

One Knight in Product - E150 - Mirela Mus

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SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, Mirela Mus



Jason Knight 00:00

Hello and welcome to the show and an episode where we ask why is onboarding for product managers so bad. Speaking of onboarding, well, this is all good. But this episode is completely coincidentally sponsored by tonight's guests company product people. But hear me out. If you're a company founder or product leader who needs to get a product management team up and running quickly or cover parental leave, check out the aforementioned product people have got a thriving community and 40. In house product managers product offers pros and product leaders. They onboard fast aligned teams and deliver outcomes. You can check out one night in product.com/product people to book a free intro chat and quote code Oh, Kip to get a 5% discount. That's one night in product.com/product people listen to this episode and check the show notes for more details. So yeah, speaking about this episode, if you want to find out some of the different ways that product manager onboarding go wrong, why it's so difficult and how you might give yourself a better chance of success. Keep listening to one night.



Jason Knight 01:07

So my guest tonight is Marilla. Miss McCullough is a longtime product manager, product leader, mentor, coach, advisor and company founder who says she hates the words digital transformation and dealing with high maintenance people. So I'm concentrating very hard on being low maintenance and simple in this interview. Speaking of simplicity, we're going to describe herself as a minimalist with a minimalist house and a minimalist wardrobe. And she's also trying to minimise the pain of Product Management for companies leading engineering product people with their own company, the aptly named product people. Hi, Mila, how are you doing?



Mirela Mus 01:36

Great. And thank you for having me.



Jason Knight 01:38

No problem is good to have you here. So first things first, you are the founder of product people. So what problem does your company solve for the world?



Mirela Mus 01:46

Our mission is to help companies discover and deliver great products faster. We do this with two of our pillars, one, spreading knowledge generously through one of the largest product management communities in Europe, where we host free knowledge sharing events every week, and similar content. And the way we make money is to enter in product management roles, or sometimes product coaching through our 14 in house product management consultants.



Jason Knight 02:12

So that's interesting with the two pillars like you've got the community side, you've got the money making side like is the money making side a necessary evil to keep the community going? Or is the community something that supports the money making side like which way around does that go



Mirela Mus 02:26

both time to our mission, the community supports hiring very good PMS. So most of the senior people don't necessarily search out these communities, especially people leadership, because the problems they deal with are already going further and further away from day to day product management. But we the talks we do, let's say around experimentation, or discovery, and so on, we attract very good PMS, because self actualizing people tend to seek this content. And so far, six of our employees have discovered our content in some shape or form first, and then for other people in the job listings. So to that extent, it's very successful. And I think for our missions, that clients, it also gives us some credibility, because we're not just there to milk every euro. But we're also interesting to make the space better,



Jason Knight 03:17

oh, pound or



Mirela Mus 03:18

pound for the



Jason Knight 03:21

yes, it's too soon to start talking about you as over here, the pain still hurts. But that's really

interesting. Now this idea that it almost gives you like a production line of ready and willing and interested new people that could potentially come and work for you in the future. So do you see that number going up in the future? Or do you think that's going to be a low level thing that just sort of comes alongside of your other hiring efforts?

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Mirela Mus 03:43

It depends on the market. So I think now we're seeing way more applicants than before, due to the VC funded businesses, restricting hiring or pausing it. But I would see it as a constant. And also, we've gotten people who are interested to get into product management as their first time role. also interested to apply because we've had quite a few successful cases where people who did an associate role with us then ended up as product managers within our company, or then somewhere else where they left to pursue a domain they were interested in, like, for example, working on sustainability or gaming.



Jason Knight 04:20

That's interesting that the Associate Product Manager thing I mean, obviously, that's a thing that a lot of companies are doing. I've just heard that Miro started one up for example, I think it's a really great way to get people into the trade. But does that collide a little bit with you're kind of we onboard fast and deliver value quickly mission because of course, more junior people that are just getting into the trade you're gonna need a lot more support and, and help and coaching and mentoring to be effective. So those people kind of fly copilot with the more experienced PMS or do you have some other model to get them up to speed?

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Mirela Mus 04:51

Yes, that's one of the models. So the way we serve our clients is what we call the tree over. I know this It sometimes collides with Theresa Thoris definition or maybe call it a thread, there you go. And what we would have is the client facing product manager, that client facing product manager is supported by an associate pm for tactical tasks and also growing into the role as they join along. And then they're supervised and mentored by either a group product manager, or a senior product manager, depending on the complexity of the mission. So this is why even if the client is just charged for the pm role, they get a lot more value and stability to this makeup. And that also helps us if someone leaves the company or takes a longer vacation or a sabbatical or all the things can happen that when we're running the people business, as I've learned, so this provided a lot of stability and a better quality for us, because just the supervision factor is coming from people who've seen a lot of engagement span out a lot of clients and have a baseline expectation of what we should do. So we hope with that to also get our people to operate on the next level, but also catch underperformance before this is visible at clients. And it's also harder for us than they say regular management consultancies that just get people out of college, right. And they just get them to polish some texts, because they are not embedded in the day to day of the client. So we struggle with people out of college, and it didn't work as well, because you need some life experience to make these type of decisions. But some people who had good judgement and life experience in some areas that could be mapped into the pm roll did quite well. And in very fortunate cases, we had the associate, even

take over the engagement at some point or have that engagement branch out into two because the client node is the personnel requested them to help somewhere else around the company.



Jason Knight 06:52

There you go. So what is then a typical length, because I mean, you're saying that you're doing a lot of intervene roles and kind of almost filling in for people when it's parental leave or filling in for people when they're having some trouble hiring. And they need to get something up and running sooner than I can get a good person in. So that tends to suppose that the PMs that you have are going in and their engagements are time limited. So like what is an average time that you would put a pm or product leader into a position



Mirela Mus 07:21

four to five months. So usually, we would recommend starting the tree, if people don't know when they're going to hire for parental covers, they already have more visibility of how big the gap is going to be. And those are sometimes six months. But we've had cases also where we left the parental leave sooner because there was someone else coming from another parental leave, and something restructuring. We handed over to a new rejoinder from the client, so four to five months. But of course, we've had also 12, or we've had also cases where the client managed to hire someone after two months, so then we need to have work sooner after we onboard that



Jason Knight 07:58

person. So what's the longest off the top of your head?



Mirela Mus 08:01

It depends how you're counting. So what we would count as a mission is a maternity cover on a specific product. But the relationship with these clients, especially ideal customer profile lasts for years and years, because there's this parental cover, then there's someone leaving, then there's someone that's now sick and can work only part time. And all of these cases, once we have a good relationship with the client, and they're happy with us, and also the rest of the organisation becomes aware of what we do. There, they're always these short bits of covers that we can do here and there and everywhere. So those so far would be lucky to have a lot of clients either with continuous types of engagements, or with some gaps and then coming back again. So for that the second example is probably 2.5 years, or similar. Because we also track, what's our retention rate and retention rate for us, its clients engaged us despite having some gaps here and there, right? Because you can't always predict what what is going to happen. Yeah, and then the separate missions are the ones we talked about, on average of four to five months.



Jason Knight 09:11



Jason Knight 09:11

It's funny, it reminds me of a story that I heard from a friend once who had basically been a contractor for a big company for something like 15 years or something like that. And they eventually realised that they had to get rid of him because they just realised that they've been paying a contractor basically a full time job, permanent job for so long. But then, obviously, in the UK, you've got all these pesky tax laws that are coming, try and stop that sort of thing. I don't know what it's like over there.



Mirela Mus 09:35

Germany already has that. So this is also one of the benefits offered to clients. Because Germany has been looking was already quite a lot of employee protection laws. Because you know, if you're a contractor then you're quite exposed whenever there's some sort of there's no downside protection, your contract can be cut off. Whereas in Germany for example, if you want to wind down the contract of an existing employee And then you'll need to pay the severance. And then depending on the length of the employment, you will have another month for each year this employee has been asked. And in some cases, you have more as a more protection against this happening. And this is something we also know this on the, on the UK side that sometimes companies call these contractor roles, but what they're actually looking for is a disguised employee, because they didn't want to work with us as an agency. They were like, no, no, we just want one person. And that's like, okay, but then you actually want an employee, but to give them a short term contract, which is understandable. But in Germany, that would be a relatively high liability, because if the government then comes back and re classifies this person, then you'd end up paying more as a company as you need to pay to back pay all the social security and all the all the taxation as you'd have had for an FD, or even be required to hire them on a permanent contract, which, of course, many corporates don't don't want. So then, companies like us who have the employees on the payroll, which offers protection. And then there's also, let's say, a bit less protection from marketplaces where they pass freelancers through them on an invoice. And then this marketplace takes a bit more of the liability.



Jason Knight 11:14

There you go, you've got it all sorted out, but you're a product person yourself, you've done a bunch of product roles before you set this up a few years back. So you still yourself doing day to day product stuff going into companies yourself through product people have you managed to step back and concentrate on the company and running it.



Mirela Mus 11:30

I have tried, but I keep coming back and forth. So someone on one hand,



Jason Knight 11:34

we love it too much, right? Not necessarily

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Mirela Mus 11:37

that we're just we see that the types of engagement we're getting, or the level of sophistication increases. So if we're talking, let's say we Scipio, one of the largest taxi apps in Germany, so similar to Uber, I can send the salesperson, a salesperson or a mid level pm have these conversations because they can be looking at various things to do. But if this is just an interim pm role, then of course, I can just send our mid level or senior pm handle if so part of my engagement has been also with structuring how we're working with these clients understanding the problem, which to some degree ends up being people and product work. And in other cases, I also had to step in for either group pm or VP of product for coaching engagements, because if you want to coach a head of product or so on, you can send potentially one of our senior PMS if they have experience in that area, or myself. And then this ended up being a question of vacations and availability, and we really want people to take their vacations. So I have to step in a few times with either discounting or structuring how we're helping a larger and more complex company.



Jason Knight 12:49

There you go, you can't escape.

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Mirela Mus 12:53

But I think to some degree, I would still, let's say even if I would have all the structures in place, at least the advice I've got from some people is to still understand how the day to day works or being engaged with this. Because otherwise, you would end up with some disconnect. And then we sell something to some clients that completely divorced from reality. We then see all of these PMS complaining about the sales team. So you, you don't want to be very far out from this, especially as the space is evolving so quickly. And best practices of like last year are not so trendy anymore, or people are dumping OKRs for narrative commitment tasks, or, you know, like, all of these things. Potential clients would ask me about that. And I need to be able to give an educated answer that's not superficial or just, you know what I



Jason Knight 13:48

mean? I don't know what you mean, I just for the record, I don't think product people need any excuse to complain about salespeople. So that circle will keep going. But again, you're a product person, and you had those roles before this, and you're still doing it day to day as and when the need comes up. And a lot of product people start companies, you know, they go and work for a product somewhere else. And then they have a great idea when they go out and they quit a SASS company in a Gantt chart, build a product of your own. Now obviously you can say that product people is a product in itself and the people are your product. And that's and obviously the community is a product as well. But why was it that you decided to create a company like this and start to effectively sell consultancy services rather than going out and starting a SASS company and trying to make the big bucks.

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Mirela Mus 14:32

To some degree I admire the people who go out of business school and create SAS for construction companies. I was like how how can you get excited about that? I mean, it's cool that you do it and there's a lot of money in getting the construction industry to suck a little less and less old school or for example logistics right but some some of the unicorns are just handling logistics because that's also like a very old business who hasn't caught up with the times too much or, and there are a lot of efficiencies to be gained. But I wasn't excited about doing these sorts of things. And one, on one part when I was hanging out and trying to understand what I want to do, I kept getting requested to advise a support on product. And then some of these engagements came through third parties, usually, body shops or marketplaces. And what I saw there is that the shops are more interested in selling the developers. Because pm there is more of the nine out of 10 people you sell. So sometimes 80 to 90% of the revenue you make to dev, Scrum, Master QA, DevOps, anything and anything you can stash in there. I think in an early stage, where more is more, and you just need to build some stuff, it's fine. But even there, there was a lot of ways and it felt like no one really cared on how to do this faster and simpler for the client if it's worth doing at all. So I understood the need of having product as a separate function. You know, a lot of people say that production greenhouse and I agree with this, or at least it should be aligned with the company building it. And then on the other hand, you have the sometimes very good strategic work, but sometimes, you know, it can be interpreted because what the strategy is never bad is how you execute it. And then there's this gap between the big consulting companies who come up with, Hey, we should target this market, and this is the plan. And then everything gets shipped over as a deck to these shops, which maybe sometimes they also just do the best they can. But in this model, it's unlikely that a pm can actually come up and say, No, this is bullshit, we should do something else, or we should scope it down completely. And what I sometimes sense also in profiles, they also have a bit of trouble hiring good people. So the the big brand consultancies don't have the trouble because people also go there for the brand, and just the experience they're going to see, but in the other cases not. So I looked at what can be in the middle that's aligned with the customer, and what kind of companies will benefit from this. And this is what we do, where makes strategic and operational, but sometimes be more operational, depending on the level at which we're operating. And then our ideal customer profiles is digital first companies from series A plus two publicly listed, because those understand the more sophisticated product management practices are not going to be super excited if one of these bodies in companies renamed some business analyst into a product owner or manager or whatever, they have these delivery managers, and they're going to look at people who can create business value or create certain scope, but also the commission and be very thorough about what they're prioritising and wider prioritising, not just filling a backlog, although some some clients will come to us and say, Yeah, I just need tickets for the PM. Okay. What else? What else is success here, because because there's less we can do.



Jason Knight 18:10

That success has many different shapes and sizes. But you talk a lot about how product people get people in place on boarded fast is a big part of your value proposition, the fact that you can kind of just spin stuff up as quickly as possible and start delivering whatever type of success or value that people actually want to have delivered. Now, this obviously implies that other people can't do that. Now, we've obviously all had at least one job where the onboarding was kinda crappy. So given that you're really keen to sort onboarding out. And you've, I know, you've given talks on onboarding and making it better as well. I wondered, What was the worst

experience that you had, being on boarded as a product manager, or indeed any role, but let's fix on product management now, like the worst landing that you ever had as a as a product manager?

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Mirela Mus 18:59

It turned out well, but it was relatively scary when it happened. So it was this, this client that wanted to start ASAP. And generally, we're believing this less and less because ASAP for another client, man, it took them four months to sign the contract. So this, this client actually signed ASAP and then basically next week, I didn't start so I was still client facing but then then I'm ready on the day and had sent them some requests for accounts, but I don't get any accounts. And at some point, I think more people and get the accounts when they have been my whole onboarding call with someone is Hey, dear, this is although initiatives there and some of the polling has funky names. I won't mention that because then people will listen to the podcast. But actually which company it is, but let's say there is like project, bubble gum and project chocolate and so on. So I kind of get these names. And then someone invites me to some meetings and says, Hey, I'm going to invite you here. I'm going to decline these meetings. There you go.

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Mirela Mus 20:00

And then there's also I get into maybe two or three Slack channels. And then there's also a new syllable hire for product and a bunch of things. So like, there's all this fragmented information, then I was supposed to be the one person seeing one whole department there and truly need to do his part. And then start getting tired by people who were doing market expansion, hey, is this life here? Is this plan A, is this something? And I couldn't see necessarily how the app looks in every geography. And what are the feature toggles? And when when did that comes in. So I had to do a also a lot of forensic work to understand, Okay, what's there what's planned, part of this upcoming things weren't in my my area I was handling. Facilitating that this company expands to new markets and for expanding in new markets, you need certain compliance are some market specific capabilities. And this is what we're doing. But they were overlapping with the client, with b2c facing up with internal tooling and everything and anything in between. So it was a lot to pieced together from basically, there was no structure of how things were done, there was no clear backlog of like, what was there, what was promised, what's coming? What importance is this, and then all of a sudden, there comes a large market expansion that needs to overhaul the whole product, and everything and anything, and then I get thrown into even more things, then it's all turned out quite well, and the client want that. And I think what saved me there is that I wasn't very attached to the product, because the people who've been building it for a while, were a bit resentful that now we're doing we're building things just top down, just because we want to get into this market. And some of the assets were in very customer friendly, because they were asked by regulators. And as you can imagine that, that were also sometimes silly as like we needed to scope down and position in a way that annoyed the user the least, but still got us the checkbox, so that we can go there. And I think that made it a bit difficult from how you're just thrown into these things. The company was also in hyper growth, so no one had time for anything. Everyone's department and role changed as we progress from one week to the other or kind of every two weeks. There were also lots of new people on boarded for taking out slivers of responsibility. So I also stayed sane, we just starting to organise people on a few Slack channels and a few notion pages, and then starting to have

more canned answers. Whenever there was like, every week, there were like three new people asking me the same thing. And then aligning with leadership of one of these 50 things that everyone says they're super important should we do. I mean, the stuff that I did is quite obvious in hindsight, and it wasn't anything, anything out of the ordinary, probably, what helped is that the culture of the company was very fault tolerant in a way that mistakes were punished. And people were very friendly and responsive. So that really helped with all this mess, where, by comparison, I had a more structure on boarding at a client that was very political and rigid, top down. And there I felt I became less effective than I would have wanted to, because whenever you tried something that wasn't on exactly the path they had defined, they, they were a bit apprehensive about it and a bit blaming, they were always this second guessing why you're in a call with someone what actually means. Whereas with this other company, this despite all the chaotic setup, and the lack of clear priorities or responsibilities, people who are willing to make it work. And I think that that is an underrated quality of a company. Because if I would compare on paper, the political company did way better, but ended up being less effective. Because everyone, including us, as contractors, were at some point a bit apprehensive into getting some into some topics, because they're like, Well, with this, I'm going to end up with five on meetings, I already have 15 hours of meetings at this client. And then I'm not super sure that he's going to get anywhere and we have no visibility. So like how do you even continue to make an impact with all these constraints and kind of lack of helpfulness, I hope this gives them an idea because on one hand, that chaotic experience, would be probably bad for a junior person that they would get overwhelmed or someone doesn't have the mental structure. But on one hand, also very rigid to set up where people don't feel allowed to make any comments or changes is not that great despite the onboarding, looking relatively structured.



Jason Knight 24:48

Yep. So it's very much a mixture of a bunch of different factors, but what you just described, obviously, fairly chaotic, lots of stuff going on lots of different ideas. about priorities, lots of different initiatives going on at the same time. That sounds like a company problem, like something that would probably impact the onboarding of just about anyone that was starting in that company in any role. So do you think that in some cases, companies are just genuinely rubbish onboarding, and it's just not something that they know how to do? Or do you think that it's specifically bad for product managers coming into the organisations, and if it is, then why

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Mirela Mus 25:25

I think they're specifically bad for product managers, because they end up being the first ones hit with changes of scope or direction, the role is also not super well understood, to some degree or for decision makers, everyone wants kind of something different out of the PMS. And if you don't have strong product leadership, or someone who has done that before, then they won't see all of the facets of these, or why it's important to also support the pm into a no, or having some sort of distance or authority over all these other departments that are trying to make you do various things for them. And I think this is relatively hard. So I was talking with with a friend yesterday, and this friend ended up at a company that had no process or structure for design, everything is was all over the place. And whatever having been in a company that had that sorted out and had seen it work was able to map and bring some of these into the new role despite not being nothing being there, or, or her being more by by herself. So I think this is

the case for 4pm. It depends on what you have in house, because I've seen very good product leadership is able to give context. And some lifelines, despite the rest of the company being chaotic. Whereas if you lack that, then it depends who the pm reports to. And then sometimes we'd get these things off, like Yeah, or run the sprints with the devs. Or we need to go to market with x. But then it takes a while to understand that the go to market team is relatively also junior, and they don't know what to ask of the PM, or how to make this work. And then there's more work and responsibilities falling on the pm on the go to market part. Yep. But they also have the, there are other responsibilities to deal with, let's say if engineering is not mature enough, and you need to spoon feed the team with tickets. So there, there are a lot of things happening at the same time in a company that can affect the weight carried by peers. And also before the recording, we were talking about this company, you are also familiar with. And that where the pm role is also a little bit less developed. And that actually makes it harder, even for a good pm to operate because you get the rest of the setup dragging you down. And you're spending way more time in this. So probably one of the things that we've noticed in better companies, you'll see that it's well run when the PMs have less organisational topics to deal with. So sometimes you sold that product off sometimes, you know, the roles and responsibilities are quite clear, and the team is mature enough. But that is something I remember for one client that one of our seniors came and said, I can't do half of the things we have on the playbook. Because the company is not chaotic. They have a very structured and well defined onboarding, the VP of product even told me to I don't need to give him daily updates of how my onboarding is doing or ping him with that. So there's like all of the things that we do in sometimes the less developed companies, because people want a lot more updates or want a lot more, let's say visible activity from us, then they were like, No, you don't need to manage me up. I'm interested in these topics that we already discussed, if we can discuss them in the pre established meetings. In any interest, you know, you do you, which was quite a dynamic thing, because it's a quite a big contrast compared to most of these other companies that we worked at. And another one that would get a great shout out for me is Lucy McGlenn at Zalando. Because she prepared super cool onboarding deck for not necessarily Savannah in general, because the huge company for the business unit she was running. Yep, also highlighting the a bit of the product complexity there because it's such a huge company that sometimes PMS don't own full premises, which would be let's say the product detail page is called the premise that you own sections of those. So let's say a carousel that recommends clothing. So this for PMS coming from smaller companies where they're used that they own quite big chunks of the product starting to own various things. And these business units have different Northstar metrics. It's quite a lot to wrap your head around because now you have a lot of other PMS to align with, aside from all your other stakeholders wherever you want to do something and you also must know what their priorities are and read their documents of their upcoming initiatives, whenever you want to do something to understand if there's a conflict, or if if this is aligned with what your unit wants to do, so that you can piggyback on that. So quite a lot of things to take in whenever you want to do the smallest change. And that was quite memorable from my side as good way to onboard. Because there were a lot of documents to read a lot of people to meet. Another cool thing they did was schedule a meet and greet with the people I it's about nine people I was about to interact with on on the three main topics set to work on. And that already gave us such a such a good start. Because this would have been the things I would have hunted down in the first two weeks. And it was already saved, read one deck and a few intros. And then I was like, Okay, now I actually need to figure out how to make an impact Northstar metric because all the it's a superficial, but useful themes were solved by the client themselves.



Isaac Knight 21:00



Jason Knight 31:00

Yeah, that's very interesting, like what the company themselves can do as well, because obviously, they're all gonna be in different states of disrepair or organisation or chaos, as you've kind of touched on. But you also mentioned a playbook. Now, does that suggest that there's some kind of product people checklist or document or almost like specification for what you need out of a company and what you're going to do in return to help your PMS get up to speed as quickly as possible? Like does that document exist? And are there any nuggets on that, that you can share with non product people clients?



Mirela Mus 31:40

Sure. So one would be what we asked for the client before we join, including things like accounting links, and what are your upcoming priorities? One thing we learned is also to ask if there are some non silly sensitive topics, but things that we shouldn't bring up or discuss because there are some history or on dates. You mentioned



Jason Knight 32:02

that one project, right? Yeah, well,



Mirela Mus 32:04

maybe people just got tired of workshops, which we're going to understand or did this spring from, how there was one one company that went from avian to stripe to a behaviour and so on. So then whenever there is a discussion, you don't, you don't want to bring that up, or change tracking twice or a lot of these things. So that is also useful for you to not make some proposals that that was already done and dusted. And people will be like, Oh, no, this person again comes up with this, we're so tired of this discussion. And for our people is mostly figuring out that we get this, and also defining short term and midterm success with the client, because we will look in increments of three months, because that's the usual part, we look at showing in some way that we're helpful. So people don't have a buyer's remorse. And also because clients wait quite a lot to bring us in. So to bring us in when, in some cases, when things have already fallen apart for a while, so you need to work more. That's why we like parental covers, because they're the person leaving is more motivated to do a good handover. Yep. And also notices in advance, because you need to go to HR do the paperwork, and so on. So we're not brought in after the team has been neglected for two, three months, because then the client realises okay, we cannot actually hire some or some people we had in the pipeline fell through. And now this restarts the process. And then this is where we get brought in. But we need to now catch up on all these months of neglect and confusion sometimes. So for for us. The other part is we look at people and problems. So which are the people that we would be working with our stakeholders, potential troublemakers who are reporting to work clarifying priorities in case? As usual, those get confusing. And then what are we supposed to do? They're from a success perspective. And sometimes they're also feature factory like or something else. But sometimes they're just Okay, for our next investment round. We need to launch this country or we need to have this capability up. Or sometimes the client says, yeah, the roadmap is agreed upon, or everything is clear. And that that's usually a red flag for us, because it means is not or they haven't done enough discovery. But you need to start with that. Because I think sometimes the clients are

afraid of that someone comes in and spends one month doing workshops in Miro. And you need to show some tactical impact relatively fast so that you're allowed to do a bit more discovery. If you're not sure that what's being done. There is the correct thing. Get also some credibility from people to be able to say hey, let's take a step back. Why were we doing this in the first place? Do we have more information To support this assumption, can we scope this down a bit, and so on. So that's I think it's the trickiest part, which we try to codify is to show from our people that they are competent and trustworthy and relatively fast to get up to speed. So that while we do this, we also get time to think and understand the topic. If it makes sense that if you come in and say, well, we're not sure. And there are some, some agencies that would just sell design sprints or like this sort of cookie cutter service, I understand why. But sometimes the client is left, because we've also been sometimes in this workshop sold by the other agencies with our injury. And then at the end, everyone feels good, but they're just left without. And there's again, this disconnect between delivery or hands on work, or the day to day and the cool, strategic workshops. So that's why we, we start in getting involved in the day to day as fast as possible, because this helps us get a feel for the people and what's happening there compared to what they're saying there. It's happening. Sometimes, product leaders, we talk to them so much know of what it is, for example, we had a product leader come and say I have a parental cover. And it's for an app that our staff uses in a few stores. And then my questions are like, Okay, how big is the team? What are the priorities, and they say, Well, this is driven by another business unit who runs the stores, I don't have much more details aside from that I need someone at this time and potentially better if they get familiarised with with our companies, and we're working through the people that already have there, because they wanted to spend less time onboarding. So sometimes we also get quite a few details. And we try to tease this out a bit under, or when when the contract dates have been more serious, and others are very verbose in the details, but more from their perspective, but miss the day to day of how the dev team works of how interactions or decisions are made with stakeholders, because themselves, they don't know that it's the people reporting to them that do this. And they get sometimes escalations or secondhand experience of what's happening there. And sometimes that makes them a bit of unreliable narrators, as probably I would also be the same.



Jason Knight 37:25

Everyone's got their own story. But I want you to imagine now that you're a PM, going into a new company wanting to make an impact in your new job, you're gonna assume that the company's onboarding may or may not be any good depending on the company, but let's assume there's going to be at best average, and you want to make sure that you land as well as you can. Obviously, there's lots of things you could do, but like what's a general piece of advice, or maybe a principle that you would advise that pm to do when they go into that company to help make sure that they can make the best success of their landing?



Mirela Mus 37:58

One part would be if they can understand it, their first days, if this is a place that's well organised, and has already some established ways of working, or if not, because if not, then they can improvise and do the best of what they decide with their line manager, and also the people that will be giving feedback on their onboarding. So sometimes the line manager is less involved in, they would work closer with the engineering manager, designer, and potentially to key stakeholders. So then this will contribute quite a lot to the feedback the pm gets, and the

performance review. My first step would be to understand if there's a discrepancy between what your line manager says, or your main point of contact there, and the other people that you work closely with, what are they saying are the priorities what are they saying this is going to be done, because sometimes people may also throw you in different directions, and clarify that then understand how well things are run. And then from an operational perspective, just be very speedy at setting up some things. Now, the distinction is that in the well run places, and especially at scale, you can't impact some KPIs, or you can't even ship some things until maybe a month or so in. So you won't be able to make this type of tactical impact. In the less organised places, you can just get your hands dirty and unblock the team or do a few things here and there. So that that's why I would say it's important to understand how they value work, and what is valuable to them. And then maybe think from first principles, what what's actually happening there. What are the goals? What are they doing? How does this fit into the context of their mission and their shorter term goals, which probably can find out in some depth from leadership of what was planning to do in the next year or even next quarter, and then trying to get your hands on? What's the mission or the main success criteria for this business unit? How are they running certain things and what if, at the same time while you're trying to get your foot in the door, and establishing some ways of working, and I know that sounds like a lot. And that's why I also cannot really give a prescriptive fix, because in some companies is better that you do things write, rather than you do things fast. And in others, it's actually fatal if you don't show very fast impact, even if it's wrong, to some degree, especially smaller companies, where the founders are used to everything happening yesterday. And then they will see this Pm who's like, oh, we need to do some, we had this case, one of the post mortems, we did this year where one founder requested that we change the client facing person. And the reason was a bit of chemistry and the fact that our pm was pushing back on the founder. And it turned out that it was also a misalignment of who's the actual decision maker there because there was a VP of product. But it turns out that one of the founders was very engaged in a certain topic, and interested to driving it. And we missed, which was the power over there. Because on the other engagement that we had, it was the completely opposite the VP of product was the one deciding. So that would be something that we thought about it quite a lot. What happens because if we get a request from a client to change the person we have, there is not our happiest moment. And really understanding it was just stakeholder management topic that the person from our team had worked in, in places before where you could push back, and it was fine. And you could also take a bit of time, a bit more time to discover and then ship the right thing rather than shipping something fast. And that wasn't appreciated in this other setup. And then we sold it by sending someone a bit more senior, while charging for the mid level role. And then everything ended up being successful, but quite a bit of pain from from our side for once, say think about it, it's kind of a ridiculous small thing that sometimes gets blown out of proportion to to just the emotions that are involved in, you know, founders are super attached to their product, and they have a lot of pressure from investors in the market. So I as a founder, I definitely understand how this can happen. And if you feel like the person there is not executing as as bold, you can get quite upset, especially if that person is a contractor, that it was also very good learning for us to map stakeholders more attentively. And look, if there's a power dynamic there that we're not familiar of, despite what probably was the problem that threw us off, despite in the other setups that we had. And we had already a successful engagement there that was renewed, things were the complete opposite.



Jason Knight 42:59

Well, as it turns out, companies are really complicated. But it sounds like if you can at least get

to understand a little bit about how decisions are made and who you need to keep close and who you need to tell what to do and who you need to get told what to do by then. Maybe a level, least some chance of success. But where can people find you after this if they want to talk about product people, maybe check out your community or find out more in general about turbo charging their onboarding,

 Mirela Mus 43:26

I have a medium article, oh, no onboarding. If you Google blazing fast onboarding, and my name, I think it will show up, then about the company and community go to get product people that call and there will be a few links there that point you in the right direction.



Jason Knight 43:44

Well, there you go. And people can come and find out more. Well, I'll put that into the show notes. And hopefully you get some eager product people come in to find out more about product people. Well, that's been a fantastic chat. So obviously very grateful. You could spend some of your valuable time I know how busy you are. So it's great. You could talk to us about how to do onboarding, right. Obviously, we'll stay in touch. But as for now, thanks for taking the time.

 Mirela Mus 44:03

Amazing, Jason. Thanks a lot.



Jason Knight 44:07

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 white knight in product.com. Check out some of my other fantastic guests. Sign up to the minister's Skype 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.