



IxDA Sydney Mentoring Program Podcast

10 – David Meier

Audio Transcript

David 00:00

The more you understand customers, the better the decision making is going to be across products across design, and actually the whole business.

Molly Lewis 00:10

Hello, and welcome to the Sydney IxDA MP podcast, a show that guides you through the stages of design mentorship, whether you're just starting out and looking at getting into the industry, or you're a veteran designer, and I've been in ministry for a long time. There's something for everyone. I'm Molly Lewis. And in today's episode, Sam and Vinita are talking to David and their conversation dives into how design is business. And my understanding of subject matter, inside out is the first step to getting a seat at the leadership table. David's career foundations were established through graphic design, and digital advertising. It wasn't until working within the startup space when David got a deep understanding of the fundamentals of UX. And the last four years, David has transitioned into design leadership positions at real estate giant domain, and later at fin tech disruptors, and now find it. David has a passionate and experienced as only to focus on finding the sweet spot between delivering strong business outcomes on nailing musings, let's get started.

Sam Hancock 01:18

Well, thank you, David, for joining us today. How are you?

David 01:23

Very well, thanks.

Sam Hancock 01:25

Good stuff, I guess best way to kind of kick this off is to tell us a bit about yourself and your background.

David 01:31

I'd say I've been in the industry for two years, probably coming up to about 20 years now. And originally, like many other designers started off in graphic design, way back in the day, then moved into digital and from digital in the My agency time for my agency wings and spent a few years in the agency space before moving quiet side, I'd say that was probably one of my best career move. So I did like the agency space, it just felt drawn towards clients science that I could really be part of the evolution, they're part of the evolution of a particular product offering and, and a brand. And you also sort of get to know a lot more about the business, the more you spend, I was was a product designer was actually

more of a visual designer back then. And just kind of worked my way up the ranks over two and a half years and ended up as as a lead designer. Your

Sam Hancock 02:37

experience kind of blend has a nice blend of corporate to start up to then growth, to then back to corporate saying how do you feel about making effective change within client side?

David 02:54

Yeah, that's a good question. So change is, I think when you when you sort of step into a leadership role, nothing is perfect. Yeah, that's kind of what you're there to do, you're there to come in and, and understand the landscape and influence change and drive change. That is the sort of expectation. So, you know, there's, there's, there's many, there's many ways you can sort of take that direction, I think, first of all, understanding the problem, really understanding what needs to change, and not just coming into business in changing for the sake of changing so to if I reflect on my most recent journey of of understanding the business, and then defining change, it's when I came to find out, and I've spent so probably three months kind of deeply trying to understand the business, talking to probably 3040 people across the business, regular discussions with, with with the founders, and this is just kind of painted a bit of a picture for me of the of this sort of state of product design, the state of understanding across the business, around the customers who are there, what are their needs, what are their unmet needs. And from there, from there, I'm now in a better position to define a strategy that's going to actually enable the change that needs to happen. This is the change and sort of step change that is needed to improve UX maturity across the whole organisation. And it goes beyond you know, when we talk about UX maturity that you know, it's not just focused on on on the user experience, it's it's really kind of maturing the product org as well as you go through that journey. Because the more you understand customers, the better the decision making is going to be across products across design. And actually the whole business really, you know, we can focus on extracting the Is it making sure that they're they're really broadly shared?

Vinita 05:03

Can you share some of your thoughts kind of around? You mentioned, like designing organisations and then designing products where you're actually, obviously trying to understand the end user? How do you find the balance between the two, because it seems like both are quite important, because you need to, obviously design Europe, or to be able to service, the actual final product as well.

David 05:25

All design is important to sort of understand, understand the composition of of York. So if you're coming into a new business, you've got a team of talented product designers, or maybe you've got user researchers, whatever it might be, you know, it's really key to sort of understand what their strengths and weaknesses are. So then you can kind of assess where the gaps are. And also, what's what's important with that, with the old design, is to understand the kind of growth trajectory of the business, you know, are we looking at expanding into new global regions? So how, if that's the case, then how am I going to reflect that in the old design? Do we have the skills already in the team to kind of fill those necessary gaps? If not, then what's my recruitment plan? And I think, I think I think it's also really important to, to factor in how much deep customer knowledge we have, when you're thinking about the

design. That's, that's so that's so key. And it doesn't take long to kind of understand how much customer knowledge and awareness there is across the business, you start looking at the way decisions are made, you start looking at the speed in which decisions are made. And, you know, it doesn't sort of, it doesn't sort of take long to understand. If people are, I guess it's the frequency in which they're talking about the customers and empathising, with the customers, if you're not hearing the word customer, very often, if you're not seeing the research happening, if there's no repository of there's no insights or anything like that, these are all kind of pretty strong indicators that you need to develop the research capability within the business. And, you know, I'm a really strong advocate for developing that internal capability. You know, there's, there's always, there's pros and cons with kind of leaning on agencies for support, you bring in the bringing, they're the kind of the mercenaries who do who often do a really good job at a cost. But often, I find that you're not building up that internal knowledge as strongly as actually running the research yourself. But it's certainly a means to an end. And it's a kind of a pathway, sort of going through that right now, where we're leaning heavily into the agencies. And so too, we have the ability to kind of build up the internal capability of research. And, you know, how does that how does that kind of impacts the product experience? Coming back to your question there, it's all actually related to the product experience, because if you have the right org design, then you're going to be in a better position to craft products that actually meet the needs of the customer. You know, it's not just completely business driven, which, you know, it's, it's easy for businesses to kind of fall into the trap of focusing on business outcomes. And I think that is still incredibly important. A lot of times I see designers who, who actually lean a little bit the other way, they're almost reluctant to say this, but they're too customer centric. And they don't think enough about the business and the needs of the business, which is ultimately why they're right. So it's really kind of key to find that balance.

Vinita 09:02

And so when we're thinking about work design, I think for a lot of our listeners, one of the things that kind of comes up is with your experience with startups as well, kind of what stage of your career Do you think it's a good opportunity to move into a startup and work in that kind of, I'm just calling it work design, but work in that kind of organisation in general,

David 09:24

I think. I mean, some people start in startups, it really depends on what you're looking for. You know, if you're looking to sort of climb up the ladder, if you're looking to learn from a whole bunch of different designers and different sort of specialities and different sorts of departments, then you're probably better at a larger organisation, with with larger product design teams, whereas, you know, I actually feel going down that startup path earlier on, was probably you know, just Just by lock happened to have been a pretty strong career move. For myself, it's it just gave me a lot of lessons in how the businesses kind of operators, and around perfectionism as well, I think I think that was really key coming from quite a strong visual design background is all about perfection. And this, this, this is something that I talk to designers all the time. And, you know, I feel like many of us have this internal strive and pursuit for perfection. But I remember one day, my product product leader who was my boss at the time, he said, Do just 80% is good enough to say 80%, like, you don't have to be 100%, I just have to be like, pixel perfect doesn't have to be amazingly polished the whole time, just give me a preset. And that's always gonna stick with me, because I've said most of the time is good enough 80%, because you've got such

a high standard, you should be having such a high standard that 80% is good for, you know, just to get something out the door all the time, get something out the door, get that that value in front of customers sooner. And that's something you really noticed that Ops is speed, it's so much is about speed. And, and just shipping failure getting in front of customers as soon as possible, I guess

Sam Hancock 11:23

so say within a startup, the ability to wear multiple hats, and then being able to translate both business requirements and user requirements into a tangible design or particular outcome, right?

David 11:40

That's exactly right, you are wearing more hats. Sometimes you're wearing the hat of a product manager, sometimes you're a project manager. Most of time, hopefully you're a product designer, maybe you sort of dabble in growth hacking, you know, there, there are so many opportunities, especially like for somebody who who is a little bit more, on the junior side, you do get more of a taste as different parts of that whole products, design products journey really across the business and beyond beyond products. So. So yes, to your point, you do get a kind of taste of, of the business, you do have an understanding, when you're wearing multiple hats around why we're trying to achieve this, I feel like it's often easy to sort of connect the why we're doing this to the company, to the company vision in that kind of startup.

Sam Hancock 12:37

And I guess within the last six months, you just kind of taken the the MBA programme, how was what you've learned within that course, being translated into what you're doing now day to day,

David 12:54

I found the course incredibly useful for if there's somebody in my position, there's a lot of value. But in that course, there's also you know, those like mid level product designers from from startups from consulting from all different sorts of sort of backgrounds, strategists also. And what what I found really interesting about course, is it's, it's kind of made for design. So there's a lot of designers there. So they speak in the language that we understand. And it's not overly complex on the business side. Now, the benefit there is that I was able to take that because I could quite easily kind of understand what they were talking about all the time. It cuts out all the unnecessary sort of hardcore accounting and going too deep into the into some subjects. It's much easier to actually relate that to what I do on a daily basis. So for example, when I'm crafting strategy, I'll start thinking about what are our actual strengths? What what are the strengths we have, as business? What are the strategic activities that that were actually were doing, for example, let's just say it's Netflix, right? Netflix, strategic activities, could be content creation, licencing, distribution, marketing, if you're a rival business, you can look at that and just think, right, we can do all those things. But they can do these things a lot better, they can do content creation, much better than us, smashing on content creation, we can't compete on that one. But we can compete on partnerships. So that's, that's gonna be our sort of strategic strategic advantage. And that's, that's a really interesting skill that I kind of learned from the DBA. And so it comes back to to making the trade offs making those trade offs around where to invest. So from a business perspective, that's that's incredibly valuable and actually use that or use that knowledge as part of the strategy for this role. There was a sort of design strategy test and I was is making a trade off trying to understand where to

focus the business's energy over the next few years. And by running that activity by actually understanding finder by understanding where the opportunities lie, I was able to make quite a quite a strong gifts around whether she's strategically focused.

Sam Hancock 15:23

So how can a designer start thinking about the business even though they don't have any real exposure to it? Is it potentially kind of building out and thinking more transactionally about the details that they produce from a design and UI and UX perspective? Or is it a second series of frameworks? And then they can start to draw on to be able to push that out?

David 15:50

It's an issue in question, though. And so I think, yes, using dates, user needs, a very important, and I bet as I sort of touched on before, it's really about balancing the business needs and understanding those, those top line metrics. And I think I think having having access to some of these tools really does help understand the business. You know, if you've ever sat through a strategy presentation and get to the numbers, pages, so talking, p&l statements, it's, it's actually in the past, and something I'd used to just kind of gloss over, like in all honesty, just gonna gloss over and just finance. But there is actually quite a lot of vein in understanding those frameworks, understanding how these things are structured. And what was really key, we talked about frameworks is the strategy side of things, I found that to be the most value I got from that whole MBA course, is understanding how strategies actually put together, where do you begin? You know, before that I had had, I've had attempts at pulling together design strategy decks. And, you know, I, I don't feel like I've really succeeded in the past, because I took the wrong approach from the start. You know, at one point, I think, much earlier in my career, I remember I remember actually googling how to write and design strategy, like, what are the key components of a design strategy, and I found it hard actually found it hard to find the right information out there. So just kind of, you just sort of take the foundations of strategy and kind of winging it together. But after this course, you really do sort of start understanding the frameworks, you understand the structure of the strategy, you understand why, why they've taken these, these these approaches, and that you can start, start actually using the tools to your benefit. So prototyping, prototyping with with numbers, for example, that that's quite useful in terms of understanding the size of an opportunity. Right? So if we're talking about like addressable markets, for example, if you can actually run those numbers yourself kind of high level, and this does sort of cross over into into product strategy. But understanding the tools, understanding how you can actually size up a market, for example, it's incredibly useful if you're trying to understand whether a product is going to be viable, for example.

Vinita 18:28

So you made the shift from real estate, with domain to FinTech with zip, and finder. And so were there any learning curves and understanding the nuances of each industry, especially today? I think there's just like a proliferation of design roles. And now design roles are getting specialised to be in certain domains and have building a domain expertise within, for example, healthcare, or fintech. So can you talk to us a little bit about that as you've grown within that FinTech space itself?

David 19:01

I suppose to me, because prior to me to domain there was big commerce, e commerce and then moving to me know, it was quite different kind of learning curve, because it was different in that it's a two sided marketplace. So, you know, you think you see something into that kind of world that it's all about the app. It's all about the customer experience in the app. And yes, that's very important. But what I found out pretty soon was the day it's actually the real estate agents who are the clients, they're the ones who are actually generating the vast majority of revenue for the business. So it kind of shifts your priorities, like ultimately, you want to create the best user experience, but you also need to make some kind of concessions here and there because to create the ideal user experience It's not always going to fly with the real estate agent. So you need to kind of balance their needs with the needs of the customer. And it was always a sort of tension point, being a designer, being the advocate for the customer, for the for the user, I should say, you know, you always just want to just make the most amazing user experience. And, yeah, you know, sometimes there's just a bit of sort of tension between the agent side and, and the consumer side. So that was that was really interesting to go through that experience. And, and, you know, just to kind of add to that, you're also in a duopoly. This domain, and there's real estate, Australia, both ASX listed businesses. And when you have that kind of duopoly, it's it becomes difficult to sort of disrupt, because you've got shareholders at this point, and you don't want to upset the shareholders, if he disrupts, if you sort of try and disrupt that industry, then you do kind of risk implosion, and then the other guy wins. So very interesting to sort of go into the, into this two sided marketplace world. Whereas, you know, moving into into zip, and I think actually coming back to, to me, I think I just kind of got to the point where I would try to solve the same problems trying to say to solve same problems for the customer. But it was just kind of hitting a brick wall like price transparency, the biggest problem, right customer is that you go to the website, you go to the app, you just want to understand what the price of the property is. But the agent that doesn't sort of work so well with the agent, because they want to get leads. And I got to the point where I say, just kind of biting my head against the wall. I'm not I'm not I'm not going to make any progress on this. So a few of those would be kind of challenges that, you know, I just, I feel it's not going to change. I'm gonna change anytime soon, without some sort of major disruption. So I saw I saw FinTech I saw deck growing in Sydney. And I saw that as an opportunity to kind of move into a new industry, fast Pace, pace, high growth. And, you know, in terms of the nuances in terms of learning, yes, it was massive, huge learning curve, to go from a duopoly marketplace to payment gateway. Essentially, that's kind of what it is taking payments, shipping payments, having merchants in some respect. There's also the the two sided marketplace, zip, where you have the merchants and you have the consumers. So I could kind of relate to that aspect from my face at Domaine, but it's really understanding payments and quiet technical, there's so many new terms that that just became part of my vocabulary in the first three to six months, which up to that point I'd never heard of. So understanding payment rails and schematics and the complexity of regulation. Banks dealing with banks, which are, which is so slow, and dealt with banks very much before. So yeah, there was a quite a lot to learn with that transition, but you know, it was incredibly rewarding, incredibly rewarding, like you're literally learning something new every day, also surrounded by quite strong leadership. And again, that was a founder led business. So having a close connection with the founders was quite inspiring, and motivating. And then moving into finder, again, find it was in a different sort of business model. It's more of a an affiliate marketing platform. That's what most people probably know for comparing this product with this product Home Loans started out with credit cards many years ago. And essentially, it's it's driving people through to conversions. So click click through conversions, heavily dependent on SEO. And, you know, I've been building that business off for for 13

years. But it wasn't really until I started going through that process that I didn't know a lot about affiliate marketing. But when I started going through this process, started talking to former CTO there about the role. I just had this moment I realised hang on these guys do do so much more than just comparisons or alerts about the web 3.0 focus on the business thing. Really, ultimately the business of finder is actually about saving people money, empowering people to save money and also grow their wealth, which, which is in some ways, I guess you think? Well, it's in some ways at odds with zip, which is more about credit, this is more about saving money. So that quite I guess that's aligned much more closely with with with my values yeah so back to the web 3.0 focus you got very visionary founders at finder and it's it's there's a there's a strong crypto focused across the business, you know, the, this this will have no idea about until actually started going through the process. But very visionary founders, crypto offering UK and as a product where you can stake you can kind of earn 4% return, which is massive compared to the banks. There's PFM there's Analytics, you can trade crypto, essentially, to digital wallet experience, which actually related very much to my experience in zipped so I've found the transition from from from zip to finder, it's actually been a lot, a lot easier to transition from domain to zip going from fintech. So from real estate, to FinTech, is finder is the partner finder that I'm really sort of focusing on is essentially fintech.

Vinita 26:20

Do you have any tips for people changing industry domains as you've gone through it?

David 26:25

Yeah, I'd say, you know, if I'd say find something, ideally, you find something that, that you actually care about something you're actually at somebody, somebody's kind of aligned to your values, and there's, you know, it's obviously going to vary between person to person, but once you found that industry, once you have an interest in that, whatever it might be, maybe it's sustainability, maybe it's been Jack, below loan about the about the key players who, who's doing particularly well in that space, and then understand, you know, if you understand a bit about their business model, then you understand more about the business, and then understand who the leaders are. And that can just be a simple, simple fix really linked in to understand more about it, ladies learn more about their journey can even reach out to them who in your network, do you know, that might be from this company? Or is it a really good spot to start?

27:21

Great. So let's pull it back a little bit. As this is a mentoring podcast, I would love to hear your thoughts on mentoring and what it means to you.

David 27:30

So yeah, mentoring, mentoring, to me is really about leveraging my experience to help point people in the right direction, I feel mentoring, it's more kind of directive, then then coaching, you know, often at work, often at work, I feel myself in one on ones, I'll be coaching people versus mentoring, which is more sort of descriptive, leveraging my own experiences passing on a stronger kind of guidance around what direction I take in a certain situation, or what direction they recommend they could take given their situation. Whereas, you know, I think if if coaching is more about encouraging, encouraging the person to come up with the solution themselves, thus giving them a kind of greater sense of ownership of the

outcome. And it's a sort of fine line between the two. But yeah, look, I you know, if I think about mentoring I've had I've had, I've had some, some mentors in my time, that really kind of helped steer me in the right direction. And, you know, even even just having peers, industry peers, who I can actually lean on, this has been incredibly valuable. You know, often I've found myself in positions where you're, it's kind of lonely, like you, there's nobody else at the same level in the business, who you can lean on and and sort of say, Hey, what should I do here? What direction should I go? And what do you think if this this this sort of strategy or this org structure, sometimes is nobody considered that there's there's often no other designer at the same level? So that's where I find there's a couple of other design leaders in Sydney who, who, who I met at, I think, envision and envision, invent quite a while ago, at a start up quite quite a friendship, quite a quite a strong connection. And we'd often just catch up and golf coffee and just bounce problems off of each other. And I think there was, it's just been so incredibly helpful for my career growth, to just to have that sound he bought from somebody who's been through the same experiences, and it got to the point of saying, we could do more than this. So, you know, Sebastian was able to do What we have here? Well, let's try and grow this to something bigger. So what I did off the back of that was I created a network. And it started Cisco's sort of slack group just randomly reaching out to other design leaders on LinkedIn, just to say, hey, this, there's, there's some of the problems. Look, as design leaders, we face problems all the time. And like pretty much every single day and, you know, if you're interested in joining the community, we come together, we sort of chat about these things. So it's got about 3540, design leaders across Sydney, and we sort of do drinks and meet ups and stuff all the time. And have a Slack channel where you can kind of bounce problems around. It's been, yeah, it's just been incredibly useful. I think it's something I'd encourage people to do. No matter what sort of level you're out, whether it's Junior Senior, or what kind of, you know, Head of Design, having a support network is so key. I mean, you can spend hours just trying to trawl through through Google trying to trawl through articles on Google's to find the answers. But often, it's, you know, it's just sort of talking to somebody else, that there kind of releases the thought that's inside you. I feel like we've gotten a lot of the answers. We've all got a lot of these artists inside us, but it's just sometimes you need somebody to help kind of bring that out, you know, to sort of help build on an idea that you might already have.

Vinita 31:32

I love that site. I think a lot about a previous design teacher who basically said we take your things into existence. And so the question here is kind of what are you tinkering with right now? What are you thinking about? And writing about talking about at the moment?

David 31:52

Well, what I'm thinking about what I guess one of the challenges I'm having right now is, this is a fine as a global business, being a global business has its comes with a whole new set of challenges, which which I wish I hadn't really kind of, didn't really, I've never been in this position before. And that was actually one of the one of the reasons I was particularly interested in this challenge. And, you know, there's, there's the challenges around scaling a global team, there's challenges around sort of keeping the unity of the team together, when you're in multiple time zones. And what may have worked for me in the past I'm finding doesn't necessarily work here. And because there's, there's not like the kind of cookie cutter approach does not have like a cookie cutter approach to rituals, or, or processes I find wherever you go, you know, if people different activities got like that somebody may have tried these

rituals, for example, in the past, but it's just planted like it's not gonna work here. So you just got to keep trying iterating and learning what sort of works best I find with on a sort of cultural side. And now it's coming back to the mentoring side of things. This is one of those scenarios where, where I'm actually looking to looking forward to this week, catching up with somebody who I consider to be like a very, very senior product design leader from Atlassian, actually, who has been through a lot of these kinds of growth and scale, challenges the global organisation, so I'm going to catch up with him and just kind of bounce some of these some of these ideas around, hopefully, hopefully, it's going to unlock some of the information inside me unlock some of these ideas of sort of bubbling around and just give me that that clarity, or clarity that I kind of kind of need.

Sam Hancock 33:54

And I guess from resources or book perspective, what what are you currently reading or any resources that you can really hang your hat hat on for our listeners?

David 34:07

I think probably one of the most influential books to me, has been Oct design for design Augs by Peter Peter melt. So I got a hell of a lot of value from that book. It helps to actually have somebody define what the role of product design leader is what what you know, what a senior senior design is, what a lead designer is communication designer, because it's a lot of this is up until reading that book. There's just a lot of ambiguity of ambiguity around titles and roles and the expectations of these roles. So it just kind of, it's obviously gonna be different for for different businesses. But the way Mohawks explains it, it's kind of it's that sort of baseline you know, expectation for each of those levels and each of those roles, so very valuable. And, and also, I think what I loved about it is the structure of design arcs and how he explains the structure of design arcs really helps me wrap my head around the idea of how to create the perfect design. I guess I guess another one of the ones I'm really interested in at moment is no rules rules. Very which, by Reed Hastings that is essentially the book of book by Netflix. Reed Hastings was a was one of the early founders, I think of Netflix, and it's all about their culture. So if you're interested in developing design culture, or product culture, interviewer says that that book is incredible. They take a really kind of novel, completely transparent approach to culture. Good strategy, bad strategy is another good one. If if he hadn't had that strategic path, I think probably earlier on in my career, what really kind of set me on the UX journey would be lean UX, I still still still stick to a lot of those principles to this day. And as probably like 1015 years ago, I read that one.

Molly Lewis 36:13

And that concludes our latest episode for the Sydney IxDA. MP podcast. If you want to learn more about AI IxDA Sydney, our events or mentorship programmes, please head to ISDA sydney.org Thanks, everyone, and look forward to seeing you next time.

David 36:39

Hey, I'm doing Maya and you've been listening to the Sydney ISDA MP pod.

Sam Hancock 36:44

Yeah, good stuff.

David 36:47

First. Now the first time Yeah, first time