One Knight in Product E60 - Christina Wodtke

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SPEAKERS

Christina Wodtke, 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. Without wishing to distract you from your objective of listening to this episode, I'd love to put a key result around number of episodes listened to. So to help achieve this, you could pop over to OneKnightInProduct.com, check out some other great episodes with product management thought leaders, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on the podcast app of your choice to make sure you never miss another episode again. Why not suggest it to your friends while you're th ere? On tonight's episode, I speak to someone who wrote the book on OKRs. No, not that one. The one before it. We speak about some of the themes from the book, some of the barriers to OKR adoption in companies, how to try and do them better, and the shocking suggestion that companies should actually have a strategy. We also consider the possible future episode of Black Mirror and you might get to decide which book my guest writes next. For all this and much more, please join us on One Knight in Product. So my guest tonight is Christina Wodtke. Christina is a self described curious human and also a lecturer at Stanford, speaker and renowned author. Christine has worked at a glittering array of Silicon Valley heavyweights including Yahoo, LinkedIn and MySpace. So I'm assuming she like all of us are good friends with Tom. Since then, she's been advising and educating, culminating in an array of books, including The Team That Managed Itself and Radical Focus, a book she enjoyed writing so much, she wrote it twice. Hi, Christina, how are you tonight?

Christina Wodtke 01:33

Fine. What an awesome intro.

Jason Knight 01:37

All into the intro. Nothing left after that.

Christina Wodtke 01:40

I just want to take you with me everywhere to explain who I am and what I do.

Jason Knight 01:44

I can be your announcer... to be fair, there's a queue. So first thing first Radical Focus, Second Edition. It's been out for around a month now. How's the feedback been so far? And has it met your expectations?

Christina Wodtke 01:56

Wow. The feedback's been very positive. I think one of the things that people really struggled with with the first edition is I wrote it for startups. I didn't even imagine big companies would be interested in it. And so after five years of talking to various big companies trying to figure out OKRs, I took all that learning and put it in second edition. And just this morning, I had some wonderful compliments on thank you for writing this because we need it because things are going sideways with OKRs. Right now, I'll tell you.

Jason Knight 02:25

Yeah, well, we'll get back to that in a short while. But that's definitely something I did want to touch on. But it's the second edition, like you say, and you've distilled some more learnings into it, which obviously makes sense. This is a second edition. But I remember speaking to Marty Cagan, who did the intro to your book, about the second edition of Inspired, obviously, his book. And he basically said that that was an entirely different book. Is yours an entirely different book? Or is it close enough? And just had some of the details changed?

Christina Wodtke 02:53

You know, that's a good question. The fiction part, you know, as you may remember, the first part is a fable, a story of a startup and that I really didn't change very much. People loved it. And I thought, well, there we are, you know, but the second half was completely rewritten. And it went from 30k words to, Gosh, 70k words. So it's quite a bit more information. Yeah, big leap forward. And so I broke it into sort of the introductory part, and then all the special situations. So if there's a part you'd like, Oh, I am a small company. I'll just skip that part. tried to make it easy for people to read as little as they have to because some people don't seem to like to read.

Jason Knight 03:35

Well, I read it on my phone, I think because I got Kindle on my phone. And it was definitely an experience. But I hadn't read the first one, the first edition. So that's obviously passed me by but definitely enjoyed the book in general. But why was now I mean, you've touched on it a bit

already. But like, why was now specifically the time to actually pick up that pen or typewriter or whatever it is you write on, and actually put the body of work in because it must have taken some time to get that done. Right. So why was now that time?

C Christina Wodtke 04:00

Well, you know, it's interesting, because every time somebody asked me a question that wasn't covered in the book, I have a tendency to write up a little essay on my website. And there were starting to be a lot of those essays. And I was thinking, Wait, when did I write that? And then it turned out five years had gone past. So I thought, well, let's take all this knowledge. And then I actually wrote my mailing list. And I thought, I'll interview a couple people. I got 250 Plus responses to that of all these things that people are struggling with, and threw it onto a Miro board and organised it and saw some patterns and decided, yeah, people would like some help. So I decided to go ahead and write it because I always think it's nicer for me to work on new problems at all then work on the same old problems over and over again. So if I have a solution, I wrote it down.

Jason Knight 04:48

Oh, fair enough. So you iterated your way to perfection and did some kind of design sprint to work out what to put in there.

C Christina Wodtke 04:54

That's how the first book came. Actually I wanted to give a talk on OKRs at South by Southwest And they said, We'll give you a book reading because I'd mentioned from my forthcoming book, which I hadn't started yet. So I went ahead and wrote a 75 page version of the book, sold it and got a lot of feedback and made the first edition based on that. So I've been lean startup my whole life.

Jason Knight 05:16

Oh there you go, living the dream. So the book's about OKRs, as we just said, objectives and key results for anyone in the cheap seats. We'll talk about a bit more about that in a minute, because obviously, you've got a lot to say on on the topic. But I'll confess that the first OKR book I read was Measure What Matters by John Doerr. And I was mildly surprised to find out that actually came out after the first edition of Radical Focus, as I assumed it had come at first for some reason. So to some extent, John's riding on your coattails? You both live in Silicon Valley, right? So I guess the question is, after his book came out, and you saw each other parties and stuff like that, which I'm sure that there must have been some that you went to, were you kind of friends? Or were you sitting there giving each other the evil eye all night?

C Christina Wodtke 06:02

I've never even met John Doerr to be quite honest. He was a VC who had invested in Zynga,

that's why I know about it, because I used it very heavily. And I will say that I know Marty really well. And I know Rick Klau very well, I would say Rick's video is the one that of course got a lot of people excited about OKRs. And so to be honest, there's not a lot of reasons for VC to write a book. That's not their business. And that's not their interest, but he is an investor in Betterworks. So I'll let you make your own connections to it. The, the what matters people are really lovely, they have a website up and I will say that when I was flipping through the book and the Learn More, and my book was the only thing listed under Learn M ore, I was gobsmacked. So I had to write them and say thank you. But I hope someday to say hi to John himself.

Jason Knight 06:51

That can be one of your objectives. Okay. But obviously, you said that the people are nice. And you've obviously read the book yourself. Anyone trying to be diplomatic would just sit there and say, oh, yeah, read both, or read all three. Now, I guess now there's a second edition. But if I could only take one of those books onto a desert island, why should it be yours?

Christina Wodtke 07:15

There's actually a couple of problems with Measure what Matters, which is the infamous tasks, not results. So one of the interesting things that came out of my conversations with Rick was that he said, if he'd realised it was going to go viral, his video, he would have made better examples. And so one of the biggest changes I made in the second edition was putting in tonnes and tonnes of really good examples of actual results. People really struggled on figuring out how do I measure something. And so I figured that if I had a lot of examples of ways to measure things that are a little more ephemeral, would be very useful to people. Also, mine is short, it's got a nice story in the beginning, and it has lots of practical advice. I'm a very pragmatic individual. So you should be able to start using it effectively, the moment you put down the book.

Jason Knight 08:04

So yours is more of a practical playbook to get you up and up and running started and lots of advice on how to do it properly, rather than being more of a theoretical treaties on OKRs.

Christina Wodtke 08:14

Yeah, I have heard from clients that after they finished Measure what Matters, they weren't sure what to do. And I didn't want anybody to say that about my book.

Jason Knight 08:23

So OKRs are definitely in fashion these days. There's a lot of stuff being spoken about them, a lot of stuff being written about them. And obviously, your book, there's Measure what Matters, there's loads of other stuff, there's OKR consultants, there's OKR boot camps, everything..

there's so much information. It's very en vogue at the moment. But you touched on it again yourself about your time at Zynga and being introduced to OKRs first of all. So what was the point where you sat there and thought, Hey, hang on a minute, there's, there's something here, this is really going to help me out?

C Christina Wodtke 08:51

Oh, well, when I left Zynga, I was really badly burned out. I was super exhausted. And I just took six months off. After that I was trying to do different things, trying to figure out what did I want to do with my next phase, and I was advising some startups like you do when you live in the Silicon Valley that seems hard to avoid around here. And they were really struggling, they were tripping over their own feet, they were getting in their own way. And I thought, hey, you know, OKRs could be useful for these folks. And so I sort of was working with different people and adapting the Zynga approach, which was super crazy, metriccy. So people don't really have that tolerance. And of course, startups often don't have good numbers. So... simplified it, cleaned it up. And people were really loving it. I thought, well, this seems useful. Maybe I should write it down so more people can use it. It really was not that complicated. I was just like, this seems useful.

Jason Knight 09:45

So would you say that your take on OKRs is very specific to you, as you say you've kind of taken it, cleaned up, adapted it or do you think that anyone practising OKRs would be doing it broadly in a way that you'd recommend if they were doing them properly?

C Christina Wodtke 10:01

Well, you know, I have some ideas about properly that may not be shared with everybody. There's a reason I called it Radical Focus rather than OKRs, like Ben Lamorte's book was ... his was the second book out on it. So I decided to call it Radical Focus, because I think that that's something that's really, really needed and in companies and the worst trend I've been seeing, and I've been seeing it in the last year, year and a half, is people trying to use OKRs for everything. And that's not what they were designed to do. They're not some giant management philosophy. They're not a project management tool. All they are is a way to make sure that your most important strategic objectives get done, to be honest, because life is full of all this crazy stuff. Like there's noise, people are yelling at you, maybe your dog is barking, maybe your boss is confused, maybe you're worried about your taxes. And you need some way to go, Oh, yes, this is the year we're moving into China, or this is the year we're going to develop this new product. And so the OKR is this way of keeping those critical things right in front of you whether you use them personally as I do, or if you use them as a company.

Jason Knight 11:09

Yeah, that's an interesting point about focus. And again, it's something you've touched on in the book about, like, you can't just put OKRs on the top of anything. And it just fixes the world of your business. Like there's certain preconditions that you need to have. And one of those

that you've just said, as well is like you have to actually have a plan. And you actually have to have a strategy that is focused enough itself. Otherwise, you're just sitting there and just everything becomes an OKR and you're just still trying to go in 25 different directions.

Christina Wodtke 11:37

Oh, my gosh, yeah. It's a mess. Well, I mean, it's the old saying, right, if everything is important, nothing is important. Yeah. So you need to know, what do I not do? I think that's a Drucker ism, which is strategy is knowing what not to do. And I like that quite a bit. So yeah, I will say that a lot of times, I find things that I know, not a lot of people know. And I'm always surprised. I'm like, I figure if I know it everybody knows it. And one of those things are one of those things happens to be thinking about strategy. And again, working with startups, it really caused me to sort of boil down how you think about strategy, because often it's this fluffy, crazy thing that sort of floats around and expensive consultants want to sell it to you. And it's really a question of, if our company is going to stay healthy, or grow? Where do we need to put our focus. And, you know, I was talking to a newspaper company about my experience working with the New York Times back when they were very first trying to figure out the web. And that's a great example, which is, oh, this thing is coming, perhaps we need to figure out what we're going to do about it. Another one is you see a market showing up, right? You know, like, Baby Boomers are ageing, that's going to affect medicine quite a bit, or, you know, this country looks like it's reaching a certain point of technological ability or financial health that we want to move into it. And unless you want to wait until it's too late, and desperately try to paddle like a crazy person to catch that wave, it's a little better to be ahead of the wave, and OKRs are a way of saying, let's start thinking about it now, before it's too late.

Jason Knight 13:13

No, absolutely. But the book's told at least in part, as you said, as a work of fiction, or a fable with our eager tea entrepreneurs, which obviously is a blatant attempt to grab the UK market, Hannah and Jack, who are struggling to make progress in their company, and in dire need of help, and it feels like everything's basically falling to pieces. And The Team That Manages Itself similarly uses fiction to make its point as well, certainly, in part. So that's obviously a conscious decision to to write the story in that way. Why does that resonate so much with you? And why do you feel it resonates so much with readers to have it told out in rather than just a list of dry examples, but to actually put that personality into it?

Christina Wodtke 13:55

I think you may have seeded me a little bit by saying dry examples. But, you know, storytelling is incredibly important. Human beings in all of human history. We've only started writing down things fairly recently, as John McWhorter likes to say if all of human history was a clock, we started writing things down around 11pm. So that means our brains haven't evolved to reading yet that's actually a theory about dyslexia. But I digress. So our brains are evolved to listen to stories and to understand stories. And so here I am going, I think I might write a book about OKRs Oh, my God, I'm writing a book about an acronym. How boring is that? And so I'm a huge fiction reader. I read tonnes of fantasy and science fiction and all those good nerdy things, and I a fan of Patrick Lencioni's books as well, like Five Dysfunctions Of A Team or Death By Meeting,

and I thought, if I could tell a story, then people would be interested, they would enjoy it, they'd get into it, and it has proven to be very, very true. I think there's something else that I didn't expect, though, which is when you write fiction, because you tell the story of people and their lives and you show workplaces, people learn more from it. I will say that I, somebody came up to me at conference and said, "Thank you so much for Radical Focus". And I was like, ready to talk about OKRs. And he suddenly went, "I had this guy I needed to fire and I had no idea how to do it. And I read your book, and I was like, Oh, I can do that". And it's proven to be true in all these funny little ways, as well. So I found fiction to be actually a really rich medium for imparting knowledge.

Jason Knight 15:34

I'm sure there's probably some study somewhere that explains some different system of your brain that in that it kind of brings into play as well, or something like that. And that's some homework for me to do after this. Now, I know it's fictional. But obviously, all fiction has a grain of truth in it, and you take it from your own experiences. So whilst I'm sure that Hannah and Jack themselves didn't exist, there must have been many people that shared many of their characteristics that you've dealt with in your time. So how many times have you walked into a company that you're advising? And seen either pretty much exactly the same situation as them or something much worse? And how do you approach doing something about that?

Christina Wodtke 16:14

I see a lot worse. I would say that I hate to tell you this. But TeaBee is a very normal startup as far as my experience goes. There's always chaos. And especially since startups are often done by young people. So they're often kind of floundering about trying to figure out what the heck's going on. Although that's not just young people, I certainly flounder about in certain areas, as well, we all do. But yeah, I will say one of the hardest things is going to a company who's trying to do OKRs. And they aren't working agile, they aren't working lean, they don't have a good system for performance management. And it's kind of like, whoa, maybe let's start somewhere else first. Let's, let's talk about, you know, empowered teams, which, as you know, is my great passion and OKRs are a piece of the puzzle. So how do you get folks from doing management like it was done in the 40s, or maybe even 20s, to be quite honest, and get them up to a more modern product management point of view. And I like to think it's sort of like cell phones. I remember, I was in Greece, oh gosh, a long time ago. And there's this guy, and he was beating octopus on the rocks. And he was wearing only pants, you know, no shirt, just ragged. He looked like a shipwreck survivor. And then he put the octopus down and reached in his pocket pulled out a cell phone. And I thought this is a guy who leapt over all the technology, you know, in between sending, I don't know semaphor straight to cell phone. So I'm hoping that what will happen between the work that like Marty's doing with empowered teams, and my writing, and a few other folks and the great folks that Mind the Product, obviously, there's a tonne of great people. Bruce McCarthy's doing interesting work. There's Teresa Torres, there's so many great people all going, Hey, folks, let's just jump over the middle bits and get to this good part, then that's what, that's what I hope to do.

Jason Knight 18:08

But you again, you touched on it just then in this part of the.. or is indeed the full focus of The

Team That Managed Itself... is this idea of empowered teams. And the way that you need those to make any kind of progress or meaningful progress. But again, as you said, you know, kind of pre empting all of my questions that that's something that not all managers are actually keen to embrace. What are some of the ways or reasons that you have heard or seen where... there's got to be some people that think this is actually a good idea to micromanage still, right? And I wonder if there's any kind of common complaints that you hear from people and maybe that you're trying to bed some of this stuff in with it says that we just can't trust our teams, or we just can't work like that, or that's not how it is here? And how do you defeat those?

C   Christina Wodtke 18:55

Oh, my gosh, that's not like that here. But what if it was? How awesome would that be. Relentless optimism, and endless questions like two year olds level of questioning? Those are a couple of things. I will say that, the reality is that I tell people a lot you don't scale. The reality is that after you get to a certain size of a company, which is smaller than most people think you just can't know everything that's going on. It's really funny. A lot of startup CEOs are like, I was walking down the halls and I saw someone I didn't know. And their mind is blown. And that's around the moment where you're like, guess what, you can't tell people what to do. The other thing is, it's a really high cost. For example, if you tell everybody what to do, A players quit, because that's, that's a waste of their time. It's annoying that they don't want to work that way. So the reason I wrote The Team That Managed Itself was really about thinking about how do we hire the very best people and then get out of their way so they can do their very best work. So there's scaling, there's the dream of actually going to sleep at night and not writing emails at 2am. And there's the ability to let go and letting go is really hard. But it's what will make the company great.

Jason Knight 20:13

So is it just an ego thing in that case, then? Or do you think that there are more pernicious elements at play?

C   Christina Wodtke 20:19

I think a lot of people think that their job is manager is to tell people what to do. I think there's a lot of bad models out there. I think that the culture shows us, you know, you watch TV, and you see a very important CEO. And they're all busy and running around saying, Stop that and do this. And it's like, no, no, don't do that.

Jason Knight 20:38

So in the book, you get very practical, and very prescriptive about the process of keeping OKRs running. So it's not just that you come up with a bunch of things and just let it go. But you're very prescriptive about how you should run that with your weekly cadencs and quarterly updates and annual reviews and stuff like that. Do you think that this is essential to the success of OKRs? Or is it merely enough to stick to the principles but just wing it the way that you fancy?

Christina Wodtke 21:07

You know, I like to call that set and forget. And then you wait till the end of the quarter for the OKR fairy to bring you your results? No, don't do that. Come on cadence is everything, cadence is more important than setting e xcellent OKRs. I have a couple of women exec friends that... we, we send each other our personal OKRs. And one woman is like, super fierce, she's all getting things done and 80% complete and stuff like that. The other one is just all hand wavy, like, oh, well, I kind of been thinking about my OKRs, maybe I should try that. Well, after doing that, for the last three years, a woman whose hand wavy, but she checks in every Monday has changed her business, gone into business for herself and is making a tonne of money and is very successful. Just because every Monday she stopped and said, "Is this really what I want to be doing with my time?" That rhythm will change lives. And the cadence is everything. So I feel really frustrated when people spend like two or three days arguing about the perfect phrasing of that objective and exactly the right number, and then not do anything else. That's a waste. It's a sad waste.

Jason Knight 22:13

So would you say is really a case of the organisation kind of using that cadence and that repetitiveness to build its muscles and get better and better and better at OKRs rather than just reading a book, doing one thing, and then as you say, set and forget and just watching everything atrophy?

Christina Wodtke 22:29

Yes. Well, yes. The muscle I think that OKRs really work is learning muscle. I think that the number one strategic competitive advantage that companies are going to have right now is their ability to learn collectively. And so with the OKRs, because you're constantly checking in, you're constantly saying, what worked, what didn't work? What experiments turned out well? What are we... what's getting in our way... that overall, a company becomes smarter and smarter and smarter and more and more nimble and more able to react to the changes in the marketplace and implement strategy, of course.

Jason Knight 23:04

But sometimes, you'll get people that maybe want to give this OKR thing a go. They go massively ambitious, they try and get it all right the first time... results are maybe kind of limited, and then they give up because it didn't work perfectly first time. What's your advice to someone like that? Aside from obviously just don't give up?

Christina Wodtke 23:22

Well, that just always makes me really, really sad. And especially since I would say, over 90% of the phone calls I get from people are saying, "yeah, we've been trying and it's not going well". So and I was like. "Oh. I wish you'd started with me. but okav. let's see what we can do now".

It's just sad, because that means they don't believe that they can learn. I don't know if you're familiar with the fixed mindset and the learning mindset concepts. So there are a lot of companies that actually have fixed mindsets and things either work or they don't, as opposed to when you try on something new... things go horribly sideways. And then you say let's do it differently next time. And then you do it differently and then you say, "Oh, well, we've now found some new challenges and on and on and on". So it's exactly the same problem. So I would say if things have gone horribly in your first try, congratulations, you're like everybody else. Everybody's first OKR goes horribly wrong. It's just part of the learning cycle. Yes, it sucks and yes, it gets better.

Jason Knight 24:22

But I've also seen situations where each team has a disparate set of OKRs. Maybe everything that they do is being forced into the OKR framework even when they're not really Os or KRs. Or worse still, you get situations where individuals within teams have their own disparate OKRs. Again, maybe not all objectives, maybe not all key results. And that's obviously not a pattern that you recommend in the book. In fact, you explicitly recommend against that. But is that in itself, kind of okay, because they're trying as in like, that's something that they could get better at, and it's just the first step of them learning or do you think that they've already gotten so far off piste that they're never gonna end up where they need to be?

Christina Wodtke 25:04

Well, there's mistakes you recover from those mistakes you don't really recover very well from and I would say individual OKRs... I now tell people " No", if they're the kind of people who don't like "No", I like to say, "wait one year and get OKRs working with a team first". But individual OKRs have got to be one of the worst possible things that people try... they try it because Google does it. But gosh, it causes so much pain and suffering. And it's because in a modern company, very few people can do things by themselves. So otherwise, yeah, go ahead, have disparate OKRs and have it go sideways and say, "Wow, this disparate thing isn't really working out for us, maybe we should try to align each other. Let's try a bunch of different things". I will admit, you say prescriptive about the book and I feel a little sad, because I believe that I try to put all the things I've seen work in the book. But to be honest, I find that people are always inventing interesting new ways to do OKRs. And that every culture is different and you really have to adapt the process to your culture. I'd like to say please adapt it after you try to do it like in the book, at least one quarter of that. And then after that one quarter, you could say, "Wow, we need to change this to this", but don't pre give up. You know, don't give up before you've even tried.

Jason Knight 26:20

Yeah, that's interesting about the trying it the right way first, or certainly your right way first, and it reminds me of a quote, which I think was from Jeff Sutherland, about Scrum, obviously, which is around like, "first you learn it properly, and you do it all very by the book. And then you get really good at that. And you can basically teach other people to do that. But the better that you get at it, the more you just throw away the book in the first place", because you've ... I

dunno, it's seeped into your bones or something like that, which I guess tracks very much of what you said around, try it the proper way first, and then adapt it afterwards rather than trying to pre adapt it. Because then you may be setting yourself up for failure.

Christina Wodtke 26:57

Absolutely. And I think that part of me kind of recoils at "the right way". But I will say that it is years and years and years. Literally, gosh, I'm old! Years of seeing what works and what doesn't work. So what I've done is write a book of all the ways people have found that do work, but they don't necessarily work for absolutely everybody. So you try it using best practices, and then you invent your own best practices.

Jason Knight 27:23

And then write your own book, and get into terrible trouble with you. Because there's another kid on the block.

Christina Wodtke 27:29

Oh, no, I'm very excited... Sense and Respond put out a new OKR book and it's really lovely. It's a very short book. It's quite good. And I think if we can have more good books out there, maybe we'll have less people unhappy because they're trying to use OKRs for everything, including buying their pencils for Christ's sake.

Jason Knight 27:49

Do you subscribe to the, I think, very Google way of basically everyone sticking on the walls and having on our cubicles and stuff so everyone can go and see everyone's OKRs? Or do you think that's completely unnecessary?

Christina Wodtke 27:59

I wish more people would be comfortable with that level of transparency. Having it all up on the intranet is a really smart idea. I know from folks, friends of mine who work at Google, they say they just hop on and they can see what everybody's OKRs are. So when they need to go horse trade, they know what the other person wants. And I think that's actually quite smart. Right? It's very motivating. But there's a habit of secrecy that a lot of companies have gotten into that it's really hard to give up. I have friends who have done consulting for the fruit company as they refer to it. And I won't tell you who that is. But I can imagine. So there's definitely companies that are very paranoid. And unfortunately, that paranoia is getting in the way of their learning.

Jason Knight 28:41

That's fair enough. I mean, I was shocked when I joined my current company, and was able to see other people's calendars not just the busy/ free, but actually what was in them as well. That was a very interesting step. And are there any specific situations where you wouldn't recommend OKRs? Or where you think they're completely unnecessary?

C **Christina Wodtke** 28:56

Yes, heavens, yes. I think that there are business units, sometimes that are in a dying business. And you might try OKRs for one quarter, just to kind of kick the wheels and see if there's anything left. But putting that on quarter after quarter is just making those people very depressed and very sad. It's very hopeless. To be honest, there's a lot of successful businesses that are just going to make money for a little while, and they're not going to grow because either the market saturated or a lot of other reasons, you have to ask yourself, why don't use OKRs their same thing. It'll be depressing, although people who are making money are usually more cheerful than people who are losing it. So that's a good place not to use it. When people first start to use OKRs. I tell them start only with company and teams. By teams. I mean product teams, multidisciplinary teams don't make the service groups do it. I find that design and engineering and marketing and sales and customer service often really struggles with it. For example, I was talking to an HR group, and they're like, "We are running around putting out fires all day long". And I was like, "Well, if you want to have OKRs, realise you only have one hour a week maybe. And therefore you have to have a very tiny goal. And maybe you should just not do it right now". Wait till later, see if it works then.

Jason Knight 30:20

Now you and I had a brief Twitter conversation a while back around people turning their to do lists into OKRs, you know, writing them in the OKR format and saying that they're doing OKRs? Is that the biggest anti pattern? Or are there any particular other bugbears when you just look at someone when they're doing it? Like, you go into a company, you see how they're doing OKRs? And you just sit there and head in hands like, "that is just the worst thing I've ever seen"?

C **Christina Wodtke** 30:47

Wow, well, there's a lot of impressive worse things. I think the worst one is 6 million OKRs. Like so many OKRs. People aren't very good about thinking about time. And visualising time. And time is a medium that we work in, because you know, it moves. That was a dumb statement, but it's still true. So people really struggle with thinking about time. And guess what, you don't have to do everything this quarter. You don't... in fact, if you have 50 things and you're trying to do them all this quarter, you probably won't do all of them. And you certainly won't do all of them well, if even if you do get all of them. So why would you do that? Instead, taking all the things you want, and then spreading them out and maybe putting a great big, humongous calendar. I'm a big fan of Neu Year, N-E-U, calendars because they're humongous and you put them on the wall. And then say where do we want to place these? And is there any benefit? Like what if we worked on retention before we threw a tonne of money down on acquisition? That's like one of my favourite go tos. And so you start looking at your, your whole year or two years, some companies working really long timescales, we start really thinking about how can

we simplify, reduce, combine, and you know what your OKR doesn't have to be inclusive of everybody. This is something that a lot of companies struggle with, because they're trying to find an OKR that speaks to absolutely everybody from the legal guy who's looking at your contract to the customer service person. And, you know, it's kind of relaxing, knowing you're not on the hook for it, okay, 'cause some of those OKRs get so general, they're so meaningless. So that's a big mistake. People will end up making an OKR for every single group, and then handing it to them. Guess what the word handing them to them is a sign you're probably making a mistake, like, you don't know, what HR does all day... I hope... Good lord, then you're one of those micromanaging managers. So let them figure out their own. Let them figure out how much time they actually have to work on things. That's a big mistake... set and forget is of course, the huge mistake. And then I will say this latest word of task lists as OKRs is... it started with the beginning of OKRs, and it is definitely getting worse. So my advice is focus on results and simplify as much as you possibly can.

Jason Knight 33:11

You've written a lot of books, as we discussed earlier.. there's at least three behind you that I can see. Although I realised that one isn't on a plinth. Are there any more books on the horizon? Have you got like a third edition or second edition of something else coming out? Or maybe a new edition, first edition of some new book planned?

C Christina Wodtke 33:27

Well, I always take a break after I finish a book just to look at my incredibly long list of books I'd like to write. Every time I come up with an idea of a book, I just write it on an index card and paste it on my wall of my office so that I can like stop and go "hmm, there's still something there". So right now, since my daughter is on the couch listening, I have to say that I told you I read a lot of fantasy and science fiction. She's after me to finish a book I started a while ago, that's actually high fantasy. But on the business side, which is I think people that you're listening your podcast is probably interested in. I'm very torn between writing a book about entrepreneurship, but it's aimed at ordinary folks, just people who are trying to figure out like, how do I start a restaurant or something like that? How do you think about entrepreneurship in this very, very simple way. The other one I'm thinking about writing is on strategy, unsurprisingly. I have been really stunned at how reactive so many companies have become. They just sit around and wait for the next thing to smack 'em upside the head. And I thought, you know, maybe I could write a little tiny book about just enough strategy so that you're not constantly in firefighting mode. And right now that one's sort of looking like it might be the more likely one but, you know, if you're very excited about, you know, simplifying these ideas of modern entrepreneurship so that everybody can be lean, or if you're interested in strategy, just tweet at me at Twitter, as you know very well Jason, I'm sort of a Twitter addict. I'm on there a lot, and I do tend to respond to people. So I think, if you want me to write one or the other, let me know.

Jason Knight 35:07

Maybe we'll get a poll going. And also, I'm sure you've got plenty of ideas yourself. But if you need me fake characters that are real characters for your book, then tap me up. I'm sure I can give you a few real life examples.

Christina Wodtke 35:17

Absolutely. Or maybe I'll make you one of the protagonists.

Jason Knight 35:22

There you go, it's what I would have wanted. And you described yourself as a curious human. What's one thing that's piqued your curiosity recently? And what did you find out when you investigated it?

Christina Wodtke 35:35

Oh, my gosh. I have to say that Stanford is turned out to be a dream job. Because I get to learn stuff full time, all the time. And it's amazing. My students teach me crazy things, my colleagues teach me some crazy things. So I've been really interested, as a lot of people are in how to make ethics more practical so that people could actually use them in their everyday lives. And so I've been collaborating with one of my wonderful colleagues, Katie Creel, on doing embedded ethics so that in my classes, we can teach ethics. And it's really funny, because I see a lot of companies working on it, and they come up with like, their top 10 list, or here's a ruler with some ideas on it. And the reality is that ethics is all these little teeny, tiny decisions you make based on your value system. And I think that it's really interesting idea to think, "What if instead of talking about ethics, so much, we talk about values", and we really think about the way our values are shaping our software, there's no such thing as neutral software, all software is a picture of how people thought about the problem at that moment. And so when you think about your values, you have to ask, "Whose values am I ignoring? Whose values am I stepping on?" And that's really, really fascinating to me. Also, I teach game design at Stanford... it's one of the things I love teaching for the sheer joy of it. And I've got to say, I'm really fascinated at the way people are starting to use AI so that the people that you... the non player characters you play with will react to you based on how you act towards them. And I think that one of the things that games are really good at is doing simulations, so I can see a future in which games are where you can try out being an asshole, or try out being a nice person, or try out being loud and outgoing, or, you know, or try not talking so much, depending on what your various struggle is and see how it plays out. So I'm really, really excited about the possibilities that are coming out of the intersection of AI and play.

Jason Knight 37:37

Maybe there's an angle here for an OKR based AI game, where we could have some kind of startup simulator. I mean, I guess it would be a bit like SimCity, or some kind of old Amiga business game or something like that. But you know, maybe we can make it a bit more glamorous and up to date.

Christina Wodtke 37:52

One of my favourite things in the world is interactive fiction. And I have been really tempted to write interactive fiction at OKRs, in which you could choose to make every single mistake that regular people make and see what happens. So... tempted.

Jason Knight 38:05

And that's the next season the Black Mirror sorted out, so let's get it going. And you've touched on it yourself with Twitter already. I guess that's probably the best place to get hold of you if anyone wants to chat to you about anything. But are there any other places that you're active or any other places where people can reach out?

Christina Wodtke 38:21

Well, cwodtke.com is a great place if you actually want to try to hire me or get me to be on a podcast or some such. Elegant Hack is where I've been writing since early 2000. And it's turned out to be really good because I, I had a boss then I was writing HTML. And my boss said, "Christina, you can either write a skanky hack, or elegant hack, and I would prefer you write the second". I thought that's a good domain name. But now that I'm a hack, as in a writer, it still makes sense to me. So that's a great place to find my latest writing. Although I realised since the pandemic I'm writing as much so as soon as this dang cast comes off. I'm gonna knock out some essays.

Jason Knight 39:01

A few hours to go then we'll expect a flood of writing and insight.

Christina Wodtke 39:06

Yes, something longer than a tweet.

Jason Knight 39:09

There you go. Well, that's been a fantastic chat. And obviously, really appreciate you spending the time and obviously recommend everyone picks up a copy of at least one of the versions of your book and all of the other ones as well. Hopefully, we can stay in touch. But as for now, thanks for taking the time.

Christina Wodtke 39:23

Oh, thank you so much for having me on your show. It's been a blast. You've made me laugh so hard. I love it.

Jason Knight 39:30

Jason Knight 39:30

Thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did, there's loads more, including Christina's good friend Marty Cagan over on OneKnightInProduct.com, where you can also sign up to be notified of any new episodes and make sure you share with your friends. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest but as for now. Thanks and good night.