

EPISODE 9

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[INTRODUCTION]

[00:01:36.6] SS: Hello UI hackers. Thanks a lot for joining us of another episode of the Hacking UI Podcast where we talk about design, development, and entrepreneurship. I'm Sagi Shrieber.

[00:01:45.3] DT: And I'm David Tintner.

[00:01:46.8] SS: We're your hosts and today, Noam Liss we'll be joining us as a guest host.

[00:01:50.5] DT: And just before we begin, we want to say thanks to WooCommerce for sponsoring this episode. WooCommerce is one the most popular eCommerce platform in the world, it's totally free, easy to customize and full of great features. It allows you to start selling and making money on your WordPress website in less than five minutes.

[00:02:05.0] SS: Yeah, thanks a lot WooCommerce and by the way, if you choose to buy any other paid extensions or themes, you can 30% off with the code, "hackingui" at checkout. Again, that's "hackingui", in one word, at checkout.

[00:02:18.0] DT: Cool. Okay, we have another great guest for you this week for the Scaling a Design Team series. She's a director of experience design at one of the few companies at the world that's truly disrupting the industry. If you travel, you've almost definitely used this product which she has been working on for the past two and a half years.

[00:02:32.8] SS: In this great conversation, we discussed managing designers as a design experiment, how craft and hustle go together, and why the user experience should be important to every employee.

[00:02:42.5] DT: Ladies and gents, it's our pleasure to introduce Katie Dill, director of experience design at Airbnb.

[00:02:49.1] SS: Let's get hacking.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:03:02.0] SS: Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of The Hacking UI Podcast, Scaling a Design Team. I'm thrilled to have you here and today, we have an awesome guest, Katie Dill. Katie, what's up?

[00:03:14.3] KD: Hey guys, how's it going? Good to be here.

[00:03:17.2] SS: All good, all good and it's awesome to have you here on the show. We've been waiting a long time to have this conversation with you because we admire Airbnb and I heard you in a professional panel in last November in San Fran and I really connected to everything that you said there and I really wanted to follow up on that so it's good to have you on the show.

[00:03:41.9] KD: Awesome. That's nice of you to say. Great to be here, thank you so much for inviting me.

[00:03:45.9] SS: Sure and today, David is not here with me but with me is Noam Liss our senior product designer at SimilarWeb.

[00:03:54.7] NL: Hey, good to be back.

[00:03:57.5] SS: And so, where should we start? Katie, how about you talk something about yourself, just a very short background of how you came to be a designer and about your career path up to the point of where you are now?

[00:04:12.2] KD: For sure. I can't say it's going to be super easy to make it super short but I will do my best. I'll give the condensed version. So I am from New York originally, the suburbs just outside the city where I grew up. I don't think ever heard of product design until way after I graduated in college. Maybe interior design is probably all people really knew of design out there.

So I studied history in undergrad and after leaving college and learning about history, I became very interested in architecture and started exploring a career path in architecture and along that journey, I think learning more and more about it, realizing that I'm probably far too impatient to

be an architect. It could take many years to see the work that you create built and I was looking for a slightly more instant gratification.

Around that time, a friend of mine saw a show called, *Making the Shopping Cart* it was 60 minutes about IDO's design process where they were reinventing the shopping cart and that I didn't even see it. My friend saw it and said that that was something that I seemed to be naturally fit for because she knew about the little inventions I made around the apartment.

I explored this idea of product design based on that, realized it was just the dream jobs and I was just looking forward, I just didn't know existed and so I started to dig into that and ask around how do I get into it? And the recommendation from folks in the field was to go to school for it because I had no design background whatsoever.

So I applied to a design school in California called The Art Center College of Design and I studied industrial design. So I learned how to make physical things now most of my design work is digital or in fact in many ways it's a service that doesn't even have any physical instantiation but the learnings from the industrial design program were certainly applicable for designing in really any media.

[00:06:15.2] SS: Yeah, of course.

[00:06:15.9] KD: That's my background.

[00:06:17.4] SS: Cool and so after school, what was your first job where did you work up to Airbnb?

[00:06:26.4] KD: After design school, I went to Odd Design in San Francisco and I joined there as a design analyst, which is a position they don't have anymore. They renamed it essentially and it became an interaction designer. But at the time, design analyst was a well suited role for me because obviously I had background in physical design but I was very interested and excited about the research phase and the concepting phase and kind of the development of the idea from start to finish.

And so I was interested more in the design process than simply just the execution of the physical and so that role was well suited for me but also help me get closer to the strategy part of the conversation. We did have a strategist on staff at Frog and so we were helping essentially Fortune 50's with their product strategy, the road map, their brand and I was there for five years. I left Frog as a creative director and went to a company called Green Star, which is like a venture capital firm but of a very different nature.

We invested in startups with design services and received equity in return and there, we were basically doing the same thing I was doing at Frog where helping a company with its brand and its product strategy and its user experience, but all these companies were early stage startups. So it was bringing design in at the ground level and in many cases coaching them and helping them build up their design teams and leverage and think about using design and design practices like user research and ethnographic research in what they were doing on a day to day basis. And then from there, I contracted with startups for a little while and then found Airbnb and I've been at Airbnb for about two years and some change.

[00:08:12.7] SS: Cool, exciting times like two years is a long time in the start world especially with Airbnb growing so fast right?

[00:08:19.1] KD: Yes. We often joke that two years is like seven years in Airbnb days because so much happens. So much changes and the team could grows and we're working on so many different things. It's really exciting how much can happen in a year.

[00:08:37.9] NL: How big was Airbnb when you joined compared to now?

[00:08:40.7] KD: That's a good question, I think it's pretty much doubled in size. My team in particular has more than quadrupled and let's see, it's about 10 people when I started and actually now, it's almost about 60 user experience designers.

[00:08:58.5] SS: Wow, 60 user experience designers in Airbnb? Okay.

[00:09:04.0] KD: Yeah, well there's just so much that we work on. Sometimes when you think about it like, "Oh what are all these people doing?" But we've got the host side, we've got the

guest side, we design our own internal tools. So for all the customer service agents, they are using Airbnb made tools but we have every platform we're addressing and as we are obviously global but much of our mission is based on our being global and being truly local.

We really need to up our game and how do we function in other parts of the world and other parts of the world are different. Every city is different and we have to understand what those differences are and design for that and find what might be the universals. I get that hospitality is hospitality everywhere but certainly some places have zip codes and some don't. Some use credit cards and some don't and so we have to address that in our interface and the service that we provide.

[00:09:58.1] SS: Yeah, for sure and like are some of the designers located as well, like abroad and faraway places where the culture might be different?

[00:10:06.8] KD: We have folks that are based outside of San Francisco only a small few right now but we are always exploring and thinking about how better to get closer to our users around the world. We travel a lot in the meantime to make that happen. I think one thing that we're still working on is we're still really young, right?

We're still figuring it out and trying to increase the quality and the cohesion of our product and so while we're doing that, it's really helpful to have people here together at San Francisco. So we only have a few. We have a few in Portland and a few other outside of the United States but we definitely be seeing more of that I think in the future.

[00:10:50.0] SS: Cool and I love also that you come with an approach that we're still young and still learning because Airbnb is already really established and really well known. It's very nice that you come with the approach that you have so much to learn. I guess it's something that keeps you so innovative all the time.

[00:11:09.3] KD: Oh thanks for saying so and yes, absolutely. We often joke that, especially if you visit our office, our office is lovely and there's people everywhere and it's humming and it feels like stuff is on track. But we're a startup in big company's clothing. We have yet to figure it all out and we're certainly doing a good job of it I think and every day we get better at what we

do which I think is a huge example of being on the right track but certainly every day is a new day for us and we haven't been here before. And so we do have to have an entrepreneurial spirit about it and recognize the fact that we're carving new ground every day.

[00:11:48.5] SS: Yeah, it's amazing. All right so let's jump into you're talking in the terms of "we". So who is this "we"? How do you guys structured and how are the teams structured in terms of product development, such and such?

[00:12:02.8] KD: Yeah, well I guess there's a couple of ways you could slice it. So one, there's the design team and we actually have a fun name for it, we call it EPIC. It actually was an acronym because originally, the four parts of the design team EPIC was Experience design which is my team, Production design, Insights which is the research and Content strategy. Since then, we've actually renamed two of those teams.

So production is no longer called production, it's called design ops. Because it includes other groups like tools, the team that is focused on creating the tools that actually amplify and increase the speed and productivity and quality of the design and development process as well as production design and then insights is now called research. But the acronym is so good, we kept it. So we're still called EPIC and so that's the design team and that's a group of about a 120 or so folks that cover all those four basis.

But while we're a family and we look to build cohesion between that group and we spend time together every week, we are best utilized and work most often among product managers and engineers, etcetera. So we are an integrated team as opposed to what some folks have as maybe more like centralized design team. We are integrated and dispersed among the product folks. So your products folks, your designers, your engineers, data scientist, researchers are all working on multidisciplinary teams and they all work essentially from start to finish through the process.

We, in all cases, try to avoid a waterfall approach. So you have researchers and designers and products working on strategy, working on the concepting all the way down to execution and the way those teams are organized are based our core pillars of our business. We have OKR's that drive our thinking and our prioritization. So there's objectives and key results for every area of

the business. So we have folks that focus on the guest experience. We have folks that are focused on growth of our guest community. Focused on the host community, building tools and systems for our hosts. We have folks that are internally focused to develop goals for our customer service agents and by dividing it up among these core areas, it helps us to develop expertise in that area.

So for example the host folks, the people that are focused on the host experience, they think inside and out about the host experience and they know every which way of our product is sliced that how it helps our host or even how it holds them back. But we also do seek to have some mobility and flexibility and so someone might be in the host team let's say for six months and then they'll move over to the guest team. There's not a strong line between them that you can't cross but there is a little bit of a focused areas around them, if that makes sense.

[00:14:52.2] SS: Yeah, I guess it totally makes sense and also that's, in a much smaller version, that's how we work here at SimilarWeb. But we have just product teams, like we have the design team and the designers are inside like a product team, like a multidisciplinary team of product manager and developers. We have no UX researchers yet but maybe one day.

[00:15:12.9] KD: None? Do you do the research on your own? How do you gain insight about what the problem is you're trying to solve?

[00:15:19.1] SS: So basically, mostly the PM's do this. We have a strategy team — I guess the PM's are in charge of doing this research alongside with the strategy team and also using us as the designers to be a part of the process of this research.

[00:15:34.8] KD: I see.

[00:15:36.0] SS: Yeah, I mean the strategy team is the one that you can call like a UX researchers for internal functionality because they talk to support, they talk to clients, they talk to — they create world maps, they create user journey maps, they create personas and news cases and they're really kind of like the heart of the product team.

[00:15:59.4] KD: Got you, yeah. That's good because you know it is true, you don't really need to have somebody that is actually called that as long as the work is happening. Even when I was working with early stage startups for example, it's like, "Oh well we can't hire a designer, we can't hire our researcher." It's like, "Okay, well how do you bring that work into it even though you might not have that actual person with that title?" Because it's more about the work that needs to get done rather than the individual that owns it.

[00:16:27.4] SS: Yeah, for sure. I mean here it's also like a technology company and when we came, I was the first designer and then everything happened so fast. It was two and a half years ago and then we started scaling. We were 50 people, today we are 350 people and besides me there are six more designers. So in order to get designers, I was focusing on hiring product designers, which are kind of like full stack designers.

I still haven't got to hiring the UX researchers because meanwhile the strategy team started to build up and we were like, "Okay, so who is UX responsibility? Because everybody does UX anyway. So yeah anyways enough talk about SimilarWeb, let's talk more about Airbnb. So in terms of product, who decides on what products you — let's say what features you build? Who decides? Does it come from the ground up?

[00:17:26.9] KD: It comes pretty much from anywhere. The problem definition and the idea generation can come from anywhere. The prioritization of what we get done in what order and of what time is based on the decisions of the product team. Product managers basically own the road map and they need to make sure that we have a strategy for going forward and that it is going to help us achieve our goals. But they do work together with the data scientists, with the designers and the user researchers and the engineers to identify what is the right path forward.

So it really is a collaborative effort but at the end of the day if somebody is going to hold the road map and say, "This is what we're doing and make sure that it is complete and has a true backbone to that strategy," that would be the product managers.

[00:18:15.4] SS: Okay and great because I guess my question is, what's the responsibilities and roles of the product designer at Airbnb? Where does he start his responsibilities where does she end? Where does she pass off the responsibilities?

[00:18:31.8] KD: Product design at Airbnb is a big part of the entire product development process which I'm quite proud of that we do have such a collaborative culture and that design engineering, product researchers and scientist are leveraged throughout. As I mentioned, we do avoid waterfall approach because every one of those members of course brings a different view to the problem and the solution and so can offer help along the way.

So I would say there really isn't a spot where the designer is or is not, or comes off the project. They are involved throughout. So what it would look like in the beginning is let's say out company has goals of "we need to improve our tools for our host. We want to make hosting easy and enjoyable and really productive for our hosts" and then the product managers, engineers, designers will get together and they'll talk about, "Well how might we do that?"

What do we know from our data about where problems are today? What have we heard from our users before? And then we'll start generating ideas and we'll first start looking at what are the most important problems and so we might realize that, "Okay, right now mobile is under leveraged. We know mobile is a really big part of their world, what might we do to make mobile better for them?" And then we'll start generating the ideas.

We'll look at those ideas and we'll prioritize them. We might use research to do so and find which of the ideas that we think we'll have essentially the most bang for the buck in terms of improving user experience and then we will identify those and proceed by designing out more solutions and the engineers and product managers are part of that process because there's a lot of ideas that they can bring to the table and there's a lot of back and forth about what is feasible and what's not. Where can we take this idea?

And then we might do some research, we might do some testing with our users based on prototypes that we create to learn more and then we iterate on it and then the designers, even when the design is "done" there is an ongoing process of revision and iteration. We're working alongside engineers to continue to improve it and so I would say that they really never come off of it because after it shipped, we need to make sure that we are looking after it. If there's new learnings or something that needs to be changed, we can't just forget about it and work.

[00:20:56.1] SS: Sure and by the way, do you find yourself coming back to reiterate on a lot of those features or do you mostly move onto real features?

[00:21:03.8] KD: I think we do come back to stuff but I don't think we do it enough. We do, of course like any designer or any ambitious team, get excited about what else can we do and what new we can do and so it is. It's a discipline to have to come back to something and to improve it because I think a lot of us could say, "Oh it's not great. We're going to come back to it," and then once it's out there, we're like, "Well its working so we really do need to come back to it?" And that's tough.

I think we all are a little disappointed in ourselves when we do potentially neglect something that probably could use another round. Hopefully if it's that bad, we will for sure prioritize it and come back to it but yeah, I've got to admit, there's a few things that live out there in the world that I wish I had another go at it.

[00:21:53.7] SS: Yeah, for sure. I can totally understand. I guess it's against our human nature to go back. We always look forward and also in life. The human species always move forward and we don't tend to go back. Also in product, it's the same kind of thing it's against our nature to go back to the thing that we finished.

[00:22:15.7] KD: Yeah.

[00:22:16.4] SS: So yeah and the reason I was asking about that is because I know like the Intercom, we were on talk with Emmet Connolly and he said that they are very methodical about this. So they have a methodology that says that they have the five principles of product shipment of how they decide what features to build and one of those is looking back and iterating on products that they already shipped. So therefore that's why I'm asking, maybe you guys also have something written down about that.

[00:22:46.4] NL: Yeah, I wanted to ask all about when you push stuff or you deliver it, how often do you do it? Or do you plan it short like a couple of week's prints or you might have bigger features on the work that it could take a while? Like how do you decide what to do and often you can shift stuff?

[00:22:59.0] KD: Yeah great question and I would say it's a little bit different for every team and every project. So we are absolutely shipping stuff everyday multiple times a day. We're putting out new things to the website. Some of them might be small fixes that you might not even see and then of course sometimes, much bigger overhauls in new product features and the same thing with mobile. Of course with mobile, we have a repeating cycle. So it's a little bit different as opposed to daily but we definitely are months that maybe making changes.

We do have two times in a year where we key milestones. So in the spring and then again in the fall, we have what we call big launches and in the spring, it's focused on the guest experience. In the fall, it's focused on the host experience and that is somewhat of the drum beat that helps our entire product team kind of come together around these key milestones. Because a lot of times the biggest things that we're shipping are interdependent on many teams and so having that rallying point for us, helps all these teams work better together and so we all know what is our timeline.

But on a daily basis that's just the areas, teams operating in somewhat autonomous ways to solve for the particular problem areas within their side of the product and so therefore, you don't necessarily have cohesion across the entire team. Not everybody needs to know about every little thing that's happening, depending on the teams. So again, it just comes back to this scale of the interdependencies of what's being shipped.

[00:24:31.7] NL: Right, yeah that makes sense. I was asking because I was wondering if you do have long term projects that you mentioned, how do you keep the team focused? I feel like if you do a project that lasts let's say more than two or three sprints sometimes it's easy to get lost and forget where the deadline is or at least stay hungry the whole time. I'm kind of wondering if you have any tips or how you guys do a long term project?

[00:24:55.0] KD: I guess the biggest thing for any type of work long or short where it comes down to like how do people get excited about it and have that drive is about the vision for where it's going and we try, and I think there's always places where we can improve on this, but we try to connect back everything that one of the team members is working on to the larger vision of

the company, what are we trying to achieve in the long term, what are we trying to achieve in the short term and how do all these pieces come together?

It's such an important part of it because when that starts to break down, when someone's like, "Oh here I am working on the payment form and I don't know why I am iterating on this and spending days and weeks working on this thing into what end?" That's a problem. They need to see the purpose and the power of their work and connecting it back to the larger vision and what we're seeking out to do helps to give them a little bit more understanding of why this is so critical.

I think that's a huge on a big project where especially on the early stages where the end, the finish line can seem so far away. Also, the reality is you can dream a big vision about changing the product but usually the best approach to getting there is by taking smaller steps. It really depends on where the thing is but for example, when we design for a host, if we were to overnight change everything about the product and we're like, "Oh look host, we made you a better product but we changed everything." That is a problem.

Some of these folks are building their livelihood on this product and if they don't know how to use it, even if it is technically better, that might be a big problem for the business that they are running and so we have to take a more delicate approach in launching this changes, bring them along with us, help them see the changes that we're making and get feedback and take a step approach to it even though the larger vision might be a true overhaul.

[00:26:57.5] NL: Right, I kind of follow up on that, I was wondering how. You mentioned you had such a large team specially like the designers of 60 people or whatever plus the developers, I'm sure it's hundreds and you do have to keep them all involved in the same project and keep them all synched, I was wondering how you do that in such a large scale to keep these people hungry all the time and in the loop throughout the whole process?

[00:27:16.6] KD: Yeah, keeping people in the loop there's definitely an increasing challenges that even grows. It was one thing when we were 10 designers sitting side by side and the engineers were all within sight. But now, we're talking to about hundreds of engineers and quite a few designers as well that makes it challenging and it also is a constantly evolving process to

keep people aligned. The ways that we kept them aligned last year is different than the way we need to do it this year.

And so there's a couple things. I think it's about the tools, it's about the methods and it's about the culture. One, starting with just like bringing on people into the team that fit the core values and are good communicators and are going to be great collaborators is the first and most important thing. We have no chance of working together if we aren't hiring folks that you can build into that and then the process, we need to set up certain types of meetings or certain types of communication so that there is that.

For example on the design team, we had what we call "a visual standup" and so every week if the team comes together and everybody shares one screen shot of what they're working on and we go around the room and 60 people say what they're doing and it's done in 30 minutes and by having a visual alongside of it, they don't need to say much. They can show that I am working on the payment form and people can see, "Oh okay, you're doing it that way. You are using that design style, okay you're impacting that part of the app or that part of the website."

And just by seeing it, they get a lot of the answers that they might need. They can identify for themselves where the dependencies lie like, "Oh shit you're working on that, well so am I so we need to talk," and that's a key part of keeping that cohesion and then lastly, it comes under the tools. So we just revamped our design system and now our design system is a component library that influence our design styles but it also brings it together in terms of how is it used and how does the typeface sit with a picture in a certain block than can be reused as a modular piece throughout our app?

And that by having that more I guess tool based system, we can have better cohesion in what we're producing and also it removes a lot of I guess the noise in a typical product design process where at one point, we were asking ourselves like, "Oh what padding do I use? And what grid and what typeface?" And those questions shouldn't be a part of everyday decision, those should be defined so we can spend our time instead on bigger questions about the user experience.

[00:29:57.5] NL: Right and there's a team that does just that, who is in charge of that to make sure that it's always cohesive?

[00:30:02.2] KD: Yes, we have a team that's called the DLS team, the design language system and these designers are focused on building the best design system possible that not only is going to look great, it's going to work really well. It's going to be accessible and it's going to be unified across all of the different platforms we design for and helps the designers and engineers move faster and to create higher quality of work. It is a huge ambition. It is not easy of course, but the work that these guys have been doing and the first instantiation of it shipped this past April on the guest side of the app. We are slowly but surely are bringing it to all parts of our product.

[00:30:38.0] NL: That's pretty cool, we're at the ambition stage currently.

[00:30:42.5] KD: Nice guys.

[00:30:43.2] NL: Our team is a guy and he's working on it pretty hard.

[00:30:46.5] SS: And he's one of the product designers that his side project insight Similar Web to do the style guide.

[00:30:53.1] NL: Right and the faster — we're always were one step ahead of him so he has a lot of work to do. Every time he thinks he's done, we design a new drop down menu and he has to start from scratch.

[00:31:08.2] SS: Yeah, I mean it's something that we've been back and forth here for last year thinking whether we should actually try to build the team to do the style guide. So it's something that we really need to learn more about. So you have developers also on this team or is it only designers?

[00:31:24.4] KD: They work alongside developers. I mean that's imperative because it's intentionally not a style guide. It employs styles but it is actually highly linked to the development and so when we create a component, we work with the engineers. Like when we design a

component, we work with the engineers so that they can create the component in code and that's where a lot of the efficiency is gained and so there's a concept back and forth where a designer might say, "Oh let's make the component look like this." An engineer can respond with, "Well actually it would be better if we did it this way," and so they worked really closely on that and I think that's imperative for it to be successful.

[00:32:05.7] SS: Yeah, of course. I guess it's a perfect picture of that.

[00:32:09.1] NL: Yeah it's ideal if you have that kind of freedom. I was wondering does that let your designers I guess build with code automatically because it's already build components?

[00:32:17.6] KD: That would be the ambition. As soon as we can get there, I think that would gain to a lot of efficiency is that while a designer is prototyping something that the code is filling in. Now it doesn't mean that they're going to have production ready code to ship. There's a reason for the experts and the engineering team that are going to be able to build something far more robust but the closer we can get to that shared language, the better.

Right now where design is today, designers are creating these mocks in one tool that's basically all for show, they are putting red lines on it so that they can translate it to somebody else. What we strive for us to be able to remove that level of translation that needs to happen and by creating the mock or the prototype, you are inherently creating what's going to be communicated to an engineer and they're going to build together.

That's absolutely the ambition but it's a long road to get there and I think a lot of the tools aren't ready to take that on but the good news is, as you look around, what Adobe is doing, what sketch is doing or Origami, all of this different tools are absolutely getting hit to the idea of that. We need to start speaking the same language, and so I'm excited about the changes that are under way.

[0:33:38.1] NL: Right, at the end of it, even if you have a complete style built in in HTML or CSS we still have to have all the sketch files or whatever also synced and so anytime we design, we're still not really touching the code, it just helps the developers build it at the end. But yeah, it's kind of missing a step in between.

[0:33:55.2] KD: Yeah, red lines like the Rosetta Stone, they're like trying to translate what's written. That seems kind of silly, doesn't it?

[0:34:02.0] NL: Right, exactly.

[0:34:04.2] SS: Yeah, totally. It will be such a perfect world if it just would be like a live environment. Even just like prototyping, a new prototyping tool based on that style guide to create mocks and everybody, even the PM's could create mocks and then the designers could really focused more on the user experience problems. That will be so much — that will be amazing. Katie, do you have any — you're talking about methodology as well, do you have any written methodology that all designers follow or are being trained on as they join the team?

[0:34:37.7] KD: I don't have what like a lot of teams might say is like their principles for design and how we all work together. We have more a kind of I guess a high level agreement on what matters and I would say it's probably every three months, we explore the idea of, "Oh, should we have our principles written down?" The fact of the matter is that if we go that route, I'm quite concerned that they're going to look a lot like everybody else's principles of these like five things of "Oh, we design for users and we care about quality." Like, "Yup, yup." Those kinds of things are pretty obvious and I would assume that that is the bench mark and expectations for all of our team members.

I think where the idea of principles becomes really powerful and what I'm excited to see currently in our team is that we have principles for how do we design for growth? How do we design for hosts? How do we design for a particular problem area for business travel? Those are the most powerful kind of guides in our every day. For our team in terms of our decision making of like who we hire and what it matters to us, we have the core values of the company which we all are all believers in and identify well with and use as we think about hiring people.

Beyond that, we look for certain things on the team, this is the high level principles I was referring to. We look for high level of craft, humility and hustle. Those three things are just a summary of it all, but your craft has to be excellent, you have to be caring about the details, you

have to be thinking in systems, you have to ensure that you are leveraging the best taste and pushing forward the best user experience.

While you have to be the best at what you do, you can't have an ego about it, we design for people other than ourselves. We design alongside engineers and product managers and researchers have to be truly collaborative. So that's where the humility piece comes in. Lastly, we have to do it as quickly as possible, productively and proactively and so that is where the hustle comes in.

[0:36:48.9] SS: So I guess that's the methodology of its own. It's like craft, humility and hustle. Just it's something — it's a very strong statement.

[0:36:55.7] KD: Yeah.

[0:36:56.3] SS: Cool. All right. So let's get into hiring because hiring is kind of — you know what? Before we get into hiring, you said you have a pretty much like, and maybe that will get us into hiring. But when a new member joins the team, you hire a new designer, how do you train the designer for those unwritten principles or methodology that you guys hold. How do you get them into the loop of whatever's going on in such a big design team, such a large scale design team?

[0:37:26.9] KD: It starts certainly before with like, who do we even bring on? So we have the core values as a company and then beyond that we do have a framework for thinking about who we hire to the design team. When we were a really small team it was pretty easy to just kind of talk about what we're looking for and align. But as we grew, we needed to write it down, and so we do have a kind of framework. A recommend a set of questions, recommended things to look for, red flags, green flags et cetera, so we can identify the people that do have craft, humility and hustle along before they enter the building.

[0:38:01.0] KD: Once they arrive, we do go through an onboarding process. We have a week long company onboarding process where they meet basically every team within the company and they learn a little bit about everybody, which is really powerful. It's an intense week but it's a fun week, it's a little bit like camp and everybody gets to meet all parts of business to get better

context. Then we have a boot camp, which is a little bit more informal and you'll have meetings with engineers, you'll have meetings with various design leaders, with researchers, production designers so that you can learn about the various parts of most related to design.

So we'll talk about this things like craft, humility and hustle and what that looks like, we'll talk about the expectations. We have a career levels frame work that helps people understand what's expected in their level and then how they say and what their career path looks like.

So we try to make sure that people have clarity about where they're going and what's expected but it is an ongoing process and certainly not something that is solved by one meeting or one discussion and a lot of it comes down to the manager and reports relationship. We try to encourage people to speak up and ask for feedback but also remind and push on our managers to continue to be very active in their people's development.

[0:39:18.4] SS: Yeah, like the managers in terms of being proactive in — so design manager is there like a system that they work with in terms of do they have like weekly meetings with each and every designer? Do they have days where they all meet and work together? How do teams with their manager just keep in sync, and how can every employee get the personal treatment and be setup for success?

[0:39:48.4] KD: Yeah, these are really good questions and I wish I knew all the answers to it because the reality is that it's different for everybody. In the last two years, I have managed a lot of people and every one of them is different and has different needs and some people are really like, lean in to their growth and they'll come to a one on one, they'll be like, "This is what I want to talk about, this is how I'm growing over here, what I'm doing over there." Then other folks are far more passive in that conversation but it certainly doesn't mean that they don't care about their growth, it just means that you have to take a more active part in it.

So it's been a great learning experience for me to think about that range of need and kind of difference in personality as folks participate in their own growth. Then as a manager of managers, I have to think about how can I encourage other managers to think about these things and again, be flexible with their approach so that it's best for the different people that they work with but that they are participating actively. We definitely, we have moments where

somebody doesn't agree with their manager's approach and isn't fulfilled with what their manager is doing.

So what I then need to do is investigate, try to understand, is it just a mismatch or is somebody dropping the ball and hold that person accountable if they're not living up to expectations of their role as a manager or even the role as a direct report. So a couple of times a year we do performance reviews and we also, ongoing, check in with people about how things are working and what's not working. We also do companywide surveys to understand people's enjoyment and engagement with their job and their manager which can really inform where gaps might exist.

[0:41:34.0] SS: Yeah, it's a great answer and what are your most helpful tips for a new design manager out there?

[0:41:40.7] KD: Tips for a new manager is really being self-aware with how you're showing up and think about how you might leverage your skills as a designer, as an IC to be a better manager. I think the hardest thing when you go from being an IC to a manager is that this fear of letting go, this fear of pulling your hands away and trusting in someone else to get it done. That can be really hard and in some cases folks worry about the loss of their creative ability.

But the reality is your ability as an IC is actually something that's going to make you a much stronger manager. Designers, we're empathetic and we seek to understand our users and you should be bringing that same skill to managing. Think about your one on one's with your direct reports like ethnographic studies. Conduct interviews, learn from them, try to understand how they tick and what's wrong, what's not working?

Designers, we're inherent problem solvers that's why most of us got into it in the first place. There are tons of problems to be solved for a manager and a team leader. So you just have to be thinking about them in the sense of like, okay, they might not look the way a problem does on an interface but it's certainly has many of the same attributes where something's not going right and similarly you have to ideate and concept and come up with new ideas and similarly you can prototype your ideas.

So when I mentioned to our standup, that is another iteration on the way we were trying to solve for alignment within our team. So before that, we had a different type of meeting where we would just come together and talk. We started to see that that meeting was falling apart, people weren't paying attention and we took that as a signal, "There is a problem here, we need to try something else."

We concepted, come up with other ideas and then prototyped it and we tried having everybody bring in their work printed out. "Okay, that doesn't work, it takes too much time." We tried another way where everybody just put it up on a different type of document and we realize that doesn't work. Now we use Google slides. So we just kept iterating on it until we found the best way to do it.

So I would so the struggle but the really imperative mindset shift that will help and I see move to a manager is thinking about managing as a design problem. Think about leading a team as your object of design. Your output is highly a functioning team but all of the processes and methods that you use to design a product are actually very similar to the processes and methods you need to use as a manager.

[0:44:15.3] SS: Yeah, yeah. I really love this approach, really refreshing approach on the whole management thing because it actually says, "Hey, designer, you're a manager so be a designer as a manager."

[0:44:28.6] KD: Yes, exactly.

[0:44:30.6] SS: Cool, I love it.

[0:44:32.3] KD: Also for anybody that's interested in getting into management but hasn't made that move yet, I would recommend that they look for opportunities to be a teacher or a mentor or an adviser because those are all going to give you those kinds of challenges about letting go and being more of a guide rather than the hands on do it yourself.

I taught early on while I was still at Frog and it was one of the most challenging things I've ever done but it was imperative for helping me learn to be a better manager because you definitely

have to use your skills in a different way and when you have to explain what you're doing as opposed to just going ahead and doing it, you'll challenge yourself but it will be a good thing for your management path.

[0:45:13.2] SS: Yeah, totally. I can relate because I had a few times where I kind of done lectures and like a far class here and there, before I became a manager and I think that kind of helped me out when I became a manager for the first time because I had no idea whatever I was doing. I was like never managing anyone before, that's a totally good tip. Norm, you had a question?

[0:45:38.6] NL: Yeah, I hope I phrase this one okay, I'm kind of curious if you have any ideas or tips or guidance you can give to — how to make your product design career last a long time. I'm pretty sure that not everybody from going to management, some people just might be amazing designers and don't really want to be in charge of other people or don't want to have kind of the bureaucracy of being in management or having people beneath them.

I was just kind of curious how you would, any tips you have where you could recommend to move forward in your career? If you're already at a point where you're happy you're a senior product designer, doing everything you can but you want to stay also relevant and employable 10 years from now. Or five years from now.

[0:46:15.9] KD: Oh good question. Who knows a lot from five years from now, we might all be out of job. I think we're here to stay. One, I think more and more companies are getting hip to this idea but that management shouldn't be the only path forward. For example at Frog, as well as here at Airbnb, we have a dual path and there is a IC path and advances to a principle level designer and then there is a management path that advances to design manager.

Both of this can be the same seniority and principles don't need to manage people but instead they are required to up level the craft. Where they're not spending time and individuals in their career, there should be advancing the tools that we use, they should be pushing forward our methods, they should be mentoring people to help up level the craft throughout the company.

Those are really powerful participants in our culture and certainly really powerful in bringing our design to another level and they are quite senior but they're not managing and that's great. I think more and more companies have paths like that. It used to be that management was only a way to succeed and that is unfortunate reality because frankly not everybody wants to manage, not everybody is a good manager and should not be one. I think outside of that though, even while you're focused on the craft where design is going is we're a part of more discussions.

It used to be, "How can design get a seat at the table?" Well, design is at the table now, maybe not in equal amounts in every company but absolutely designers are far more recognized and appreciated broadly now than it ever has. But to be, to keep that seat at the table and to continue to be valuable, we have to continue to grow our skills in terms of understanding the business, understanding the data behind it, understanding the technology.

Help to guide the appropriate strategic decisions for the user experience but for how it comes together with all of these other aspects like the technology and the data. That I think is like lifelong growth. The tools that we use and the ability that we have are just going to continue to grow and all designers should be thinking about how they can learn more and be a part of that as they advance.

[0:48:30.9] NL: Right, absolutely.

[0:48:33.9] SS: Cool, I want to get in to that part which is hiring and it's like, it's kind of like I say the last part but you can take like a whole new 45 minutes. Because hiring is such like — it's such a big challenge and I think a lot of the success that you have as a manager also in the design team, especially in a fast scaling startup is to hire correctly. What would you say are your top tips as design manager to hire?

[0:49:09.9] KD: Top tips for design managers, to hire design managers or how design managers should hire?

[0:49:14.9] SS: Yeah, how design managers should hire other designers.

[0:49:17.2] KD: Ah yes. Well I do think you need to sit and think about that before you start interviewing but especially if there's more than one person being a part of the interviews and the decisions. It's imperative that your team is aligned on what you're looking for, otherwise I think it gets into a really bad behavior of a lot of indecision which can be tough on the candidate and also, you go back and forth and maybe you end up making a decision without a true framework for making that decision and hastily moving forward with something that may not actually be the right thing in the end.

So you need to ask yourselves, "Like what are we looking for, what is the arm into this person, what are the things that they're going to be doing, their roles and the responsibilities and think about what are the things that matter to us? What are deal breakers or the things we want to stay away from? So you articulate that and you agree on that and you use that as a reminder as you're interviewing and you're looking for these things. You're kind of checking them off in your head, like does this person do this or this person not do that?"

Through that process, you'll hopefully find who fits the mark and who doesn't. There will definitely be debates, people will see and feel different things based on their conversations. So after we go through an interview process, which is basically a day long activity. They'll meet with about six people, they'll meet people from the team, they'll meet people from the engineering or product or research, they'll meet with people that are looking specifically for cultural values within the company and then we'll discuss and we'll come together, we'll have what we call round up where each job, what we see, what we saw, what we felt about that candidate so that we can make a decision that we all agree upon.

Where they fit and how they fit with the team, what the makeup of the current team is really important as making that decision. One designer does not fit all holes. Some designers are a little bit better at the upfront concepting, some are a little bit at the visual design. While we look for designers that do it all from start to finish, concepting all the way to visual, we do need to recognize that some people are going to have super powers in different places. So then my job and the other manager positions on the team is to create teams that have a nice balance of skills.

So if we have one person that has a super power of visual design, one person has a super power of interaction design and one person has a super power of strategy, they all can do a little bit of everything but they have those powers that makes a far more balanced team, we also have to consider that a part of the hiring as making sure that we're bringing that balance, that diversity and have kind of a better composition in the end.

[0:51:47.8] NL: Right. I was kind of wondering about the hiring process in general. What you kind of put the candidate through or the different steps he has to go through or stuff like that?

[0:51:56.7] SS: So the hiring process, it can take up a number of weeks, it can even take months. It depends on the candidate and the conversations that are being had. But we discuss with them earlier, some conversations over the phone, to try to understand what are they looking for, what are their experiences, what is their personality? And then make a decision as to do we want to move forward? And we'll review the work, we might give them a design challenge if we don't have enough signal already as to their skills.

I'd say, most people, we give a design challenge to and then we look at the design challenge as a team, we discuss and then we bring them in for onsite interviews. Again this could take a day, they'll meet with several people from the team, they'll meet with other disciplines and then they will meet with also people that are throughout the company looking for core values and then we'll discuss and make a decision.

Sometimes they'll come back for a second round of interviews, often times depending on the level and also again how much signal we have if we're ready to make a decision or not and by the end of that we'll have an offer and typically a team identified. In some cases with individuals that are coming onto the team, we'll start them out with a mini project so that we get a sense of their skills and they can also get a sense of the company and the team and the different things that we do so we can make sure that we're placing them on the right team for them.

[0:53:26.3] NL: Right. That's cool. Just kind of elaborate on that a bit. Do you ever find that the process can get to be a bit too long? That you may even lose people because going through whatever, seven-eight steps might be a bit too much for some people? Or if so, could that be

maybe something that isn't necessarily indication of how they be in your company? Just, it's like making people maybe jump through hoops a bit.

[0:53:46.9] KD: Absolutely. It is a long process, but I would much rather have a long and diligent process than make the wrong choice. If somebody can't go through the process, if their timeline is too short, that is unfortunate but I think it's better for them in the long run that we go through the methods and understanding of their skills and their fit to make sure that we're bringing them on where they're going to be happy.

So we do look for places like where can we just gain efficiency? But the last thing we want to do is like skip steps that would help us get signal as to whether or not they're the right fit because I've definitely made that mistake. We've let people on to the team that weren't the right fit. It's far, far worse than being slow, is making the wrong fit.

I think they're saying like hire slow, fire fast. Now, I don't know if I necessarily ascribe to the whole "I fire fast", but I get the idea behind it, which is don't prolong those decisions when you have somebody that isn't the right fit but do take the time to understand their fit before making those risks.

[0:54:54.1] NL: Right, so you find that going through the process generally ends up with somebody that you're actually very happy with?

[0:54:58.9] KD: Yeah, exactly.

[0:55:02.0] SS: One last question, you might not have an answer for it but I'll just ask it. If you had one entry question that you would have to ask someone who is applying for a job at Airbnb, what would you ask?

[0:55:17.7] KD: As a designer or in any role?

[0:55:18.0] SS: Designer, yeah.

[0:55:20.7] KD: Okay. Well it comes back to the things that kind of drive our team and help us find the right folks, is that we do look for that craft, humility and hustle. We look for makers that love what they make, they like to get involved in the problem solving and create wonderful, useable, highly desirable things but they do so with that humility. It's so important for really any product designer but especially for an Airbnb designer that is designing for people all over the globe and we're creating something that happens really in the offline world.

Our pixels are only a method to achieve an offline interaction between two strangers that sometimes don't speak the same language. So us taking ourselves out of the equation and thinking about those end users is imperative to our success. We look for that and the folks that approach us or the folks that want to be a part of our team is show us that great craft, show us that care for the details and the excellence of the work and putting that user first and that would make us be so excited about working with someone like that.

[0:56:29.5] SS: Yeah, for sure. So in terms of the question itself. So design applicant comes up to you and you are the interviewer and you have one question only to ask them. What would that question be?

[0:56:44.8] KD: I like this question.

[0:56:47.1] SS: It's a tough one, it's a tough one.

[0:56:49.0] KD: Yeah, I'm thinking, I'm thinking.

[0:56:51.2] SS: Do you want me to give you my example?

[0:56:52.2] KD: Okay, you can. Yeah, I'm thinking, go ahead.

[0:56:56.6] SS: So my example for this would be I ask the person, "So in your last company, what is the one thing that you did that you designed alongside with another person that you're really proud of and you can tell me about that experience?" From that answer, I will also know if the person did something interesting, if he is a collaborative person that likes to work with people and if he's a thinker. So it's like the couple of things that I can get out of that answer.

[0:57:32.8] KD: That is a really good one, that's a great — I was literally trying to figure out a way to put something like that into words, like what's the best way? Because it's true, you need them to talk about their work, to understand like how do they rationalize their decisions, how do they make the decisions? Because it's not important to know whether or not the output was the right thing, it's like, "How do they get there? Can they do it again?" That's a great question. I think you said it right.

The other one I always like to ask and I always start with is like, "Tell me about yourself." It's so open and usually people look at me like, "Uh, what do you want to know?" I want to know how they choose to answer that question. Are they just going to riddle of their resume, are they going to bring a little of their personality into it? What do they prioritize? How good of a story can they tell about who they are but that only is part of it. Obviously, the work needs to be talked about as well, I like your question every much.

[0:58:32.2] SS: No, it's also a very good thing to ask them, "Tell me about yourself." bBecause eventually, us designers, we're storytellers. So it's funny for me to say that because just like the week ago I saw do you know Vooza?

[0:58:44.9] KD: No, I don't.

[0:58:46.6] SS: Vooza.com, it's like a studio for funny videos, a production company for funny videos.

[0:58:52.9] KD: Oh Vooza! Yes, I know what you're talking about, yes, yes.

[0:58:56.2] SS: So they launched a video called *Everybody's A Storyteller*. I'll just link to it from the show notes but it's funny, anyways.

[0:59:07.1] KD: Okay, that's good.

[0:59:09.8] SS: All right. Norm, you have one last question right?

[0:59:12.0] NL: Yeah, I had a question, I was just kind of curious when we're working here, a lot of times we're trying to find enough people to talk to or to get feedback from and in order to improve our features what we build, or prioritize what we're going to build or develop and I was curious, what struggles, if at all or maybe what could be the down sides and actually like you guys having hundreds of millions of users and probably almost unlimited data about how they use your product. What are the struggles that might present that we as small people wouldn't actually run into in our day to day life here?

[0:59:43.4] KD: What are the challenges of having too much data?

[0:59:46.0] NL: Not too much but very large quantities?

[0:59:48.8] SS: How do you get the qualitative out of the quantitative?

[0:59:52.1] KD: Yes. I like it. Really good question. Frankly, yeah, there's never enough data. Of course like the more we have, the better. But yes, it is difficult sometimes to understand what is noise, what thread do we follow, that's one of the reasons why we have data scientists and research on every team and that they're involved in every step of the way. We might start from a point of data like, "Okay, we're watching all of this things and we're seeing that people are using our app for these five things but not these six things or that in this part of the world, they're using the app more than they are over here."

So we'll pay attention to this kind of macro trends but then when there is an anomaly or we're not seeing the same trend at one place as we are in another, we'll dig in and then we'll send out researchers, we'll conduct studies, we'll get a little bit closer to try to understand the why behind what we're seeing and that's just like an ongoing process of learning.

Our studies kind of like go hand in hand of the qualitative and quantitative and yes, I wish we could double our research team and just be like sending people all over the world at all times like digging in to these things. It's not realistic that we would have that big of a team and actually be able to utilize all that information. So we have to be really strategic with where we're putting that effort and that is really based on the quantitative data. Does that answer that question?

[1:01:19.5] NL: Yeah. I was wondering because we're checking some new feature, we're changing something for users and at the end we kind of find out that let's say 4% of the people didn't use it as much as they thought they would and it hurt their experience but it helped everybody else. We'd say, it's a win situation, it was pretty positive. But in our case, 4% is not your 4%. You could still be affecting a whole country or a city of users or hosts. How you can take that to consideration every time you do something. Even a small percentage can make such a huge difference.

[1:01:47.9] KD: Absolutely, really it's important that we understand what that percentage is right? "Oh okay, 4% aren't using this, is that a bad thing? Or is 4% normal and actually those 4% we're never going to use it?" Sometimes you just don't know until you really dive into the information. One example is we were worrying about response time on messages and then when you dig in to the data, it's just like, "Oh, well it's 2 AM in Berlin and it's like 6 PM in Shanghai. So there's a reason why the messages aren't happening as often as we want it to."

So we have to address that differently and think about, "Well how can the design report that?" When somebody sends their host to message, can we send them back a message saying, "Oh your host, it's really early where they are, they might take a while to respond to you." And so just like try to understand that sometimes bad data or what looks negative isn't negative, it just needs to be sorted accordingly. I think that's the same for the slice.

[1:02:56.5] SS: All right, so Katie, that just about wraps it up but I have one last question, when are we going to see an Airbnb bot?

[1:03:05.2] KD: A thing that would help you book? Is that what?

[1:03:07.4] SS: Oh yeah, on messenger. Just like, "I want an apartment tomorrow in Shanghai."

[1:03:12.8] KD: That's pretty cool. I don't know? But I like it, I like it. We definitely, if you see our most recent guest experience on the app, there are things that we're doing to be smarter about what we are sharing with you as the options. It used to be, you type in "Berlin" and you'll see many listings and it's just search results. None of them are catered to you specifically.

Now we have built more intelligence into our search, we ask a little bit more information upfront, like, “Are you traveling for business or are you traveling with a family?” So that we can give you recommendations that are a better fit for what you’re looking for and we’ll tell you a little bit about the neighborhoods and help you better identify which part of Berlin is best for you. So we’re taking steps to that to have a more intelligent search experience. But I do love that idea and hopefully we’ll see it sooner than later.

[1:04:10.3] SS: Cool, amazing. So anything left that you have to plug before we go?

[1:04:14.6] KD: No, just know that we are hiring for great designers and design managers and principle designers, and so certainly get in touch and we’d love to work with you if you’ve got great craft, humility and hustle.

[1:04:28.2] SS: Amazing. Is there like a specific URL or link or anything or just like search for Airbnb carriers at Google?

[1:04:35.1] KD: Yeah, ping me on LinkedIn, that certainly would be a way to get in touch. We don’t have our design roles listed on our site today, but you absolutely can find us online or on Twitter.

[1:04:47.4] SS: All right, cool, I can also link to your LinkedIn and Twitter in the show notes for anyone who is interested? Great. So Katie, it was amazing to have you, very insightful, I really loved your approach. Some very refreshing views on design management and I learned a lot. So thanks so much.

[1:05:07.0] NL: Yeah, thanks a lot. Very insightful, and I just pinged you on LinkedIn.

[1:05:11.1] KD: Awesome. So great chatting with you guys. Excited about the work you guys are doing and this is a great podcast. So thank you so much for letting me a part of it.

[1:05:20.7] SS: Thanks so much Katie, thanks.

[1:05:22.7] KD: Thank you.

[1:05:23.9] **SS:** Bye-bye.

[1:05:25.3] **KD:** Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1:05:38.4] **DT:** This week's episode is brought to you by WooCommerce. WooCommerce is the most popular eCommerce platform in the world, powering more than 30% of all online stores. It's completely free to set up and has no monthly fees. All basic functionality is free and certainly more than enough to get you started. As you grow in e-customizations, you can buy extensions and plugins and the community is huge.

It's built on WordPress, so getting started is as simple as it can be and what I love most about WooCommerce is that it's open source and fully customizable. You can make your store as unique as you'd like with virtually no limitations. WooCommerce is also perfect for side projects and is one of the tools that we're recommending now to students in The Side Project Accelerator.

When I start a project at the beginning, I don't want to waste time. I just want to get something out there quickly and then as it grows, I can customize and scale it. WooCommerce is perfect because it fits for every stage at the project and I don't have to waste time changing to another platform later. It's also nice that it integrates with all the major payment gateways, Stripe, PayPal, Amazon and tons of smaller regional services and you own your data forever.

If you ever decide to leave, there's no risk of losing data or not being able to transfer over your sales information. If you have an online store or thinking about starting one, check out WooCommerce. Like I said, it's completely free to get started and easy to set up. You have nothing to lose and if you like to purchase any extensions, themes or plugins for your store, enter the code "hackingui" and check out. You'll get 30% off all your purchases.

Again, you don't need to buy anything to get started. It's completely free but if you want to customize or need some of the events functionality, you have a ton of extensions and plugins to choose from. You will get 30% off everything with the code "hackingui" at checkout.

[END]