IxDA Sydney Mentoring Program Podcast
08 - Michael Wong
Audio Transcript

Michael Wong
You have to learn all this stuff like UI design, UX design, user research, user testing, you do. You're doing everything. I think subconsciously juniors are coming out thinking I need to be perfect in all these aspects. And that's not reality. That's not true because if an organisation is looking to hire a junior, their expectations are of junior level.

Vinita Israni
Hello and welcome to the ix da Sydney mentoring programme podcast, a show where we can't guarantee answers, just better questions. I'm Vinita Israni. And in this episode, Molly and Sam are chatting with Michael Wong, also known as Mizko. Their conversation dives into Cisco's unconventional path into UX design, and how a strong marketing skills shaped his success in his design career. He also talks about the value of learning the business side of design, and the importance we add as designers within an organisation. We also hear Miskolc perspective on the power portfolios, as well as the power of experimenting with objectives constantly iterating and pushing ourselves to be better designers. Misko is a founder, educator and product UX UI designer at heart. He has spent the last 15 years strategizing and designing for high growth companies that have raised a total of 500 million since he last checked, which is many years ago. His passion lies at the intersection of business design and technology. And today he runs an online educational platform called the designer ship with over 3500 alumni. Let's get this party started.

Sam Hancock
Great to have you with us today. Mizko.

Michael Wong
Thank you for having me.

Sam Hancock
For our listeners, we are recording this very early doors at seven in the morning. So you seem like a man of habit. The rest of us seem to have just rolled out of bed. So the question that we ask all of our guests right off the bat is what is your habit of 2022 that you're really trying to drive?

Michael Wong
I think ironically, it's actually trying to rebuild my habits. For the last two years, I felt like I've fallen out of my habits due to external factors and circumstances. But this year, I've started F 45 at a 5:45am session, mainly because I generally am a morning person. But I've realised for the last two years, I've been waking up at around eight or nine. And that might sound normal to you guys. But to me, it actually makes me feel terrible to feel like I'm not productive. And I've wasted an entire morning. So yeah, 2020 is actually trying to rebuild my habits.

Sam Hancock

I feel I feel like we should all be following a page out of the MS. codebook.

Michael Wong

Yeah, well, I would have loved to maintain all these habits I've had. But you know, life gets in the way sometimes. And you just got to pick yourself up and you just got to keep pushing forward. So learn from your lessons,

Sam Hancock

good stuff. And I guess to kick us off, it gets to tell us a bit about yourself and your background.

Michael Wong

Yeah, so I've been a designer for around 15 years now started off in the web 2.0 era even before that, so flash websites. And I was I spent a lot of time sort of like learning in my own spare time, also into gaming. So I naturally found myself spending a lot of time on the internet. That led me into designing a few websites started my gaming community as well. That led me into advertising found myself in affiliate marketing. So I was designing websites for internet marketers, I was also marketing my own products, which I discovered was an absolute goldmine back in 2007, I believe. And that's where I sort of found my passion because I was able to harmonise and bring together creativity, which was in design, but then also the business side of me. So I was able to make money from doing what I love. And I think I was very lucky to be able to find, I will discover this passion very early on. And then 15 years later, I'm practically doing the exact same thing. But I'm teaching people now, what I've done and how I've done it and my experiences.

Sam Hancock

So as you're teaching people and this is a mentor in podcast, what does mentoring mean to you?

Michael Wong

I guess, really good question. I think mentoring to me is willingly giving your time to help guide but not You're not trying to instruct or tell the mentee what to do. You are simply trying to guide them through your experience and sharing your stories. That's how I have always found myself mentoring mentees, which is not trying to tell them exactly what I feel like it's right. But sharing my thoughts, my opinions, my perspectives, and then letting them make the final decision.

Sam Hancock

And that's mostly anecdotal, or are you looking at showcasing what best practice is with a view to okay, this is a bit of guidance along the way.

Michael Wong

Well, I guess for me, I have all i came into design through a very unconventional way. And I think a lot of my my processes and methods are also quite unconventional as well, not to say they're better or worse, but I guess I have valued the business side of design a lot more than the creativity, and the process driven side of design, which is what a lot of people have been taught and are currently following. Just from the nature of how I got into design, which is through affiliate marketing. So I've always been quite objectively driven. It's always about driving

objectives and meeting outcomes for me. And that's something I've been very passionate about, because that's been a way for me to validate my skills. It's not subjective, and it's all about was this experiment actually successful? So these are sort of the mindsets that I teach my mentees? Yeah, so I guess it's Yeah, a bit of both.

Molly Lewis
I think that's really good point. And I think, for designers listening, why do you think it's beneficial to have both the creative side of design and then also learn about the business side?

Michael Wong
Well, I think it's important to understand both and have experience and have an interest in both mainly because there are two parts to the answer of this question, mainly because we exist, and our entire industry exists. Because of the business, the business needs to solve problems within the organisation for it to expand to capture more market increases market penetration, all that good stuff, right. And the reason why they hire designer is because we are able to fill in the gap filling in missing expertise within an organisation. So that's the first that's the most important reason we need to understand. So with that, we then need to bring through our creativity to solve those problems with out of the box sort of perspective, we can't just go in be logical about every single problem that we're facing, because there are other departments that will solve those problems logically, which is product managers, even C suite, they have a very logical mindset. But with designers, we are given the opportunity to be a little bit more creative, and really connect with humans on an emotional level. So I think that's where we see ourselves, balancing product management, and also design as designers. And that's where they intersect.

Molly Lewis
Yeah, that's really interesting answer until they agree with your unconventional way into design. How do you encourage others to take risks?

Michael Wong
Yeah, and I think this is something I'm actually very passionate about. As I'm crafting my product design course, I've been reflecting on. Exactly why do I want Why have I found myself thinking differently to a lot of designers. And for those who don't know what affiliate marketing is, it's, it's very simple concept. You find a product online, that you want to sell, or you want to promote, you create a website, you drive traffic to that website. And if you make a sale from it, you make a clip, right? So if you sell $100 product, there are products that give you 50% Commission, so you make $50, if you have 1000 people coming in to this website, and 10% make a purchase, but just 100 people, then you would make 100 times 50. Right, so that'd be $5,000. And this is how I found myself getting into UX design because I didn't follow a course because back then there were no courses or no tutorials, US didn't even exist at the time. And all I was doing was I knew I had a product. And I had a website, and I had to drive traffic to it. How do I close that gap? How do I get people to buy this damn product, right and make some money for myself. And I would then go ahead and experiment with all sorts of things, all sorts of different ideas, just to try push them over that sale, that barrier to entry. And I think these experiments or these projects that I worked on, in my very early years of design, gave me the opportunity to just try things and experiment, but with an objective. And I think a lot of designers that come into UX nowadays, thinking, Okay, if I just follow this process of like talking to a customer, synthesising

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the research, and then doing some wireframes and doing some design, I'm doing my job. And then they forget the whole bigger picture of why we even exist, which is, we exist because we need to help the business grow. That's why they're paying us. And I think when you spend some time to work on your own projects, where you have your own goals, your own objectives, and passionate about it, that gives you time to experiment and learn things that you might not learn or even notice or pick up in the workplace because this is your project. It's something that you want to grow. And it will just give you all these new ideas that you can try.

Sam Hancock
So the majority of your experience comes from a freelancer or an agency background. Is that correct?

Michael Wong
Yes, I worked at two organisations to Australian listed startups. So freelancer.com, which is the actual platform for freelance says, and then also high pages.com, which is a marketplace for tradespeople. And then the rest of it was pretty much freelancing, building my own agency and working on a few other businesses as well.

Sam Hancock
So how did you get into that by setting your own rates? Or were you working under a recruitment agency? How did that work?

Michael Wong
I would spend all my time online playing games on social media, following people on social media, just learning from other people. And I would also be sharing my journey on social media as well, I always found that quite fascinating as I connect with anyone online, and I could get feedback from them as well. As I was doing this, I was also in my full time role. But because I was at my full time role, I had time in my evenings. And in my afternoons, where I would also be learning. So I would spend a lot of time redesigning my design portfolios, and then launching them online. And there was always an objective for me, it was always trying to get more visitors, I was trying to attain more awards, I never got an award for my portfolio, but that was the objective. And it really pushed me to learn new skills, and also be a little bit more confident with my work and with who I am. So lucky enough, after working in the in the workforce for around three years, I think I was@freelancer.com for a year and a half. And then at high pages for about a year or so just a little bit more. I had enough work coming in through my portfolio that could sustain me for practically entire year. I didn't make the jump right away, I was quite strategic about it. Because I had a mortgage at the time, I was 23. And I thought to myself, if I can see a lot, six months worth of work, then I will jump out. So that was my objective once again. And you can you can tell that these are my traits. Whatever I do I always have an objective and it's very binary. If I hit it, then I will do it. If I don't, then I won't. And I'll reassess like, Why did it not happen? And then I'll proceed. So I gave myself three months, I filled up six months worth of work. And I thought to myself, Yep, I've checked it off, I'll jump out. And then from there, what you will realise, and I think a lot of designers, they fear is that there might not be work coming through once I complete all this. But I think that's the mindset of someone who is in a full time role who's spending maybe 20% of their free time on freelancing. But for me, what I realised was when I jumped out to focus on my freelancing journey full time, when I've spent 100% of my sort

of like waking hours to work on it. Just fascinating things happen, things that you just don't expect, because you end up spending so much more time on it, then the results are relative.

Sam Hancock
So when jumping into that full time, did you assess your rates? And if so, how did you start to value yourself more as a designer?

Michael Wong
Yeah, so great question. In terms of rates, when I first jumped out, I had already been working on a few freelancing projects on the side. So I was experimenting with pricing. I think in terms of if you have the ambition to jump out as a freelancer or start your own agency, the rate at the start really does not matter. I would not recommend anyone to jump out to freelance full time right away, you should always be experimenting on the side alongside the full time role, mainly because you don't have the pressure, the financial pressure of having to seal more deals. And yeah, work under that stress. So while you are working and experimenting with your price, the best way for you to think about it is what's your salary, divide your salary by I think it's 2040 working hours a year. And then that will give you your hourly rate. And the reason why that's my simplest way is because your current salary is how a an existing business valuing you for your time right now. So based on an hourly rates, that's what you would see, you can include tax contingency and other other factors that you can include into your hourly rate. But that would be your base. And that's where you should start.

Sam Hancock
With freelancing, you're a team of one, how do you look at building up into multiple people?

Michael Wong
Yeah, so lucky enough. Throughout my journey, I was able to hire 10 full time employees. And I think it sounds very daunting when you first hear about that. And you just you might be thinking, Oh, how do you even get to 10? There are companies who get to like hundreds and 1000s. Right? So your first hire is the most difficult hire because you have to learn what's the process? What do you have to ask, what are you actually looking out for where they're going to work? There's just so many questions out there. But the only thing that you should really be focusing on is supply and demand. If you don't have enough demand, then don't worry about building up the supply. And if you have too much supply and you have Don't eat don't have the demand, then you shouldn't have hired, the first question that you should be asking yourself is, Do I have enough work to suffice a hire? If so, then you should think about it. And I think what I did was when I made my first full time hire, I did not pay myself for that year, mainly because I did not want to pressure myself to have to bring in two full time salaries worth of work. But instead, I would just want to focus on bringing in high quality work, make sure my first full time hire was happy. And then I could also grow the company. And then that's where and then I believe it was, when I made my second full time hire, the company was already growing, we had consistent streams of income. So that's when I sort of paid myself a full time salary.

Sam Hancock

And with that, I'm guessing there's the pressures of actually going for work which you're interested in and aligned to the values of the organisation, right. So was that, particularly a struggle at the start to find work, which everyone valued and everyone was across?

Michael Wong

I think in terms of the type of work that we brought on, it was quite common to see startups tech startups that we were working with. And they generally were funded or in early stages. So angel or seed, there was never really a project where I had to turn them down because of values or ethics. So we're quite lucky with that.

Molly Lewis

I wonder how did you ensure quality and consistency when building a team because obviously, when you're, you know, one person freelancing, you can manage that. But how do you manage quality as you build out that team,

Michael Wong

in terms of any business, it might be agencies, or it might be a startup itself. Quality is something that is quite hard to maintain, especially on scale. But I think it's important to bring focus to systems and having scalable systems that allow you to produce things on scale. So when we first started, when I had my first full time employee, it was quite easy, right? The system was that they would work on it, and I will check in. But then once you start to have your third and fourth full time employee and all designers, you just simply cannot work or focus on four different projects at a time. So that's when I brought on a product manager to be able to at least instil some level of control and quality in the projects. And then I would sort of pop in whenever I had the time to just sort of like maintain quality and standards that I expected.

Molly Lewis

Yeah, great. And I guess maybe going back to more junior designers, what is your advice for people that are wanting to start off? And then freelance do you recommend, you know, trying, agency first, or is there any advice you give to anyone that wants to start fresh into freelance?

Michael Wong

Yeah, great question. And I think, I think in terms of freelancing, that should be the question that I think do junior designers should be asking themselves is, do I want to freelance and why do I want to freelance, right, and I think, for some reason, I've noticed the last couple of years, a lot of people have aspired to work for themselves. And I think it may be for the wrong reasons, I can guarantee you, there is less freedom, when you work for yourself, at least for the start, it is more stressful, it is more difficult. You don't get paid as much as a full time role at the start as well. And there are just so many factors that come into play, which why freelancing is not, or building your own business is not the right direction. However, if you genuinely are passionate about business risk taking and willing to put in the hard work to build a business that revolves around your lifestyle and fits with your lifestyle, then I think that is when you should consider it. Because there was a lot of hard work upfront. Now if you do decide that is that's me. That's definitely me. I need to get out do my own thing, then I would definitely think about taking small steps instead of leaps while you have financial security, while you have a stable job. Think about what can I do

right now to just move forward? Right? If I don't have a portfolio, you get a portfolio or if I've never spoken to a client have never worked with a client before give away a free project. So jump into Sydney startups, which is a Sydney startup group on Facebook and say, Hey, I'm a I'm a UX designer. I've got five years experience. I'm looking to help out any startup reach out, you will get a guarantee you'll probably get 50 or 100 DMS I've done that before. And I absolutely got spammed and I had to like delete my posts because there's just so much spam like people just wanting work done. So there's there are lots of opportunities for you to just get out and just test it first. And then once you've got enough experience and exposure to that, then you then you might think okay, well I think I'm ready to start charging for it. Taking the slogan steady approach will always work out more effectively, and will help you move forward more efficiently in the long run. I think a lot of people jump out cold turkey and then realise, oh my god, I still gotta pay my rent. And then they have to fall back to like, contracting and they'll make these irrational decisions, because they're stressed out. And it just, that's just not the right approach.

Molly Lewis
Yeah, no, that's really great advice. I guess more broadly, how do you think designers struggle to learn their first role?

Michael Wong
I think there are many factors. As I've been mentoring, a lot of graduates from boot camps, like UX Boot Camps. The first one is the mindset. I think a lot of students when they graduate from a boot camp, they've done like an intensive 12 week sprint, they've crammed everything within 12 weeks. And then their expectation is that I'm going to land a job within the first month, that's already throwing you off, and that's gonna set you off on the wrong track, because you're gonna be stressed, you'll be anxious, you're not gonna perform well in the interview. And I think it's just the wrong mindset to have, I think, for myself, it took me a number of interviews to land my very first role, which was@freelancer.com It was through constant iterations and improvement and self reflection. And I would say I put in a lot of work already, to get to where I was, back when I was 20 years old. I'd made like $300,000 from affiliate marketing, I knew my craft, but it was the the delivery and the execution and how I was talking to people. I just wasn't explaining things clearly to them. And something that I've been focusing on trying to improve ever since. So the first one is having that right mindset. The second one is unsure of what to focus on. So because institutions have created these curriculums, and it's like, you have to learn all this stuff like UI design, UX, design, user research, user testing, you do, you're doing everything. I think subconsciously students are also juniors are coming out thinking I need to be perfect in all these aspects. And that's not reality. That's not true. Because if an organisation is looking to hire a junior, their expectations are of junior level, they're not gonna expect you to be a senior in any way, even though they might say three years experience. I don't believe that the organisation I think that's just a terrible HR employee, who doesn't really understand the industry just copy and pasting things in the job description. Right. So I don't think the organisation is expecting you to have three years worth of experience, I think they expect you to have the passion, the right mindset, you're hard working, just the fundamentals, I think it's quite common sense that everyone knows this type of stuff. But for junior designers try to find which aspect Are you more confident in? Are you more confident in the visual UI design aspect? Are you more confident in the UX side, the talking to customers, the user research, the empathy map, the customer journey, like what I've noticed, is a lot of these junior designers, they're either one or the other.

And depending on which one you are, you should definitely just focus on that just to get your foot in the door. Don't try to spread yourself too thin, trying to do everything at the start. Because there are definitely organisations that need people who can talk to customers, and be able to like Garner insights really effectively, and do more the research side of things and be able to sort of map those out into ideas. But then there are also organisations that need juniors to fill in the gap in the organisation, which is to just churn out your wide design and do little illustrations for the marketing team. So find your strength, then align it with the companies that need that skill set. And that will increase your chances of landing a job.

Sam Hancock

Can you touch on a really important point there as well that sometimes it's vital to draw on previous experiences as well, even if you're a graduate and you may not have that specific industry experience you may have experienced where you gone deep into design or craft such as mastering figma for example, how do you go about sharpening and honing that particular craft? Is it just practice?

Michael Wong

I believe it's practice feedback, and iterations. So there are people I've actually mentored students that continuously practice they spend hours doing the same thing over and over again. But the result, it's still not to the level of good, it's still quite low, and not to sound harsh, is they just don't know any better. They've just thought that if I keep practising, I'm gonna get better at this. But they're practising but they're not getting the feedback. They don't know what to actually improve on. So when juniors are practising, I think it's really important to find Someone a mentor, it could be another designer, there might not have to be senior, there could be a mid level, it could even be a junior, whoever you have access to. And I think today we have so many platforms like ADP list, you can connect with any mentor from anywhere around the world. At any level, you should be doing some work, have an objective, do the work, then line up a call, get some feedback, hear what they have to say, be able to point you in the right direction, then you improve on that work and do it again, and then do it again. For me, when I first started, I didn't have I wasn't lucky enough, I had the luxury to talk to mentors. So what I did was my path to improvement was the objective. I have to sell this damn product, right? Why isn't this person buying this product? When I'm getting visits? I know people are visiting because I was tracking the website. But why aren't they buying? And for me, it was trying new ideas to have to make it look more trustworthy? Do I have to instil scarcity? Do I have to instil urgency like what was it right? And then I would launch up the new website, when I made my first sale. That was the Holy Grail of that, all I have to do is scale this out now. So then I'll do the design, again, I'll improve on on the design, maintain what I had on the existing landing page, and I push it out again. And then I would start to see the conversion rates start to improve. So there are two different ways of approaching it. So it's the subjective side where you're talking to someone, they share their experience, which is great. But then there's also the more tactical side, the more technical side, which is something that I am passionate about, which is let the customers tell you whether you're doing a good job or not. Because they're the ones who are actually making the final decision. Either way is great. But I feel like if you combine the two, get industry experience to guide you. But then also validating your skill set by experimenting with your projects and actually tracking it, you'll absolutely become a unicorn, and companies will be throwing money at you,

Sam Hancock

I guess from someone who just come straight into the industry, and they're just fresh out of the bootcamp or out of university. They may not be accustomed as to what the general kind of interview process is like. So could you maybe shed some light in terms of what is the generic UX UI design interview process?

Michael Wong

Yeah, I've started to see companies explore different types of formats for interviews. But I guess the general blueprint to an interview would be, they will ask you to just share your thoughts around some very generic UX concepts. What is UX design? What does that mean to you? What is what's the difference between UX and UI design? What are some of the tools that you use? So quite like macro level questions, which are which cover very high level concepts? Then what they actually try to do is they want to start to see, okay, if you've got that down, Pat, and you're confident about it, can you actually walk me through one of your projects from the past, right? And what they're actually looking for, is, at least from my perspective, because I've also interviewed a lot of people, and these are the things that I actually look out for when I use my own hard earned money to pay for the salaries is, I want to know how you think it's less about what you've actually done. It's more about, well, how do you think how do you solve? And how do you communicate those ideas? Because in the end, we all know, everyone, every designer will work within a team. And there are different influences. There are different reasons. There are reasons why some design might not be what you had intended. Because I know the CEO said scrap that we want this, the actual work itself is less important to me. But it's more about how you articulate and communicate what was the actual problem? Did you refine the problem? How did you think about the problem? What was your process around the problem? And then seeing you think and communicate the entire process from start to finish? Because so I think it's really important to understand, if you want to maximise your chances of landing a role through an interview, is to really focus on how you're thinking about the problem, and how you're communicating it and how you're telling that story. Because those are the traits that the company wants.

Molly Lewis

Yeah, so I guess what should designers expect when maybe going into a portfolio review?

Michael Wong

Once again, there are many things in my mind that come into play. For a good portfolio. I have hired designers, with less than three case studies, but for some reason the status quo is to have three case studies. I've also hired designers with to round one or two years experience, but I'm paying them a salary of a mid to senior level. I think what it really comes down to is that your portfolio is really a vehicle for you to communicate the work that you've done. It's as simple as that. What actually happens is, the person will end up what is hiring you for who you are, right how you're communicating how you're talking about your work. So you think you might have the most beautiful and best portfolio design. But if you don't know how to communicate your ideas, you might lose the opportunity. Still, I think a lot of focuses around the portfolio. And that's important. But I think it's more important to be able to communicate your work. But if we were to talk about portfolio review, I think the key things or top three things that I would always look

out for is personalization. So if someone can make it unique to them, photos of them, it feels unique to them, they have a unique personal brand, like a visual brand, they're using quirky copy, I think those things really stick out to me, that's just because I come from like a marketing background. And I, that I connect with that. And I think it's also a little bit different. Second is being meticulous about the details of your portfolio. So a lot of UX designers that graduate from these boot camps, everything is just rushed, because not because of their fault, it's just the nature of the boot camp timeline. But then they jump out thinking, I'm just gonna use his portfolio to land a job. But when I'm doing a portfolio review, I can see inconsistent spacing, the logo is actually way too big. The displaying of the portfolio screenshots, they just inconsistent, some have borders, some don't have borders, some are like half the width of the page, some of the full width. And I think these little details can't be overlooked. Because the person that is going to be interviewing you, they've had, like 510 years experience in the industry. And this is what they've been focusing on every single day of their of their lives, like for the last 10 years. So you want to make sure that even though you're a UX designer, you are still sort of careful about the details of your portfolio and making sure things are are aligned, you are following basic design principles. And these principles can be found online. And they're they're very basic, and they're very trivial as well. It's just like consistency within spacing and alignments and using the right typography, it's quite simple stuff. So definitely don't overlook that. I think the third thing is to remember, when you are applying with your portfolio, the person on the other end, which is the could be like someone from HR, it could be a recruiter, their job, they get paid to review and look through portfolios every single day. And then they have the shortlist. So imagine how many portfolios they're actually looking at every single day. And that's daunting. And that can be very exhausting, right? You have to think about what are you doing differently on your portfolio to not just be different for the sake of being different. But to actually make it a little bit more joyful for them to do their job. So what's actually going to turn their heads, right, that's something that you need to think about. If you can have those three things in mind, when you're putting together your portfolio, it should hopefully land you that next role.

Sam Hancock
So one key resource which I always throw over to my mentees is your UX case study, review. You're kind of preaching to the choir here in terms of how you should go about showcasing a case study, just want to kind of shed a bit of light around that.

Michael Wong
Sure, when I first started out as a designer, I was terrible at presenting. I've learned from my mistakes. And as you probably have noticed, I will do self reflections on myself. And I would try to reverse engineer what other people that I look up to how do they do things right. And presenting a case study or presenting work has something that I've always been trying to improve on the mistake I used to make our mistakes that a lot of my mentees make, and it's because that we just don't know any better. And the way that I used to present was, it was always quite technical. It was always quite waterfall like. And it was simply boring. Because no one really cares about boring charts of a customer journey map, no one really cares about your wireframes, that looks crappy. And they might care a little bit about the UI design, because it looks a little bit more beautiful. What I've learned over the many years of freelancing and building and scaling the agency was that I had to be able to sell and position the work that we were doing in better light. Because I needed stakeholder buy in that's a key factor to why I was

so focused on improving my storytelling and presentation skills. Not to say I'm an expert at this right now. But I do feel like I have improved. And some of the key things that I've looked into and been focused on doing is starting from the top, which is how I'm actually presenting my work, I used to jump into the actual software like figma. And I would just simply move around within the environment within the workspace. And what I've realised is that people just struggle to follow where you are, what you're talking about, and where you're actually going to be moving to. So the one thing that I've put into place is to actually create a presentation. Because with the presentation, you are in control of what you were communicating what you were showing and what you were displaying. And you were showcasing one idea at a time. So creating a slide deck or a presentation is the first thing that you should definitely consider. Now the second thing is a lot of UX case studies are quite technical. So you go from wireframes, to design or user research into primary research into secondary research to someone that may be employing you or interviewing you, they might not understand what those technical terms mean. But what they do want to know is the story behind it. So why did you have to do user research, and that should be the framing of that segment. And then as you move into secondary research, which is the synthesis of the primary research, instead of saying secondary research, it could be We were overwhelmed by the product, the research that we discovered in the first phase, and we needed to understand it. All right, so you're bringing a little bit more of a human element to the way that you're presenting your ideas. It's less technical, because you're using less technical terms. And you're bringing the human element to it by actually explaining and walking through the employer through the story of what you had to go through the struggles that you had to go through. And what I've also found quite useful is actually highlighting some of those challenges that you've faced throughout the actual case study. And using that as a trigger to move on to the next slide. Because a lot of slide decks or presentations go from A, B, C and D in quite a linear way. But it doesn't explain why you had to do specific actions. And I think those are some of the key things that you should definitely look out for when you are presenting.

Molly Lewis
Naturally. A lot of us as designers focus our time on making everything pixel perfect that you know, leave out the storytelling piece or spending time to really present the design challenge well, but talking about design challenges, why do you think completing a design challenge is beneficial in the interview process?

Michael Wong
I think completing a design challenge is beneficial mainly because it helps the company understand whether or not you have the abilities to think on the spot, communicate your ideas and actually solve the problem. Because without these challenges, it's very difficult for the organisation to understand your capabilities. But then on the flip side, it's also very difficult for you to understand whether or not these are the challenges and types of projects you want to be working on. So it's a two way street and I think a lot of designers think I deserve better, I shouldn't need to do a one hour design project or challenge. And if that's the mindset that you have, then you might not deserve the job, right. So you might have to find another opportunity where they don't get you to do a design challenge. I think the industry is becoming more competitive, and the expectations are high. And nowadays, I think designers need to embrace this. And it's not just for the organisation, but it's also for yourself as well. Once again, are these challenges, right for you? Do you like solving problems in the space with this team? Right,

because you have to walk through with them, they'll be challenging you as well. So don't think of it as I need to waste an hour's worth of my time, it's more about understanding is Yeah, is this right for you?

Molly Lewis
Yeah, and I would love to hear your perspective on whether you think designers should be able to take home design challenge,

Michael Wong
I think take home challenges. And this is a mistake that I made at the start of building my agency was that and by the way, just to be clear, I don't run an agency anymore. I'm actually full time teaching nowadays. But I think take them challenges are a bit of a waste of time, I think that actually does waste my time as an employer, and it wastes the time of the designer themselves. Because it's not a true reflection of their capabilities. When you taking work home, there could be many factors, and many reasons why you had come up with your results. And you might have done a lot of research. And you might have just copied something. Those are the things that we want to avoid. We want to just eliminate as many areas or margins of error within the interview, we want to be able to just truly understand, what do you have to offer. And it doesn't need to be perfect, but it just needs to be a true reflection of who you are and your capabilities. So I think that's important.

Sam Hancock
Say, so going back to some of the themes that we talked about earlier, you mentioned the constant reflection, how do you bring this into your practice? And how can juniors and designers actually learn from doing that themselves?

Michael Wong
I believe from speaking to a lot of not even just juniors like seniors, people who run their own organisations, as I'm talking to a lot of people, I have noticed that there are two types of people. There are people who, obviously that we've heard this before, glass half empty, and glass half full. And I think it's important for me to talk about this, mainly because the people who are glass half full, generally will practice this process in their day to day life, they generally will have an objective that they need to hit or they want to hit, they know that they're not perfect. And it takes practice and time to be able to improve and get to where you want to get to. So for me, I grew up in a Chinese migrant family, things weren't terrible, but they weren't easy for me. So I had to go to ESL, which is English as a second language, I had a stutter, there was all these external factors and internal factors for me to have to struggle and to really work my way up. Because of those struggles. I told myself, I don't want help, I don't want external help moving forward in life, I want to be able to improve on my own, and be able to actually grow as a person and overcome the challenges that I need to overcome. I've always had this mindset that whatever I want to achieve, I just simply need to work towards it. Because I had to go to a speech pathologist and actually go through a process of improving the way that I articulate things, because I had to go to ESL to improve my English. This taught me from a very young age that things takes time, right. So if I want to improve in a specific area, because I can see that there is a weakness, I just simply need to practice it, get feedback and improve on it. So that's sort of the glass half full approach. And generally, it's not too difficult to put in place. It's more

about discipline and naturally doing it. But then I've also noticed that there are people who are glass half empty. And when they think about refinement, they think about improving. They struggle with the concept of that because they think of it threw away that they're not worthy, or they're not good enough. And they should stop now. And they worry a little bit too much about what other people think. And that is a little bit harder to put into place this sort of reflection piece because they don't have that motivation. They don't actually want to get to that objective. They reason with themselves to stop. What I've realised is the people who find themselves in this position, simply need to find a mentor to be able to guide them into the right direction. They need to hear that they are better and they are improving and they needed Little bit more validation and guidance from an external factor. People can turn their careers around quite significantly through that guidance, but the people who are self driven are able to guide themselves. So really, depending on where you are and what personalities you have, either way can work, it's just that you need to find the right sort of guidance to make it happen.

Sam Hancock
Really interesting. So it sounds like from your reflection, you're talking more as to not focusing on those particular binary outcomes, but looking into Shades of Grey and ambiguity to really improve yourself.

Michael Wong
Yeah. And to be honest, if I was to let you guys into how, like, I think about it, for me, these challenges are fascinating. It's really fascinating to me to think back to where I started, even when I was working out high pages, the CEO would always push me to present my ideas, because he loved my ideas. And he gave me a lot of responsibilities. And he actually became one of my mentors. But even back in 2014, I could not speak in front of a small group of friends, like colleagues, because I was so nervous. And I think because of that, I realised that was a major hurdle I had to overcome. If I wanted to build businesses, you just have to be able to articulate your ideas. And if you ask him now, he would vividly remember how nervous I would be and how terrible my presentations were. Because I would just mumble and I would not be able to articulate these ideas. I told myself, I needed to overcome this. And that was when I would actually practice in front of a mirror, or the actual camera as well. And I would just rehearse, like my ideas. Think like an idea that I had in mind, I would just practice it. And I did that so many times until I was able to record like my first ever video that I uploaded onto YouTube. So I think people think that, Oh, you, there are people who are just born like this, and people who are natural in this. I don't believe that because I grew up with a stutter. I grew up speaking English as a second language. There are people who have witnessed me in the workplace that can validate that I could not present my ideas. But if you put in the hard work, and you believe that you can achieve, like anything really, if you put your mind to it. Yeah, generally does will happen. It just takes time. So I'm a true believer in self reflections and retros and just constant practising.

Sam Hancock
So I guess our last question is, apart from the designer ship and your YouTube, are there any books or podcasts or resources that you really hang your hat on?

Michael Wong
Yeah, so for junior designers, I think there are definitely books that I would recommend. And the first one would be lean startup. This is a framework or methodology or concept, how organisations actually prioritise work, and how do they plan their work and plan the roadmaps. And I think as designers spend more time understanding how businesses operate, the better of a designer you will become because you're not trying to swim upstream. When the river is going downstream, you're actually going with the flow. So understanding how businesses operate is going to be very advantageous. There's also two books around a bit more about the psychology and growth design. I think those two go hand in hand, which is blitzscale by Eric Ries, who's the co founder of LinkedIn. We have hooked by nerd Ale, which is about how to build habit forming products. These two books are extremely recommended, really insightful around how organisations one build habit forming products. So tapping into the psychology of habit forming triggers and design. And then Blitzscaling is around how organisations actually scale their company to millions of users, and what is the methodology that they use? So I think these three books are great. Then we also have Noah Kagan, he runs appsumo.com is also sumo.com. Now, he was one of Facebook's Like, first employees, and he's a big businessman as well. And I think he has something that I look up to and I always follow his work.

Sam Hancock
Cool stuff that was yeah, that was excellent.

Vinita Israni
And that concludes our latest episode of the ix da Sydney MP pod. If you want to learn more about IX da Sydney's events and mentorship programmes, please visit I IxDA sydney.org

Michael Wong
Hi, I'm Mizko and you've been listening to the ixda Sydney MP pod