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Data Mesh Radio Episode 64: The Crucial Value of Data About Your Data: Approaching Data with a Product Mindset

Interview with Sadie Martin

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Scott Hirleman

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Scott Hirleman

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Bottom line up front, what are you going to hear about and learn about in this episode? I interviewed Sadie Martin, Senior Product Manager for the Data Platform at Q4 Inc, about applying a product mindset to data in general. This is really crucial to getting data as a product right, but also in building out your data platforms and even a lot of the processes just in general for implementing data mesh. Sadie started as a data analyst where the team didn't have a product manager. They're doing a lot of work and they just weren't sure if what they were doing would work, or even if after they had done it, if it had had a positive impact, if what they had done was good work, so she started to take on some of the task of answering those questions and started transitioning into being a product manager for data. So what really is a product mindset? For Sadie, the easy definition, but with a lot of depth and nuance is it's all about really understanding the problem.

For most organizations, really thinking about the problem you are trying to solve relative to data is pretty new. There may be a data request, but what product or



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process is that data contributing to, and what is that product or process trying to solve? Sadie believes measuring the problem is really crucial. Once you figure out what you are trying to solve, what is the scope of the problem? How are you going to measure if you are actually solving the problem? Especially, is it better than what you were previously doing? She also talks about the importance of customer centricity. Really, why are they making a data ask? Should this be a one off or a repeatable process? Did they ask for really the complete set of what they need, that kind of back and forth communication of really finding what you're gonna actually have to do in the long run, not just what did the ticket say? One crucial insight Sadie has brought from product management to data is to be willing and ready to throw things away. If it ain't working, don't be too precious.

That's a very different mindset than we've historically had relative to data. There's also the idea that processes can devolve quickly, so ensuring when you start a repeatable data process, you need to understand the effort to keep it going. If the upstream of your data product is constantly changing without your knowledge or understanding, it's gonna be a bad, bad time. That's something that data mesh really obviously looks to address, but if you're not in an organization that's implementing data mesh yet, you wanna really figure that out.

While it feels counterintuitive, Sadie lamented that for most it's often quite difficult to get the buy in, that you need data to measure if your data work is actually providing value. I'll say that again. It feels weird to say, but we haven't really historically measured the impact of data work very well, so getting buy in to set up an effective measurement system ahead of time for your data work is hard. It's worthwhile to do but again, it's hard. You need to take the time to do spikes and investigate ahead of time and slow down enough to set yourself up to measure your results.

A continuing theme throughout the conversation is the need to give the team time to figure out how to approach challenges and set yourself up to succeed, just continuing to go off assumptions and gut feelings is going to put you in a vulnerable spot to a competitor really doing the work around this. Sadie looks at measuring the success of data work in two ways, the first feels obvious once said, but really isn't to me, start by measuring the baseline. Without that baseline, you can't measure if you're having an impact and lots of data work proves to be low value or even negative value. You tried a hypothesis and it isn't working, how do you get to the answer of, is this hypothesis right or not? Is it valid or invalid? You measure the incremental change for that effectiveness, and you have to set yourself up to really do that and think about that baseline first.

So what happens when you do look at your work and find out it's not been valuable? Sadie talked about, you have to get away from the sunk cost fallacy, it's absolutely okay to make bets and they don't pay off, you just understand that and you move on.



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That's literally what a bet is, you're hoping for a positive outcome, but it might not happen. That willingness to frankly assess if it's working is really crucial. You need to really investigate if you are solving the problems you set out to solve, and by proving out the value of the product mindset so you can make better bets in the future. A lot of the product mindset is also thinking about return on investment, not just maximizing the return or value of data work. A \$20 return for one week of work is better than a \$100 return for 20 weeks of work. Can this simply get you where you want to go without doing the extra cool but complicated and or risky parts? Sadie mentioned a few things getting in the way of applying the product mindset to data, one is that there are often teams making promises on behalf of the data team without checking with them first. We've all had someone write a check on our behalf and it ain't fun.

We need there to be communication before committing to data work. The other is many data consuming teams view the data platform teams as simply service teams and not really partners, we need to get to a place where all data consumption and production is about a partnership instead of a merely pub/sub type of relationship or a service model. There is a misconception that data work is all about facts, a large part of it is discovery work, much more than in most disciplines. For Sadie, measuring a team's effectiveness should focus more on getting to an answer, then getting to the preferred answer, of finding the really, really valuable things. It's about getting to an effective way of evaluating hypotheses. So evaluating a lot of hypotheses and proving them invalid isn't a bad thing. You prevented a lot of toil work that wouldn't have added value, make sure to measure your teams based on that type of aspect.

So some closing thoughts, advice that I took away here, anyone can apply a product mindset, not just the product manager, so everybody should be thinking in a product way. Second, giving yourself the time ahead of starting work to investigate and create your measurement framework, including your baselines is crucial to measuring progress and choosing where to focus. If we're learning how to get better at doing data work as we evolve, we have to be able to measure how we're actually doing. The third is, approach your data work with intentionality. I think this is important for all of data mesh, but especially around things like this, because your data team is always a precious, precious resource. And the last, really understand what you are trying to accomplish and what your immediate customer/consumers are trying to use the data for so that they can accomplish. What are they trying to get to so that you can really align with them well. So I think this is gonna help you really think about sustainable and scalable ways to think about data work. With that bottom line up front done, let's go ahead and jump into this interview.

Alright, super excited for today's episode here, I've got Sadie Martin here, who is the Senior Product Manager of a Data Platform Team at Q4 Inc. And so what we're



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gonna be talking about is just in general, what is the product mindset and how we wanna think about this relative to data mesh, and how we wanna think about what is that product mindset around data, and what is that data product owner, what should they be thinking about how to intertwine this with data as a product and just getting people out of the way that we really handled data in the past. So I think this is a really, really useful perspective for a lot of folks out there, especially people who've been in the data world and haven't really thought about things from a product perspective. So with that said, Sadie if you don't mind giving people a bit of an intro to yourself and then we'll jump in from there.

Sadie Martin

Yeah, of course. Thanks, Scott, for having me. I'm really excited about this conversation too. So a bit about me, I right now work at a company called Q4, which is basically a capital markets communication platform. So when I started, I was like, "What the heck is that?" Now I know a little bit more about it, and I can give you a very short intro to what that is. Essentially, we provide public companies, investors and investment banks with ways to connect, communicate and engage. So that might look like, for example, hosting virtual earnings events at the end of a quarter, or providing CRM tooling that would allow public companies to find and target and retain investors. So that's where I am. I just started there in January, so it's a pretty new space for me. And maybe it makes sense to tell you just a little bit how I got to where I am, because that has a lot to do with product and why I think it's such an important role in data. I started my career in tech, seven or eight years ago as an analyst, working on data teams and working on data teams that did not have product representation, so no product manager, no product owner.

And after a few years of doing that, I just realized like, "Wait a second, why are we doing some of these things that we're doing?" And how do we know that these things are actually gonna work, or how do we get any kind of certainty about what we're doing? We're just getting things handed to us and we do them and a lot of times they didn't work. At the time, I was working at a large food delivery platform in Berlin, and we were given this task of categorizing all of the menu items on the websites so that we could... There were a lot of different reasons but essentially so that we could use that to give more information to our customers. And it was just an impossible task because there was no training data or anything like that, but it was just like, "You can do it." Just use machine learning and just do it. And in that moment, I thought, we really need to take a different approach to the way we're doing data, and so I assumed this role on the team of being more of a product person without having formal... What is formal product training actually? But without having product experience, just trying to ask some of these questions like, "Why are we doing this?" "How will we know if we succeed?" And after a little bit of doing that, I got the chance to transfer into a formal product role, working on a data heavy team,



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and that's kind of where I've been ever since, just trying to bring more product thinking to data team. Yeah, that's why I'm here and looking forward to talking more about that.

Scott Hirleman

And so it's interesting that you're coming at it from the data consumer side somewhat. It's data consumer, data producer, we're asking the data producers to think of this as a product, as well like, how do consumers approach it and help give that feedback, where consumers historically have been playing that telephone game with data engineering and being like, "Hey, data engineering, we want this." And then data engineering goes to the producing team and goes, "Hey, you gotta give us this." And it just comes back and forth and back and forth and it doesn't really work.

Sadie Martin

Exactly.

Scott Hirleman

So it's a really helpful background as well to know that you've seen why this is so necessary in that you're coming from that angle as well. How do you think about what is the product mindset? Big broad question, if you wanna break that down in any way. But if you were to tell somebody that doesn't have that product mindset historically, how do you think about explaining that and that shift? What are the different aspects of it?

Sadie Martin

Yeah, it's a hard question and thinking about explaining to people who don't have that mindset is even harder. But for me, if I break it down, it's actually quite simple in the end, which is, it's really just about understanding the problem, which sounds really simple, but it's not 'cause that's a hard thing to do a lot of times, and it's a thing that people continuously overlook. I think we've been through this shift a lot in the engineering side, it's very common now that a traditional product or user facing team will focus or have a specific process that allows them to discover and allows them to really understand the problem, that doesn't mean it always happens. It's maybe there on paper, but people still love to just go off of their gut feeling and build things. And even less so on the data side, do we have this more formalized process and do we spend the time thinking about that? So yeah, that's like the foundation for me, is just understanding what the problem is, and we can talk a bit more about what that means in the context of data as well. But just to keep it broad for now, understanding the problem and measuring the problem. Again, you can do one of those, you can understand the problem and you can not measure it, but that's a very key part, is being able to measure it. And then finally, I would say customer centric solutioning of that problem.



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So again, validating the solution you're taking... That the solution you're doing is actually solving the problem of your customer, whether that's an end user facing customer, whether that's an internal customer, often when you're on a data team, you have to think about both of those, because it's even more complicated. You need to satisfy your internal consumer, but why are they asking you for that, it's for some use case, often some use case for the end user. And if they're not concerned about the end user when they're asking you for a data solution, then the solution you provide is very likely to fail. So sometimes you as the data team, you have to think of these two layers, if no one else is doing it, if you wanna guarantee that it's gonna work or have a better chance that it's gonna work. So yeah, those three things, understanding the problem, measuring it and then being customer centric in your solution.

Scott Hirleman

Yeah, and that last example frightens me because it's like you have to be the product manager for your own team and the product manager for the team that's building something and it's like, "Uhhh.... "

Sadie Martin

Absolutely, but it happens so often. Unfortunately, it really happens a lot. And again, it's kind of a personal decision. As a product manager for data teams in that situation, I have to make that choice, like am I gonna take that on because I'm afraid that team will not succeed if I don't take that on, but it's a lot of work and it's not like... The way I approach it, I don't wanna just do it myself, I wanna mentor people, I wanna mentor other product managers so that they're also thinking of doing things that way as well, not just have me take that all on for myself.

Scott Hirleman

Yeah. And I can see that if your metrics are based on the success of their project, not on your own metrics, that you're KPI stuck, like your KPIs aren't under your own control and that could be... I think that's something I haven't really thought about, when you think about a product, your team has to be able to own their own KPIs and control those, so if you're delivering on something that's entirely dependent on somebody else doing 80% of the execution or knowing what they have to do, that could be a little bit crazy.

Zhamak has talked about this. One of her favorite books is just *The Design of Everyday Things*. And so it's like that concept of really understanding what the problem is. I can't remember, there's this famous professor that was talking about milkshakes, I don't know if you know the example that I'm talking about but...



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Sadie Martin

I don't think I know it.

Scott Hirleman

They were trying to do all these things, like milkshakes were very, very high margin for their customers or they were trying to figure out why customers kept buying milkshakes early in the morning, and so they tried to do all these different things to get people to buy more milkshakes later in the day, and all this stuff. And what they found was that people were buying milkshakes specifically so they had something to do while they were sitting in their commute. And so they made it something where they tested the consistency and the people wanted it to be something that wouldn't be too liquidy so that you wouldn't drink it too quickly, it had to last the whole thing and you had to put in a little bit of effort and it wanted to be something where it could just be in one hand, so they kind of redesigned a little bit of the cup so that it wouldn't be too cold and that the consistency was such that it could tip a little and it wasn't going to immediately spill things everywhere and cause accidents, and it was just really, really fascinating to exactly what you're talking about of, what's the actual problem that they're trying to overcome? Is it that they want something that's really, really delicious, or do they just want something to do while they're sitting in the traffic?

Sadie Martin

Yeah, that's a great example because also what that illustrates to me is that that was a rather complex process to figure out all those things and think about all the ways that you could then tweak that situation to grow your milkshake sales in the morning. And so that's what's hard about this, is that it takes time to do these things, it takes time to really understand the problem and to go through a proper solutioning phase, that might mean throwing some solutions out and things like that, and I think even when people say that they're willing to do that and that they want to bring more discovery into their process, actually doing it in practice is harder because it takes time.

Scott Hirleman

Well, and how do you get to that minimum viable aspect and also data, especially once data production process has started, people expect that it never stops and that it never changes, so talking to your data consumers about you need to have that product mindset of you're a consumer, not that this thing is locked in place, that we need to evolve it together and we're gonna make it better, but that it's going to evolve and that you have to be prepared for that evolution is interesting.

Sadie Martin

Or at least that if we don't do anything, it's actually gonna get worse, so we need to



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have also the time and the thought to think through, this is not just a one off thing where we just give you some data and that's the end of it. Yeah, I'm working on a few situations right now where it's all about, can you give us this data so that we can release this product, and the answer is yes, we can, but if we don't think through this, the quality is gonna degrade over time, and then it becomes a question of, well, how fast is that gonna happen? How important is it that we really solve that part of the problem right now? Those are hard questions to answer.

Scott Hirleman

Yeah, I think that's really, really important, and that's been a historical thing with data as well, is one off production. This is why a lot of people that really love coding really hate Excel, is that it is one off production because you can't really backtrack exactly what you did to get from point A to point Z, and so it's not that Excel in and of itself is bad, it's that you don't have that process to be able to backtrack and say that, okay, we're gonna actually productize what just happened. I talked to some company that was trying to do that, and it was like, it sounds really interesting but it's also... There are a lot of people on the engineering side that are like, "No, no, no, you can't use Excel under any circumstances," so it's like...

Sadie Martin

Yeah, yeah, I've also had, I have had a lot of situations where you're looking for... As a product person, you're looking for areas where you can optimize something in the business, and a lot of people say, look for the Excel sheets, look for the Google Sheets where the stuff is happening because those are great opportunities to productize something. And I believe that is very true, that's a great starting point, but as you said, it's not as simple as just taking the Excel sheet or taking the Google Sheet and turning it into a product, that basically shows you maybe where you should start looking, but then that process of starting to look is a completely independent process from that sheet existing as a solution.

Scott Hirleman

Yeah, I think Paolo Platter in one of the very early episodes mentioned that same thing, that you've got business processes that are happening, so you want to look at those. So you talk about the assumptions and gut feeling and that we don't check those enough and that... Especially a lot of people where we haven't had data to be able to actually check those, we've developed new ways to generate the data, we've got much better ways to manage and analyze that data than we have historically, so how do you think about driving that buy in around, okay, we've gotta change the way we're doing things? I know that can be a frustrating process in every work because you're asking people to change and change is always painful, so...

Sadie Martin



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Yeah, definitely, that has certainly created a lot of frustration for me over the years, because I see clearly how I think we will get the most value out of working with data and out of data teams, and it really often requires a cultural shift because as you mentioned, this gut feeling, I think... What I said before is that it's hard now to find a product team or a user facing product team that will say like, yes, we should make decisions based on gut feeling, but we're so not there yet on the data side, we still... I think, especially with ML and data science, we really got into this position where people tend to think that data and machine learning is the solution to everything, and we're still going off of our gut in a lot of those situations just because someone said, this is a complicated problem, machine learning will solve it. And then people are excited about machine learning, so of course they wanna try to use it to solve that.

But I feel like this has gotten us, in a lot of cases, into this sort of rut of not questioning our assumptions and not checking our gut feelings as much, and the only way that I know to do that is just, to me as a product manager and my team, to make sure that we do that for the things that we're working on and make the case for taking the time to investigate something, and that means showing a lot of examples of what could possibly go wrong, what the risk, laying out the risks, it's a lot about communication. And obviously, doing that in a way that people can understand, and it takes a lot of time, which I think is... That's the most challenging part for me. I do love that part about my job, I love distilling complicated problems into simpler things and communicating this to people and seeing these sort of aha moments of like, oh yeah, okay, that was not as simple as I thought it would be. I understand now.

But figuring out how to fit that into the expectations that people have of me as a product... Taking the time to do that and to lay these things out, that's really the challenging part, but I just make it a point to do that and I think that's the only way that I have developed so far to try to slowly make this shift. I accept that it's a slow thing and sometimes that still frustrates me, but I accept that it's kind of like a learn by showing situation, and I hope that if I just do it enough, over time people will get used to it and see that it's valuable.

Scott Hirleman

Yeah, and so I don't wanna misquote you here, so let me see if I kind of got those points in a lot of ways. ML feels like it's an easy button but it certainly isn't.

Sadie Martin

No.

Scott Hirleman



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So you have to set yourself up, whether it's ML or its data, and sometimes you wanna split the difference between just good old fashioned analytics of like, hey, we're gonna get some data and we're gonna look at this rather than, we're gonna try and make this so that we analyze every single data point versus like, hey, we're gonna do some sampling or we're gonna get... We're gonna get just some data and we don't need eight million data points to be able to prove things out, but ML isn't that easy button, but we need to set ourselves up ahead of time to be able to measure.

And then once we can set ourselves up to measure, then we can make quicker data informed decisions and that the data doesn't necessarily have to drive everything, but just doing via gut... It shouldn't be a one or a zero between, the data says X and my gut says Y, so it must be X or Y versus kind of... Well, that's a terrible analogy 'cause it's zero or one, and it's like, no, there's a slider in between zero and one, there isn't really a slider between letters. But that we're thinking about setting ourselves up to succeed with data and that so much of what people try to do is "do the thing" instead of, let's set ourselves up so that we can actually figure out if doing the thing is the right way or if we're doing it the right way or it's the right even thing to do. Is that how...

Sadie Martin

Yeah, that's absolutely right. And I think that's, as you said, that's where measurement comes in and is so important, especially in the context of data. But what I also think is interesting is that you have to look at it... I think you need to look at this measuring in two ways, so one... Okay, if you have an idea and someone says, "Let's build a model to do X, Y, Z," it's one thing to say, okay, great, let's measure how good that model is, and that is an important thing, but what is so often overlooked is, what is the baseline? What is the baseline measurement without that model? Is there a human doing this job now, how well are they doing it? Very often, you're working with data to try to improve something, something that already exists, whether that's to optimize it, make it faster, make it easier, whatever. Very often, there is already something that exists that is doing that, even if it's just a human doing that job, and I think it's so important to measure that baseline so that you can understand whether your data solution to that is bringing value and how much value it's bringing. I think it's very rare that that will happen, that we will have measured the baseline of a problem that comes to my team to work on.

And that's one of the first things that then I try to convince people it's worth doing, 'cause otherwise you can spend... Any time you spend on something and not knowing whether it's a good investment is bad, especially with Data Project you can end up spending months or years on something, and who knows, maybe it's better than what you had before, but maybe it's only a little bit better than what you had before, or maybe something less complicated would have gotten you already quite



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far on that journey, and that's what I've seen time and time again, is that you don't need to go to a complex solution with data in order to deliver value.

Scott Hirleman

So I like that a lot, and I'm kind of thinking about A/B testing on a website, you kinda have to have that A before you start testing B, you can't just roll out the thing and say like, "How effective was our conversion rate on doing A way?" It's not that you're rolling out two different versions at the same time, it's like, well, what was our effectiveness rate before this, so we measure are either of these changes positive, I think that that's interesting. Something that you said there got me slightly depressed, in that you're talking about this as, okay, we're doing a look back on, was this useful? Was this good? Did this have the return that we want on it, but how do you then take that and apply that to future decisions? 'Cause it kind of feels like in some of these things, talking to people about measuring the value of a data project or anything like that, it's all look back and it doesn't really...

The whole point of this is to not just say, did we win? It's, how does this inform our future decisions as well? So how do you think about, especially with things that feel like one off ish, is it really that important to measure, was this change that we've locked ourself into? Is that really as important to measure that versus the opposite? And I think I know where your answer is, and I don't disagree with it, but I just kinda wanna get it out there and kinda talk about this.

Sadie Martin

Yeah, that's a really good question, and it's funny that you say that because sometimes I get in this situation where I feel like, wow, everyone must hate me because I'm just going around killing projects, that's not really true, but there have been several times when I feel like I have done this, look back on something and shown that whatever was done up to this point was not valuable or is not valuable, is not necessarily solving the problem that we wanted it to solve, and I feel terrible about that because there's so much blood and sweat and tears that go into those projects. And it's hard because it's this sunk cost thing where if you've put that much time into it, you're like, well, if we just do this much more, it will be valuable, and I don't believe that, to be honest, and sometimes sure if you can redirect something, but it's definitely not a given.

And so I do think it's quite important to do this, look back on things, measure where you are, assess whether you're really solving the problems that you set out to solve. But that being said, if you're doing your job right, I think that's not what you will be doing forever, maybe there's more of that at the beginning when you start somewhere new, but then the goal is to learn from that, to show people what happens when you don't have this product mindset with data and to show them



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that you wanna do things differently going forward and that you wanna take the time to understand the problem and measure it before you design a solution, before you build a complicated solution.

I think any time you're talking about AI, one of my first questions is always like, well, have we tried just a heuristic model for that first, do we know how good that would be? Because then it's almost like you're creating another baseline, you have your baseline of where you are today and then you wanna look at, what would something super simple do, before you go on to AI or machine learning. I don't know if I fully answered your question there, but basically I do think it's important to go back and assess where you are now and whether that's still achieving the goals you set out to achieve, as well as then try to shift the culture so you can do those things upfront in the future.

Scott Hirleman

So this is, when you're talking about that kind of look back, a lot of times it's that you didn't already do that set up so that you'd have the information along the way, 'cause then you can say, we've spent six months on doing this and it's not having the return we wanted, so let me spend the two weeks to set ourselves up so that the next time we're two weeks along or we're one month along and we've got enough of a proof point out there to say, okay, let's shift and that we don't waste... Okay, we spent the two weeks and a month instead of six months, so oh no, we spent the two weeks but we're now in a position to evolve a lot.

Sadie Martin

Exactly. And I just did this, I just did this, and I got six weeks. I was given six weeks to do the discovery on a project after putting together an analysis of where we were and saying we really need to take a step back and treat this thing as a product instead of just doing what we've been doing for the past year and a half. So yeah, that was a big win. Big celebration day to get six weeks for discovery for a data product.

Scott Hirleman

A very big congrats on that. That's always difficult. I always think of it as slow down to speed up, which is just such an obnoxious phrase, but it's also, in this it's slow down to enable speedy evolution and that fast feedback cycle only comes if you set up a fast feedback cycle, it's not that you could just get fast feedback out of nowhere.

We're talking about bringing the product mindset to data in general, which can be, again, pretty difficult when it's people who haven't done this historically. You talked about showing people and just showing them repeatedly, but where do you kind of find that people are having the biggest pushback, is it that you're finding it at the data analyst level or the data engineer level, or senior or junior or... Where do you find



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that there's that push back to, let's become data driven or let's spend the time to do this up front rather than do the thing, is it that customer demands come in and they just want you to do the thing instead of that... Where do you find that the challenge is coming from the most, so that way... I want people to also go in kind of eyes wide open about this stuff as to where they're probably gonna need some challenges in that it's not only their work.

Sadie Martin

Everywhere, be prepared for them around every corner. No, it's not... It's just like they can come from everywhere, but it depends on the person, like I find... If it's a person or a part of the organization that is already used to working in this kind of product mindset way, then of course they're gonna understand a bit better that you need to approach that with data as well, but I've seen it come from a lot of different places. I've seen it come from above, in the sense of just people, directors making promises up that we can do this thing, and then that coming down to the data team and saying, "Well, wait a sec. Sorry. I don't think we can do this thing. Could you give us some time to figure that out before you make this promise."

And I've seen it come as well from consuming teams. Maybe not so much analyst, but more from maybe other engineering teams that are consuming data products for their user facing products, because they are not used to working this way with, let's say, data platform teams or platform teams. They're used to coming with their set of requirements and then having those done, because I think traditionally, data teams have been more seen as service teams. They just have a long backlog, a long list of things to get through and teams just keep bringing them, they're overworked, so they don't have time to do this proper requirement gathering and understanding what the consumers want in this case, and so it is a bit of a challenge when the team is used to getting things quickly, even if maybe they weren't always right, they're still used to just throwing things in quickly and getting the result quickly and then you say, "Hold on, I wanna actually write out what these requirements are, I wanna understand who's gonna benefit from this data that's..." I've had some situations where there was push back there, and there wasn't a really good reason for the push back, and so I could kind of infer from... They couldn't explain why they were pushing back, and so I inferred from that that it's just because it's not what they're used to, it's not the process that they're used to working in, which is more like, "Here I give you my request on a plate and you do it for me."

Scott Hirleman

Here is my ticket, I don't know if you know the Jonathan Coulton song of Code Monkey, but it's kind of that thing of you're the ticket monkey of, I put the ticket on your backlog, you prioritize it and you do it, 'cause that's the way we do things and it's like... But it's not working, it's not delivering you what you want.



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Sadie Martin

And at the very least, the data team that's working on that is not happy. At the very least, they're overworked, they're feeling like... It's not so motivating to just get those requests and fulfill those requests, and... Yeah, absolutely that's a change and I think something that can really benefit from taking more of a product approach, not every... Obviously, not everything that comes to a data team needs to go through a six week discovery phase and really understanding, but even just spending an extra 30 minutes, writing a ticket to understand who the users of the data are and what they're gonna do with it, I don't see any harm in that, I think that that benefits everyone all around to have a bit more visibility into that. And it's just funny to me that I see so much more often now that companies are hiring for data product managers, which gives me a lot of hope, because obviously this is something I care about and I think it's important, and that's great, but then sometimes when you come into that role and still you're just getting shoved like, I don't know, a Slack message of like, "Can you do this please?" Then I have some moments where I'm like, "What? What is my... "What am I doing here? You don't need me to do that, you can just dump that in the ticket and the team can do it. So it's funny that there seems to be a recognition that this is needed, but then it's not so clear exactly what that role is, and people aren't used to having that role on a data team, so that's where I think we have a lot of work to do to just keep building up on what this means and keep progressing, making the way we do data more mature, by bringing this product mindset to it.

Scott Hirleman

It's interesting. A couple of different interviews that I've done, one was Andrew Jones at GoCardless. They created a form for anybody who's requesting data and when you submit that form... They made it so that it was, okay, here is an actual form that you have to fill out, and when you submit that form, it creates an automatic invite to a meeting. You must have a meeting, nothing can be done only via ticket and form request, which I think is great.

And Tim Tischler who comes from the human factor space and is now helping to lead Wayfair's data mesh implementation was talking about a lot of that same stuff of, okay, everything should either be fully programmatic, fully automated API or should be hightouch human to human conversation, 'cause tickets just... We keep trying to do this ticketing system because it's easy to, or easyish, to groom that backlog and prioritize and do that, but it doesn't exchange any real context because your data consumers and your data producers, is what he was talking about, you don't speak the same language, so you're... And it's not like Portuguese to Spanish, it's like Russian to Chinese or something like that, where you're using something totally, completely different structure and even written form and... The language is so,



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so, so different that you're not...If you just put tickets on, you can't really communicate that well. Now, getting everybody bought in that everybody should have enough space and time and things to do that kind of slow down to speed up, again with that product mindset. Are you gonna be able to do that? Probably not, it's a pipe dream to be able to say it should be for everything, but there just feels like there needs to be a better way to just go, instead of should have been an email, this meeting should have been an email, this email should have been a meeting, this ticket should have been...

Sadie Martin

Yeah, I cannot agree with that more. And you're right, isn't it unrealistic that everything goes in that direction? So it is about choosing your battles, and I'm really bad at that because I wanna fight every battle. Yeah, I need to work on that because it does... When you're starting from scratch, that's not the right way to go. But I think especially, again, especially with data, and especially with a scaleup data organization or a data organization that's in the beginning of their journey of figuring out, how do we do data, what is data? What is not data? What are the domains? Especially in that situation, it's just really hard because usually you have one data team that's serving all of the needs of the company, which means there are multiple domains, and then you're kind of expecting that one team to know everything, to have all of the domain knowledge in order to do everything. And then when you just get a ticket that comes in without a lot of context, that's even harder than, let's say if you just have a domain team that at least has a domain, a focus area, with data, it can be really different.

With us right now, we're just one team and so there's stuff coming in from a bunch of different domains, and I think so often that I really wanna get people to talk to each other more and I wanna get the people on the data team closer to the domains, obviously going in the direction of data mesh, but sometimes having a product person or specifically, like a specific product role on the data team can actually make that a little bit harder because people then think that you're sort of the gatekeeper, like you as the product person needs to be the gatekeeper for everything that comes into the team, therefore there is a gate between the people working on the team and the domains, and I think that can be really problematic. So that's another challenge, is saying, "Well, yes, I am the product manager of this team, but I also see a future where people on the team can have that domain knowledge and be better at understanding those requests and gathering requirements for those requests that I can.

Scott Hirleman

Yeah, and I think it's interesting that the number of people who are doing "lunch and learns" and show and tells and office hours, that if you can get the space to do those, those teams are so much happier, so much more productive, but it's kind of like



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trying to talk to retail companies and say, "Hey, if you actually pay your people living wages, they're much happier." Costco has been doing it for, God, three decades or so. They've been paying people reasonable pay for benefits, all this stuff, at least they were, I hope they still are. I haven't checked in a while but... So their turnover was 1% versus the industry average of 17% or whatever, it's just like... Yes, you do have happier, more productive and engaged workers when you do the things that make it so that people have psychological safety and that type of stuff.

Sadie Martin

But it is a long game, and that's the hard part, that you don't see those things, even if you are, which a lot of people aren't, even if you are measuring those things like happiness and you have good retention metrics and stuff like that, you're not gonna see an impact on that right away if you say like, "Okay, in the next few months, we're gonna take more time to discover our data products." So that's something I would like to think a bit more about. I haven't yet, but again, how can you MVP that... Everything is a product, so how can you really break down that long game that you want to take with data into smaller pieces that you can show impact in shorter periods of time? I don't have the answer to that, but I think that's important to think about.

Scott Hirleman

I thought you had the answer to everything, I thought you were gonna come on and solve all of data for folks. And I think that's kind of what you talked about getting people to give you the space to do that measurement, it does become, well, what is our ROI on doing this measurement, return on investment, of that for people and how quickly... And you're in a space obviously where the quarter driven results is extra in focus, because of being part of the investor community. I used to cover stocks and I do not miss earning season and things like that.

Sadie Martin

It is, yeah. It's different. I never knew that, really that part of the world, but it is a different world.

Scott Hirleman

Yeah, not fun late nights and craziness and all sorts of stuff but yeah. What have you found that's been, not asking you to solve all of the challenges, but what have you found that's been successful for getting yourself to those early measurements? If you are given the time... It's kind of situation dependent, but how do you get those early measurements and figure out how to pivot and maybe... How do you get that buy in to pivot and go, "Hey, this thing that we tried, it isn't working, we went with this assumption and it was wrong, and that's okay, because we're measuring it and that's why we're measuring it," but how do you get to that early thing so that people can



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really start to apply that to data?

Sadie Martin

Yeah, it's a hard question, and I feel like I do it differently depending on the situation. I'm thinking recently of this project where I said I managed to get six weeks of delivery, but that was a really complicated project that involved a lot of different... Combining a lot of different data sources, including manually input data and managing the relationship between the manually updated data and the automatically updated data.

I had to really have several days of real focus time to think about how to distill that problem and the way that I was thinking about measuring it into something meaningful, so I couldn't have... Most people know it's very hard to find that focus time, but I can't say how important that is and how often we just skip over it because we think, I can do this thing without spending two hours on it, but in this case, I don't think I could have if I hadn't really sat down because I had to get a bit creative and in this case, I used a traditional prioritization method that had different ways of modeling risk and confidence, and it's called RICE, if you wanna look it up, reach, impact, R-I, confidence, effort.

And so I tweaked, I just got a bit creative with this, and tweaked the framework a little bit and used that to measure the current solution of the problem, and what really helped in this case is that I didn't have all the measurements and it would have taken a long time to get all those measurements. But this method allows you to model the confidence in your measurements. So just by saying, well, I can guess that we would reach this many customers, but I don't have actual evidence to back that up, so my confidence is lower and that affects the resulting score of this particular approach that we're taking. So it's a bit complicated, but when you have complicated problems on your hands, I think it's worth it to sit down and think like, how can I measure this thing, and even if I don't have all the data, I can still make some assumptions and reflect that in my measurement to make a convincing case, and in the end, I did, this was a convincing case that I made.

And so yeah, that's one thing that I would say, is really think about how you're gonna spend time thinking about how you're gonna make these measurements and even if you think that...I think there's some book, I don't remember the name, but I remember someone telling me about it, but there's a book about how to measure anything. I haven't read it, I should read it, but I kind of believe that there is a way to measure anything, even if you don't necessarily have all of the data, there's a way to make the case that you wanna make there. So that's one thing. And then I'm trying to think of a simpler example where... I just slow things down. I just say, "We need an extra sprint before we can tell you the direction that we're going in with this



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particular project, and in that sprint, we will tell you what the status quo is of where we are." And so again, it's about slowing down.

Scott Hirleman

Yeah, even before you said that, that was gonna be my question. Is this about not just even the product owner or whatever, slowing down, is it about working with the team to free up enough space so they can take on the cognitive load to say, "Are we doing this the right way? Can we be doing this better?" Really do think about this as instead of number of tickets being your KPI, that's not a product mindset, it's impact. It's, what are you actually doing that's impacting the organization? So I think that helps people to frame this, but again, so much of this is pretty unique to the situation, and that's kind of the challenge of applying product mindset to data, is... You can have the mindset, but everything is unique, so trying to share more of these stories about, okay, how did you approach this? Why? It's very helpful, so that way people can start to find those patterns, which is kind of what I'm doing with the podcast in general, it's just finding patterns. If only ten people are telling their data mesh story and nobody's talking about the same challenges or points or anything like that, it's like, "Okay, how do we actually do this? Or what are the patterns and anti patterns and things like that."

So this has been super, super helpful, I think, for people, and that they also don't feel alone when they start to say, okay, we're trying to apply the product mindset to data that... It's hard. There's not a real...

Sadie Martin

There's not a rulebook.

Scott Hirleman

Guidebook to this. Right. So is there anything that we didn't cover that you would like to talk about before we kinda wrap up, or is there anything, any salient point or do you have the, again, the solution that you can just hand over to people? It sounds like a lot of just giving yourself the time to think through it and set yourself up to be able to measure, set yourself up for success is kind of a product mindset, so it's not that it has the results on day one and that you kind of, if you can get that buy in, is that... I don't wanna put words in your mouth, but that's kind of what I took from what you've talked about.

Sadie Martin

Yeah, definitely. As you were saying that, I thought of another example related to the question you just asked about how do you measure these things? I tell the teams that I work with, and especially the engineering managers that I work with a lot, that a lot of data work is more... We have to spend more time on discovery than maybe



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you even would in other teams, because so much of what we do is uncertain, and so it needs more effort to understand, to get closer to that point of certainty before maybe you wanna commit to building something. And I think this can be challenging 'cause if you're used to working with a team that just has stories in their sprint or things to build in their sprint, it's hard to get people to say, let's take more time to put in more investigations or spikes or whatever you wanna call them to... More time when we're not building and more time when we're discovering.

And so one thing that we did at my previous company was that, that is how we kind of measured things. We didn't measure in terms of what we built or necessarily the success, the KPIs of what we were building, but at first we started just measuring what's the number of hypotheses that we can validate in X amount of time, and we had this goal of being able to validate or invalidate a hypothesis within two weeks or to say, we have discovered this many ideas, we've decided yes or no about this many ideas in a quarter, which is telling you that some of those things are gonna be nos and some of those hypotheses are gonna be invalid, so you're not necessarily gonna get to build everything that you investigate. But when you can think of things to measure like that, you can show we are being productive even without necessarily always being in build mode. So yeah, that was just one last example that I wanted to provide there about measuring things other than business KPIs, more like leading indicators that show you that you're going in the direction of... You know that if you've validated or invalidated a number of hypotheses, you're more likely to go in a direction that will bring business value, so that's kind of a leading indicator there.

Scott Hirleman

Well, and you could even do the second derivative type concept of, okay, what is our hypothesis validation rate of positive, so are we getting better at making our hypotheses. But I think that's a really interesting thing that I think is really counterintuitive of that... When you think about data, data is about certainties, data is about facts, data... And so that you're like, we actually have to do far more discovery when it's... But the data is the data so why is data about data more difficult and it's because there's so many things you could look at, there's so many... I really like that. I think that's a really salient point because I wouldn't have thought of that even after our conversation till you said it, but it kind of, it's almost... It's one of those things that's kind of obvious once it's been said, but it's not obvious at all until it's said. It's like, "Oh, that makes perfect sense. Yes, you are right." That is one of those things that I never would have thought of, but yes, 100%. Well, Sadie, this has been fantastic, and I think it's gonna be very useful for a lot of folks. Where can people find you? What do you want them following up with you about, LinkedIn or Twitter or where can...

Sadie Martin

Yeah, LinkedIn would be great, and I'm always very happy to talk to other people who



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are thinking about these things, because as we discussed, it's really... It's different in different organizations, and I think that's where... We're gonna move data forward if we can kind of figure out how to do this even better, so please reach out to me on LinkedIn, happy to chat. Now that you said this, there was something I did wanna mention, which is, this is not just about being a product manager or a product owner on a data team, a lot of data teams don't have that role and they still apply the product mindset. So anyone can have the product mindset. I've seen teams with engineering managers who are asking these types of questions and thinking this way, or engineers themselves who are really asking why are we doing this and how are we gonna measure it, and so it's not like you have to be a product person to benefit from this or to bring this to your team. That being said, I'm happy to talk to people who are not product people but who are still thinking about these issues.

Scott Hirleman

And I think a lot of what you said earlier as well was about teaching and helping people to understand why this is important, and I think that's important for your internal team, that's important for external folks that you're working with, again, whether it's to a product manager or not. I think a lot of this is very helpful for thinking about that, but it's a really good point that the product mindset isn't only for the product manager.

Sadie Martin

I'd say I don't want it to be 'cause that makes my job a lot harder.

Scott Hirleman

You can just handle all the product and stuff. I just wanna do the ones and zeros, right? Exactly. I'll say this has been great, so thank you so much for taking the time, and thanks everyone for listening. And again, I'd like to thank my guest today, Sadie Martin, the Senior Product Manager for the Data Platform Team for Q4 Inc. As per usual, you can find her contact information in the show notes.

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