URL: https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/people-over-tech/

Kevin Weil, Novi's VP of Product, describes a major lesson he learned as he moved from an engineering role into a product role: You have to focus on people, not the underlying technical details. Only after you've isolated the needs of your customers, he says, should you start asking questions about how to pull off a solution on the technical front. He then shares how he surfaces the most useful customer feedback.

Transcript

- In the engineering roles that I'd had prior to switching into product, the sort of implementation and the technical details were most of my mindset.. And I really had to unlearn it because that just can't be where you start.. When you're building a product for people, it has to start with the people that you're building it for.. What are their problems? What is their day like? How are you attempting to improve their life, to make their day a little bit better with the thing you're building? And you have to start from there and work backwards.. And that was the thing that I had to learn.. And I had to learn not to think about how it might work technically, but just purely think how the product needed to work.. And then once you do that, then of course, if you have a sense of what you wanna build, then you start thinking about the engineering implementation.. And it may be that you find that you make different trade offs and so on but you have to start with the problem you're solving and with the customer you're building for.. - Yeah, so do you have customers on your team? How do you engage customers in that process? - So there's a bunch of different ways that we do it.. One is once you have a product live, you can actually, you have data for example..

So you can use the data that you're getting back from the product to understand where people are having challenges, what things they see are really useful because they're using them all the time.. What things they either don't find useful, or aren't even finding in your product because it's hidden and you see no usage.. You also have direct customer feedback 'cause you have, support forums and you have places like Twitter where people give you all kinds of feedback, whether you like it or not, but there's really, it goes deeper than that.. That isn't enough in my opinion.. There's no substitute to being able to see your product through the eyes of your customers.. And so one of the things that we do that I greatly value is direct user research with people on the ground.. So with Novi, for example, we've traveled all over the world.. I think we've been to probably every continent, except Antarctica, talking to people about their daily habits, how they go about their day, how they think about money and how a product like ours might fit in.. Sometimes we're directly showing them our product and taking them through flows.. Other times we're just talking to them about their habits..

If they use financial services today, how do they use them and what are their shortcomings? If they don't, for example, they don't use a bank.. Why don't they use a bank and do they miss parts of it? Or actually, are they completely happy without a bank? Because that's the way they live their life.. And you know, there's nothing, to be honest, there's nothing more valuable but also more humbling.. Across my time at Twitter and Instagram and Novi, I've had experiences where we're sitting in another country taking a set of people through a flow that I've worked very hard on.. And it's the only thing I've been thinking about for a while and it's really important so we poured all of our energy into it.. We think we've come up with something simple and then you watch them struggle with it and not understand it and you just realize like, wow, I'm terrible at my job.. I just spent all my time on this and these folks don't understand it at all and it's my fault not theirs.. So it's really humbling but that's what matters.. You need to see how your product is gonna do with people going about their daily lives.. And that feedback absolutely then helps us improve the product..

We understand what was keeping them from getting it as simple as easily as they could.. And we hopefully improve and build something better as a result.. So it's just, I couldn't imagine building a product without that kind of feedback...