about some important and complicated issues around design and leadership and entrepreneurship and all those other great things. Obviously you and I will stay in touch on Twitter. But as for now, thanks for taking the time.



Andy Budd 44:49

My pleasure.



Jason Knight 44:53

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to <https://www.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 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.