Data Mesh Radio Episode #300: Panel: How to Treat Your Data Platform as a Product
Led by Michael Toland w/ Sadie Martin, Marta Diaz, and Sean Gustafson
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0:00:00 Scott Hirleman
A written transcript of this episode is provided by Starburst. For more information, you can see the show notes.

0:00:08 Starburst
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0:00:28 Scott Hirleman
Data Mesh Radio is provided as a free community resource by my company, Data Mesh Understanding. And it's produced and hosted by me, Scott Hirleman. This is going to be a panel because while I clearly am not shy about talking, I want to give others in the community a voice too. It definitely shouldn't only come from me. We should be hearing from many different people doing this. If you wanna participate in a panel, please do get in touch. You can go to datameshunderstanding.com to see some of the other free community friendly programs and the other learning resources we have, and you can check out our actually quite reasonably priced offerings. So let's hear some fun music and then jump into a quick-ish summary of what you'll hear about in this panel.

Panel: How to Treat Your Data Platform as a Product. Bottom line up front, what are you gonna hear about and learn about in this episode, guest host Michael Toland, who's a Senior Product Manager at TestDouble/Pathfinder Product Labs, as well as

the host of the upcoming Data Product Management in Action podcast. Facilitated a discussion with Sadie Martin, who's Product Manager at Fivetran and guest of episode 64. Sean Gustafson, who's the Director of Engineering Data Platform at Delivery Hero and guest of episode 274. And Marta Diaz, who's a Product Manager of Data Platform at Adevinta Spain. As per usual, all guests were only reflecting their own views. The topic for this panel was how to treat your data platform as a product. While many people in the data space are talking about data products, not nearly as many are treating the platform used for creating and managing those data products as a product itself.

This is about moving beyond the IT services model for your data work, platforms have life cycles and need product management principles too. Also in Data Mesh, it is crucial to understand that platform can actually just be plural. It doesn't have to be one monolithic platform. Users just don't care. And then typical note here, as per usual, I'm gonna share my takeaways rather than trying to reflect the nuances of the panelists views individually. So I've got my top eight takeaways here. And then there are 24 additional takeaways that I think are useful in the show notes. So number one, you will hear product mindset a lot in this panel. It's important to embrace product management as a mindset and not an exact set of things to do and approaches to take. The whole point of a product mindset is to find what works and deliver reliably while focusing on value.

Number two, be ruthless. Ruthlessly, prioritize and ruthlessly focus on user centricity. In data, we have a tendency to fall in love with the tools instead of the jobs to be done. But a good platform is about making it easy to get high value work done. And that's rarely about exposing tooling to users. Really prioritize on what do users actually need and not just what they want, but what they need. And then really, really prioritize constantly to focus on what you're trying to deliver on now instead of all the bells and whistles you could put out. Number three, your platform isn't going to magically drive usage. There is change management required to get people to leverage your data platform more and to leverage it appropriately. Be prepared for that change management work and closely aligning with users, whether they are kind of data people or not. You really are gonna have to work with people. I know a lot of people don't get into data to work with people, but to be successful, you have to have people that are focused on actually getting people to use your platform.

Number four, platforms and products in general are about scalability. Through a platform, instead of reacting to tickets, you build services and capabilities to address the problems that cause the tickets to keep coming up. That's far more scalable than reacting to the individual tickets. You're addressing the disease, not the symptom in this case. If you actually build it at the platform level by building your platform as a product, you focus on what actual capabilities are within scope so you can continue

to manage and expand your data platform instead of, again, just firefighting. Number five, as much as it would be amazing to build a data platform from scratch. Think how awesome you could make it. You could build the greatest platform of all time. In many cases, you will have to build off of existing services and platforms. Don't be too dogmatic. What matters is continuing to get better. Not being perfect. If you can build greenfield, a lot of people in data mesh say that's better, but a lot of times that's not an actual reality for many of us out there. So give yourself the space to improve the platform. But products live in the real world and the real world of your organization has current and existing business needs and constraints and tooling and services and things.
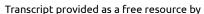
Number six, products, especially in software, are as much or more about evolution as they are about their form or function at initial launch. The same should happen with your platform. The same should happen with your vision. Don't get locked in. Don't get tunnel vision about your vision for where the platform goes. The whole thing of no plan survives getting first contact with the enemy or getting punched in the face. It's that same thing like don't be super, super focused. Your platform has to evolve, but even your vision of what the platform is gonna be has to be able to evolve. Number seven, generally speaking, most data platforms are still not serving the role of a software platform, data or otherwise should serve. They're still about the tech instead of the capabilities. You aren't alone if your platform doesn't meet the ideal vision of what a platform should be. Your role is to make it better, but it's still probably not going to be a sparkling beacon of perfection anytime soon. You have to be okay with that. But progress is progress.

Finally, number eight, your data platform needs to be aligned to your company culture. So you have to meet people where they are and properly set down the easy path to where you want them to go. It's a long journey. It's not about, okay, we're now down, everybody just jump over here. You kind of have to lead them along the path to getting more data capable, more data literate, or whatever you wanna call it. And you have to... Again, that change management of setting it along the path so people get better. Okay, with that summary of my top takeaways, and you can see the show notes for more takeaways if you'd like, but let's go ahead and actually hear from our awesome panelists themselves.

0:08:38 Michael Toland
Welcome to another episode of the Data Mesh Radio. I am Michael Toland, the Senior Product Manager at Pathfinder Product Labs, a Test Double operation. You can find me in a different episode number 251, telling the data work business strategy. And I am here with three guests, Sean Gustafson, Sadie Martin and Marta Diaz to talk about platform as a product. Typically the place you're gonna start when you're building out your data products. I'm gonna go ahead and have my guests introduce

one another and then we're gonna jump right into our conversation. And Marta, this is your first time on the Data Mesh Radio podcast, so kick us off your intro.

0:09:09 Marta Diaz
Well, thank you so much. Well I have been working in data world for more than 20 years, participating in exciting projects such as the launch of a data office and data driven culture in Leroy Merlin a leading do it yourself retailer in Spain and Europe, being there, the first data product owner and leading and promoting also data governance. And in 2020 I started a position as a product manager data platform in Adevinta, Spain, bringing others the capabilities to make happening what I have built before inside a data mesh journey. So, great challenge.

0:09:48 Michael Toland
Well, welcome to the podcast, Marta. We're thrilled to have you next, Sadie.

0:09:54 Sadie Martin
Yeah, thanks, Michael. I'm Sadie. You can find me on another episode of the Data Mesh Radio podcast, but I'm not as prepared as Michael and cannot tell you which number that is.

0:10:02 Michael Toland
64.

0:10:03 Sadie Martin
But I've been... 64.

0:10:07 Michael Toland
Yep.

0:10:08 Sadie Martin
Oh, it sounds like pretty early on. Yeah, so I've been working as a product manager in the data space for maybe about six years now. Working with a variety of data teams from like data science teams, analytics teams, data engineering team. And that was building out data products, but also building out data platforms. Most recently such as two months ago I started a job at Fivetran as a product manager for a portfolio of Fivetran SaaS Connectors. So I'm specifically working on sales and customer success SaaS applications, and delivering data from those applications that is useful and solves people's problems. So it's a different way of thinking about data product management because the product that I'm product managing now is actually a user facing product. And yeah, that's great 'cause I get to use a lot of the experience I had building those internal products in the past. But there are a lot of differences and things that I like a lot so far about having these products being external facing.

0:11:10 Michael Toland
Awesome. I'm looking forward to diving in deep on there. And then Sean, if you wanna give us a little intro on yourself.

0:11:16 Sean Gustafson
Great. I'm very happy to be here. I'm Sean, I lead the data platform team at Delivery Hero. So I'm an engineering leader. I'm not actually a product manager, but deep down inside you would probably see a little bit of product manager in my soul. I really think this stuff is important and I try to bring that to sort of the engineering leadership for the platform teams. At Delivery Hero we have sort of a series of brands for food delivery, so local food delivery for restaurants depending on your market, you may not know them, but certainly Foodora, Foodpanda, Yemeksepeti, talabat, yeah. And a few more. So sort a worldwide company based in Berlin. And my teams build out this central data platform that is used by all the data teams around the world to do their fantastic work.

0:12:09 Michael Toland
That's awesome. Well, thanks to all three of you for taking some time outta your day. We are all obviously very busy folks helping our customers and clients, but we're here to talk about platforms as a product that support all of our data products. And so I'm gonna just ask each one of you the exact same question to kick us off here. And Sadie, I will start with you. Succinctly, how would you describe platform as a product to someone who may not know much about it? What matters to you and what are the principles that you approach it by?

0:12:41 Sadie Martin
Yeah, so I think I have a pretty simple definition, which we can dive into later, but I separate out platform and then what it means to treat data as a product. So a platform to me is basically a collection of tools, services, and support for those tools and services for internal users. And then applying treating that as a product means applying a product mindset to it. And that to me is simply described, not simple to do, but I just think about two main things, which is anchoring the decisions about that platform in the context of the business. So always knowing the business context, what is the business trying to achieve, and making sure that how we're building and supporting a platform is in line with that, and then applying user centricity ruthlessly to the decisions that we make. So it's really just applying those two things to the concept of them.

0:13:40 Michael Toland
Awesome. Thank you so much. I love it. Marta, I'm curious, how would you describe platform as a product to others? What matters to you? What do you approach the principles by for it?

0:13:47 Marta Diaz
Well, in my case, well, very close to Sadie, I'm thinking with... When I'm talking with a data platform as a product first of all, you have a goal where you want to to go is not only about goaling, it's not about tooling, it's not only service for others. And with this goal I believe in a common goal for everyone, which the technology, the platform is only enabling, maximize the value of data and where the users are the ones together, that make it happens, no we need them and they need us. And when I think with a product mindset, I'm thinking also in continuous improvement in learning during the journey and not in users that are bringing us the requirements, I need this. No, we are talking about what do you need and why do you need this? And building with them, not building for them.

So I think that this is very user centric, but not only thinking about what I have my users have to be so so happy no, my company not the resource that says Sadie. My company has to be so so happy with tool, no. With the platform that it's accelerating this part and bringing value to the users and the users that we are working together for the same goal. So in my case, it is a totally change management, for everyone because it's something not quite strange inside the IT teams. We have to provide tooling, we have to provide this. The KPIs change a lot. You are not talking about the requirements of the output. You are talking about the outcome because this is the angle.
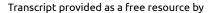
0:15:49 Michael Toland
Yeah. And I really think you touched on something that I think really passionately about, which is the collaboration with your users, building with them, not for them. And I think that's something that I think is really specific to product. Sean, what are your thoughts?

0:16:05 Sean Gustafson
I don't disagree with anything that's been said, so far that's absolutely how I think about it. I guess Sadie, you said that there's platform and then there's product. I have a hard time thinking about a platform that is not a product. I think in that statement, it's basically the products for emphasis, a platform is a product. And we should always be thinking about that. Product list platform is just a collection of IT services. That's really not something, there's no holistic vision behind it or anything like that. And I think that a big part of what makes it that product is that vision. That was also kind of touched on.

And just the way that it's built and the way that the user centricity and it just feels different than a traditional IT service. It's there to bring all these capabilities together for the purpose of having more efficient data people in the organization. It's not just providing, okay, here's data storage and here's some query engine. And that all that

kind of, all these little mini capabilities. Those are just things that we put together to build this platform that people can then build upon. I think this begs sort of a holistic view, a user-centric view, a focus more on overall capabilities and outcomes was the word that was used instead of just stuff. And I think I really like the idea of not just doing what you're told that this is something where we're being explicit about designing this.

0:17:45 Michael Toland

Yeah. I think you touched on something specifically when you said it feels different than a traditional IT service. And in some of our conversations leading up to this via email, there was sort of this general discussion when we were thinking about topics to bring up around shared services as opposed to product. I have a lot of opinions on this and I'm sure I will spell them out shortly, but I do think that changing the mindset of a platform as a product really changes it away from the service mentality, where we as a team building this platform are doing something for you. And we're really focused on building out capabilities that allow you to act with your own agency and get the things done that you need without these bottlenecks. I'm curious though and Sean, since you led me into this topic, like what does feel different about that traditional IT service? What would you expand upon on that?

0:18:35 Sean Gustafson

I'm really am influenced by a fantastic talk called The Magic of Platforms by Gregor Hohpe. If anybody of you, have seen that? He's talking about developer platforms, but I think a lot of what he says is really connected here and is useful for data products. So he talks about things like, being self-service versus being ticket driven. Having... You said bottleneck. A traditional IT service as a bottleneck, a platform should really thrive with scale. It should get better with scale, like, data platform, obviously it does. 'Cause there's more data in there. There's more opportunity. There's a community that's built around that. There's, oh my, a bunch of other dimensions that I forget now.

But, yeah, it's just really is two separate things when you think about it. It's just a very different perspective. And I think it all starts from this user centricity. If you take that first, all these other things like fall out of that. Of course, if you're user centric, you don't want to be let the user go into a process that take a ticket from one stage to another. You want to put them in control and let them actually solve the problems that they care about.

0:19:46 Michael Toland

Yeah. I'm curious, Sadie, what would you add to this? We, I think had some conversations too on this topic back and forth, as we were planning, what are your thoughts?

0:19:56 Sadie Martin
Yeah, I completely agree with what Sean has said. I guess I would add to that, at least in my experience, that I see this on a spectrum and multiple people have mentioned the importance of having a vision for your data platform. And I completely agree with that. But I do think that sometimes we can make mistakes in terms of being very dogmatic about the way that we do things. And not putting that in the context of the realities of the business. So, if you're starting from scratch and you have a lot of resources and you can go for that vision from day one, but a lot of times you're coming into a situation that has maybe been more of a service in the past. There's a lot of, Marta, you mentioned change management. There's a lot of expectations that people already have.

And so I think there are aspects of applying the product mindset that you can do even in those situations without making full transition to a, ideal state of platform as a product. And so even if you have a team that calls themselves a platform team, and they are a bottleneck because they are the ones who own the important data assets in the company, you can still apply products thinking to those data assets, despite the fact that maybe you can't live up to all of the ideal self-service. And working with your users, that you would like to. So yeah, I think that's the only thing I would add. Just putting things in context and that there's a spectrum.

0:21:32 Michael Toland
Marta, what are your thoughts? Shared services, products, platforms.

0:21:37 Marta Diaz
Yeah. Well, I will add... I maybe having an agile mindset, it helps me a lot now because it's very focused or start with why, like say Simon Sinek, that I love then. It's just to think about this product means this. No. Okay, maybe you are doing always the same. No, you know the pieces of a data platform, the storage, schedule, things like this, but you are have to start to think why, the reason why that it very is very close with the return of investment or the just say, seeing the platform as a cost or seeing the platform as an investment because you have to be very sure why you are here. And why this data platform exists, because here is the real value. And I believe that this is the great challenge we have nowadays with data platforms.

Because we really know very well the cost. But this return of investment not saying, yes, you have to invest on it because, ah, this is the thing, the piece that have to be developed now. And while I'm learning a lot, listen to others' experience, I think that everyone have the same challenge and there are some initiatives and just sharing with you also, that help us to think in another ways of doing. And well, it's incredible being a inside here and of course this is about the product vision, but also the data platform. You have to be very informed about the new technologies, what is coming.

So it's just a balance. The reason why, but but also think about the new challenge are appearing.

0:23:25 Michael Toland
Yeah, and I think something that everyone's touched on really is around the distinction between following user demand, particularly for internal platform products, which I think a lot about versus truly having a product vision on like what is this platform aiming to solve from a business problem? And often I think because we see executives view technology as a cost rather than an asset to invest in, and that's not a maybe a reason to just balloon your asset budget on technology, but it is something to consider is, what do we want this platform to do and enable for the business? And often I think that when we talk about platforms, we get into this mindset of, well, we have to have something to house the data and it's really just a solution to do something with our data and put it somewhere as opposed to solve real business requirements. And problems specifically. And I'm curious from the experience that you three have had, how important has having a vision for the data platform, and platforms just in general helped make certain that it was successful? And how did you build about building that vision if you, or how was that vision really culminated, through the types of collaboration we're all talking through? And Marta I'll pitch that back to you.

0:24:40 Marta Diaz
Well, what you learn is that the vision have to be something that engage the people to be all together. But it's true that as we are talking about that great change management in some ways, you cannot do with all the people that you want. I think that first of all, you have to be very clear your mind, okay? I am just the technological solution to execute our strategy. This is something real, okay. Our strategy is maximize the value of data. Okay. So does it means that the data, it's the core, not the platform is the data. And these data products, okay, what I'm doing for this, okay, I'm the technology that makes this happen, but I need another, the analysts and all the business that have to build this product.

So we just started, putting the different pieces and trying to make sense everything. Going this way, and always, having the strategy in your mind, what is the goals of your company, because is the way to find this common goal, is the way to speak about the same with your users. Because if not, you will talk about, well, with my data platform, you can do all of things. You can ingest data, you can… Yes. Perfect. So maybe if you are starting building this vision with the users, the users says, I want the easy as possible for explore the data. And you are thinking, okay, but this is the main goal of the company. This is the strategy. Just analyze data. No, no. It is not only analyze data, this is for a purpose.

So you have to balance, the maturity of the company also, because in some ways there are analysts that yes, I want to measure the value of data. I need this return of investment. It depends a lot on the company, on people, process and technology. So I have to be always in the balance. So in my case, I believe that you have to analyze very, quite well all the pieces, the maturity of them for them, decided how to create this product goal, that really helps the company. And then it doesn't finish with creating the product goal. It start then because start the communication. And start to talk with the stakeholder, okay, this is our goal. And this is why, with your requirements, I had to ask you, okay, which is the return of investment, what you are doing, because this means an effort for the data platform, and it makes an effort for you also for telling me if this thing is valuable for the company, so I will prioritize this.

So the dogs are starting to be another. And of course, the protocol is not something that is define it, and is there, it's something that you got, you have to iterate in some ways when it's needed. And of course, when you are engaging your users, is the moment that they challenge some of it. And you have to be in this conversation. You are not in the way that you have to talk only about the data platform, only about the analyst. You have to talk about the common goal and establish this common goal together.
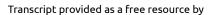
0:28:13 Michael Toland
Yeah. I'm curious also then, from Sean and Sadie really specifically, how do you go about building a product vision? Who do you need to involve in building that product vision and thinking through how to create it?

0:28:28 Sadie Martin
Yeah, okay. I can start. As many people as possible. I think, I don't know. So this is something that I have found really challenging in my past roles. I think it's extremely important, and I believe that the success of your data platform as a product is really tied to having this vision and having buy in for this vision. But I've been in a lot of situations where I don't feel like I was supported enough to create that vision and sell that vision and get the buy in. And I know this isn't your question, but I would love to talk a little bit more at some point with others about what is a structure that supports that vision? So for me, there were a few scenarios where I feel like I was hired in as a product manager and there wasn't really any other experience data leadership in the company.

And my job as a product manager was, get this team on track, get them delivering value, define the vision, what are we getting out of data? And again, it probably depends on the setup at a given company, but product management, you don't have it's... People say it's responsibility without authority. So you're coming in from the side, you're not even reporting into the same line as the people who are building

the platform and who have owned the platform in the past. And, so, I did what I think product management is, which talk is like talking to users, talking to different business functions, trying to understand their need, what I mentioned before of, a plot, trying to link the platform to the business context and to the users.

But there was still so much diversity across the company in terms of what they thought a data platform team was supposed to be doing. And there was no one high up enough to be a decision maker or really sell the vision. So even though I worked to come up with a vision, I felt like it wasn't necessarily... It couldn't really be used in a way that I think it needed to be used. So yeah, that's a long way of saying vision super important. I think there are contexts in a company having to do with structure and past experiences that make it hard to do that. And I wonder if it's easier to create that vision and sell that vision if you are higher up in the chain of command than a lowly product manager like myself, in the situation.

0:31:19 Michael Toland
Yeah, I think, that's probably been something for every product manager who's had to sell their version of a vision that aligns back up to some executive mandate, and facing that hurdle. I also think the other thing is really understanding to who for the platform is the vision supporting. Me, I've always thought a platform particularly internal, should focus almost exclusively on user experience of the internal employees. I think there are a lot of garbage platforms out there, and I won't name any, but I do think there are a ton of platforms that are seen focused on the buyer at an organization, particularly if you're buying off the shelf. That they aren't focused on who's actually using this platform and how easy is it for those people to onboard build within that platform, because that's really what a platform, in my opinion enables. It enables other people to build additional products on top. So, those are my thoughts real quick, but Sean, I'm curious, any other thoughts on this topic around vision and just how do you get one who needs to be involved? How do you lead it?

0:32:27 Sean Gustafson
Yeah. So first of all, I definitely, can echo Sadie's experience. I think this happens fairly often where a lowly, not so lowly, but a lowly data person comes in and has to somehow impact the culture of the entire company. And I guess it's often comes down to product because it's part of the product manager's job is to lead and to provide this vision and all that stuff. And the engineering org, at least the traditional engineering org's job is to just listen and do. So they don't, maybe eventually the CTO have a, has a vision, but for the most part, they don't really have that in their culture of developing that vision. And as an engineering leader myself, I'm actually struggling with this and trying to encourage this even within my technology org, is to have a vision for where are we going technologically with this, there's new capabilities coming, how do we integrate those into our platform, for example?

But the idea that somehow a person responsible for the data platform can somehow impact the whole organization, I think is actually a very powerful idea. And I think we can, because we can lead through the product. We can nudge the organization in a certain direction through the choices we make in that product. We don't often have the authority to say that, okay, you must use this best practice or you must do that, but we can make it easier or harder to do things within the platform. And that can push forward that vision. So we probably don't have enough authority to do these things, but we have a little bit, we have some levers that we can pull, to make that happen. Yeah, so overall, the bottom line is vision is extremely important. And the organization tends to look to the product org to build that vision. And I think actually more people should be talking about that, but at the very least, we have that in our... The expectations of us for sure. So yeah, at least...
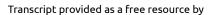
0:34:30 Michael Toland
I couldn't echo that more that so much of organizations are really looking at products to really define what that is. I think the problem sometimes is, I've been a product manager of data products for a while, but I wouldn't consider myself data literate. I'm very data fluent, and I can speak some of the language, but when it comes to some of the new technologies that really require my tech lead to be able to provide those insights and the engineering organization are the best ones who are equipped to know what the technology is out there. My focus has always been, and I think that this is something that I'm starting to really have a strong opinion strongly held as opposed to loosely held, is that I care more about the experience of the people building the products on my platform and what they need in order to build their products and their data sets and bring their data assets, into this data platform rather than the business problem itself. Because I think what we often are talking enough about is how our platforms are introducing inefficiencies and causing additional headaches for engineers. I don't know if the three of you have experienced that, but that has been the thing that really irks me. I'm just like, why is this so inefficient? I'm curious. Do you feel that way?

0:35:42 Sean Gustafson
I think this could come from, you asked about how do you develop a vision, and I think that's about observing the organization and seeing where are the current problems. If you're seeing that these people are extremely inefficient, well that's where you should focus on. If you're seeing that, the data is being collected and not really being used for the purpose of driving the business, well, maybe that's where you should focus on and that's where your vision should target. In my personal experience with my current job, I have both of these actually, there's situations where the data's just not a high enough quality and, it's just unusable for certain purposes, and we need to have a strategy and an ultimate vision around fixing that, which is not really about efficiency of the analyst or something like that. But the same time,

we can also do a very good, much better job of supporting them. If I had a succinct vision, I would include those two aspects.

0:36:36 Michael Toland
Yeah. Sadie Martin, any closing thoughts on this topic before we move on?

0:36:41 Sadie Martin
Yeah, no, I just really agree with what Sean said. I liked the... It's going back a little bit, but I like the idea of leading from within, making changes that then influenced the way people perceive and treat your platform as opposed to solely relying on a vision that you can sell from the top and ring down. So I think it's a combination of those things and again, I just feel like the structure of an organization and the culture of an organization really depends which one of those is going to work, or, at which point in time you can rely more on one versus the other.

0:37:18 Michael Toland
Marta, I think you spoke a lot about the change management aspect. And I think to tie in Sadie's point around this idea of structure in your team topology, how are you gonna structure teams to deliver? I don't know if you've had this experience Marta, but I find that inertia within organizations that have always resisted change, they're always going to resist change until they start. And they really love... And I was just chatting with a different Data Mesh Radio panelist, from a different one. Beth Bauer, and maybe, you know her. But leaders want to change until they actually have to and they have to change how they work and out. I don't know, Marta, if you've experienced that too.

0:38:00 Marta Diaz
Well, the change management in my experience, the main problem today is that it happens with the technology, because it happens with the data platform. And in that reason the... In my situation as a product manager, my main challenge inside the change management is to speak different languages. Once you worked with the engineers data platform that they are talking about another things, about tech debt, about now the storage, da, da, then I have to speak with the final users that they want to accelerate the data products. And the data, and for me in this case, the change management I focus on a lot is in trying to understand each other, not trying that the users understand the data platform engineers, why do we have to do this? This is not as easy as you as you think because there are a lot of things inside the data platform. There's a complex wall that you have to translate in another language.

And also you have to translate the needs of these users to the data platform team for saying, okay, you have to be focused on everything we are doing. We have to think about what, which is the outcome. And just explain me why is this is so complex, for

me trying to send the users, because it's true that we are different pieces and not everyone speaks the same language. Business speaks one language, analyst speak another because it's needed to clean the data, the data quality, all of these things. And the data platform teams is trying to scale and, but it's the same goal. But there are different languages that are working together and it's needed. The conversations this change management for me is this conversation how to try to a better understanding between all the pieces that it's so challenging. So challenging.
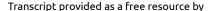
0:40:09 Michael Toland

Yeah. There's such a tension there between the groups and I think so many of our teams have relied on our platforms acting as services. So, hey, I need a new data environment set up. Please set this up for me. And we're moving to this model slowly on productizing our platforms to say, no, you can do this on your own. Here's the steps to go do it and go do it. I'm curious for folks who have worked within, and I know we all have, 'cause it's the embedded mentality of so many of our organizations is, so many of our platforms have been services and now we're seeing this move of productizing everything. There's data as a product, platform as a product, for our platforms who have traditionally operated on this request ticket structure. I think, Sean, as you spoke, how can we start very tactically, what are ways that you've started in those, whether it's greenfield development or brownfield development of moving folks towards a more product led way of thinking about the way they build their platform. I know that's a loaded question. So Sadie, I'm gonna pick on you.

0:41:19 Sadie Martin

Oh, great. Let me think. How can we... I was thinking about... I feel like I've worked in these gray areas where there's a lot of service components to the platform and then there are also some product or more self-serve components. And I've found that really challenging to do that context switch for myself all the time in terms of thinking about how to focus on the platform as a product and how to encourage people to think of it that way and support them in that way. But then also having to switch back sometimes and think about the platform as a service. So just for me, being able to compartmentalize, which times and situations do I still need to think of the platform as a service? At which times, do I have some room to go another direction? That's definitely been a challenge.

I guess I'm thinking of one example where, it was easy to point out how something could have been more efficient, if the platform had been treated as a product in that scenario. So, there was a request, like, we need this data for this application. It was not analytics, it was an operational use case where we were trying to expose data as part of the product. And there was just a huge amount of back and forth between the team that was building the application. And then the team that was providing the data in that case, took a really long time. The data was provided and then we

basically discovered that it didn't actually show any insights or provide value for the customer.

So that was a clear case where if earlier on in the process there had been more collaboration and maybe the team that, requested this data was more involved in seeing what that data looked like from the beginning, deciding how to display that to customers. Maybe we could have avoided this scenario where we just provided some data that didn't solve a problem. So to wrap that up, I think if you can find examples of cases where, it's beneficial, where it makes things faster or it makes things more valuable to have that treated as a product, that's where you can start then to, move in that direction.

0:43:54 Michael Toland
Yeah, I take maybe a more unpopular opinion to this question. I'm lazy and I want my team and myself to have to manage as little as possible. And so I'm always thinking about how can I offshore work of my platform directly back to the team that needs this to work. One, 'cause I don't wanna be a bottleneck. And two, I want folks to be able to self-service. I want everyone to be able to, in my head, things should just work and that's how I operate. And I struggle to get buy in on that a lot. And so I'm curious.

0:44:31 Sadie Martin
Yeah, that's what I was going to... Yes, I feel the same way. I want to get more things off of the team's plate, but that I can't say that to the other, like, here, I would like you to do this because I don't want my team to do it. So that's where I mean, I feel like I've looked for ways that I can tell them that it helps them. So to make that case in a way that shows the value for them instead of just the value for individual or for my team.

0:45:08 Michael Toland
Marta, Sean, what about you two, this transition from service to product, thinking and getting folks out of the mindset that we're gonna do something for you, thoughts there?

0:45:18 Marta Diaz
I have to tell that it's a journey.

0:45:19 Michael Toland
Yeah.

0:45:21 Marta Diaz
Because it's not for one day happens. No, no. It doesn't happen one day. It's a continuous journey because, you receive a request. And in that moment, as a product manager can say, no, this is not our product goal, so I can not do this. Or yes,

I'm a product manager that I'm trying to do a little, an MVP for you. Not trying to think about how can I help you in the way I can help you thinking about the product vision. So this is for me one thing, and the other thing is through that, this change of service and product have to happen also inside all the data platform team.

0:46:10 Michael Toland
Yeah.

0:46:10 Marta Diaz
Because when they come from, okay, these data engineers want this, I want to do it and I want to do, the first thing I have to do today is this request that happens today. And and it's a journey because you have to speak with the team. No. Well, let's think about the preposition. Let's think maybe this user can wait. Maybe it is not such important for stopping everything you are doing and start doing this. Let's talk with the user. Because it's true that the user when makes request says it's a fire, I need it now. So, it just start these little things that is starting to talk with the user and say, okay, you can wait for tomorrow or for the next week because we have started the spring and we have, different things to do. And of course you have to... It's a change, and as a team you have to be, so a strong team and it's very easy to stop this and say, okay, I have this request I have to solve. Because it's something that it happens time ago and it happens now.

0:47:27 Michael Toland
Well, Sean, I'm curious from your perspective as director of engineering, how much change management is involved in getting your team of engineers building out the platform to think differently? Because I feel like so many engineers are so used to and in ingratiated to our prior ways of being and thinking that they're so used to just accepting a request and delivering it. How do you get teams to start? Just to Marta's point thinking across the board?

0:47:54 Sean Gustafson
Yeah. It's a little bit of a cultural change. They need to, the first thing that comes to mind has to be a little bit different. Traditionally it would be, okay, I'm on it. Or okay, it goes in the backlog and we'll get to it eventually. And what I try to encourage people at least, in of more coaching sessions, not as an overall policy, but is to, if somebody comes to your request, you should ask why, what is the reason behind this? Because usually it's the solution that that person comes to you with may not be the right thing. And it might actually be very useful information about what you're doing. And maybe you don't have to do that at all. Maybe there's some other product, maybe there's a simpler way of doing that.

The same thing that they want to accomplish. And I find that they actually...

Engineers actually like, once they get get to that point, they like to actually, oh, I'm involved in this process now. I'm not just a ticket taker and then somebody to implement things. I'm actually, I have some agency in this whole process and I can dive down and really solve this person's problem. And I think that's, I spoke at the very beginning about my soul of a product manager. I think it comes with that. Yeah, the engineering desire to solve problems is the same as the, as from the product man.

0:49:11 Michael Toland
I think you also, when you're leading a team and you're trying to get them, you see the light bulb go off for them. And as you go and have a magical moment where the engineer has this sort of, whoa, I can build it so no one comes to me, but they just self-service. And I think that's table stakes for so many of our platforms, particularly if we do product well, we also then bring in a designer to help make certain that even the most novice of junior engineers building on this platform can deploy that. I do wanna switch gears real quick because I'm really interested also from the concept of a data platform. What is the scope of a data platform? Some people are gonna say it's just the underlying infrastructure for which we're going to house our data assets. Some people are gonna include things like the data catalog or the integrations into those data assets into the catalog as part of the platform or as the catalog as a separate team. And I'm curious, going back to your question, Sadie, maybe you have an answer, maybe you don't because you did ask how do you structure your team, but like, what are your thoughts on that? Where is the confine scope of your platform product?

0:50:27 Sadie Martin
Yeah, again, I'm gonna sound like a broken record, but I feel like you've gotta put that in the context of the business. And so I think you do have to take into account to some extent how things have been done in the past. Of course, you can have a vision for where you wanna go, but you might need to work with what you have, then given... To start with, and then slowly manage that change. So I think in an ideal world, the domain knowledge is outside of the platform. So whether that meet... The building of the actual data asset, would be outside of the platform because there are going to be people who are closer to that area of the business who are going to be better at treating that data as a product than a platform team who is, spread across the entire organization. So it's not a hard line, but for me it's like the capabilities that are common across the business belong in the platform. And then things that are, domain specific belong outside of.

0:51:36 Michael Toland
Yeah, I think I really resonate with that answer, Sean, Marta, anything to add?
0:51:41 Sean Gustafson

Yeah, I think so. And I just like to think of it as a bit of a marketplace. So the data platform is the place that's where consumers and producers come together. And that sets up two very clear interfaces, the data production and the data consumption. And your job is just to make those two, sets of personas, to be as efficient as possible. So that's the vision that I work.

0:52:07 Michael Toland
I wish listeners could have seen my face just light up, like you said, producers and consumers and there's two different pieces. It just lit up. I was like, oh, Marta, anything you'd add?

0:52:16 Marta Diaz
Well, the question about where is the catalog, I think I need that...

0:52:20 Michael Toland
Just yeah, the scope.

0:52:22 Marta Diaz
Yeah, the scope. I agree with my colleagues of course, and as I said, it is just to focus on data product and how to help the others to these data products. And then of course it exists, the data catalog, because it's different things that probably are something you need because you have data products, but for fielding them, for creating these data product, you don't need a data catalog. But of course it's needed for the discovery, for showing this value to others. And things like the, so in my experience, in our case, the data catalog, could be part of the data platform or not, it depends on the organization, of course are so related, the data catalog and the data platform, because the connectivity like, a Tableau or another tooling or like, so it's true that maybe these pieces like data catalog, I will say that it depends on the company decided to not to put inside the data platform, but of course are very related.

And it exists because there's a data platform. But where to put, well, it is just a strategy is just, and maybe you can try and if it works, it's okay, and if not, maybe you can separate. So it's also learning for the journey, learning and then what match with the company. And because of course you can build a self serve platform or it can be a centralized platform. It depends on the matter of the company and where you want to go. And this is strategy where it is. So depends on this, probably you will define the data platform as one thing or another. So.

0:54:12 Michael Toland
Yeah, the context is so important there, particularly, again, back to your point Sadie of how do you structure the teams that are building this platform? There's common

pieces that everyone has to utilize in order to, function with their data and whatnot. How do we share those capabilities across one common investment framework? How do we make certain that folks can integrate their data into a platform for cataloging and manage that holistically on their own? Because I don't wanna manage someone else's data, it's their data. I'm not the expert. They are far. And so, first off, I want to thank everyone, for the conversation. I've got one final question, that I think is always, really important for folks to impart their wisdom. But what's been your big mistake that you learned from and resulted in a really valuable lesson on moving forward as you've built out different data, environments, data platforms? What's the mistake that you've made that you've really learned. Who wants to go first?

0:55:16 Marta Diaz
Well, if you wanna...

0:55:18 Michael Toland
Marta go.

0:55:20 Marta Diaz
Yeah, I can start. I believe that you always made mistakes because you learn from this part of it. I think that in my experience, the communication, it's so needed education. And it's something that if you forget it, if you only work on your silo, this is the more warning in my experience. And my mistake that I'm trying to solve is just to, arrive with this product vision or with this communication trying to understand. And this is something so challenging and maybe you have to listen to someone that you have not vision and so what are the key stakeholders? This is a mistake not to think about the communication.

0:56:04 Michael Toland
Yeah, I think the communication and getting the buy in is so valuable. Sean, mistake you've made.

0:56:14 Sean Gustafson
I'm gonna point out something that you mentioned. 'Cause it triggered me a little bit. And we can be a little bit controversial on these.

0:56:20 Michael Toland
Yeah, I love it.

0:56:23 Sean Gustafson
The idea that, the hope with having a platform team is that, you can do less and the engineers don't need to get involved and all that stuff. I think this can be a serious

mistake. It's the idea that actually, we don't care so much about the users. They make mistakes. That's their fault. If they need support, they should read the documentation. I really think as the maturity goes on at the beginning, you probably, give more power to those teams.

And then eventually you have to back that up a little bit. Look at enterprise, data SaaS or the SaaS, products in general, they always have a customer success rep. They always have engineers that are there to jump in and help you and that thing. And they realize that's necessary because the success of their product is the success of the users using that product. And if we divorce ourselves from that success, we're not gonna be as effective as we could be.

0:57:21 Michael Toland
Made that mistake once. And I think you're right. And I had to really think about not just, well, we've provided you the capability, but we've also provided you a good experience that you don't need our assistance. And understanding that that is a journey, a sliding scale from like, here we've deployed a capability you can use, but we're gonna have to run and support with you on that until we expand the experience as such that it's very clear how to use this. And that's hard to figure out. Because then you need user experience designers, which is something that doesn't happen a lot in platform. Had I the opportunity to go back and rebuild my first data mesh for a client, I would've insisted on more user research, and specifically user experience design. Sadie, what mistake have you made that really gave you a valuable lesson that you carried forward?

0:58:13 Sadie Martin
Yeah, I think, maybe it's, it's a little bit similar to what Sean said, but I think my biggest mistakes have been coming into situations and being really married to my idea of the ideal state. So like, taking the principles of data mesh or of platform as a product and from the get go saying, this is the way, I mean saying at least to myself in my head, this is the way that it needs to be done. And if we're not doing it this way, we're doing something wrong. And I think, yeah, that's why I've said so many times in this conversation, really anchoring decisions business and what's going on around you, because that just, that really didn't work out well for me personally in terms of that struggle that I created for myself. And that also made it so that I wasn't able to like, bring as much value because I wasn't focusing as much on the ways that I could bring value and more thinking of how do we get to this ideal state where we will bring, perfect value, in that ideal state.

So and I think that learning was for me as product manager in those situations, but also for me as an individual in terms of what do I want to do as a product manager? And that has led me to this new role that I have at Fivetran, which is very different

from, being a product manager on an internal data platform. And some of these things that you mentioned, Sean, having support for the products, like user experience being really important, if your product is external, there is a very refreshing... It's an expectation that those things are already there, so you don't need to make the case or convince people that you need to treat your data as a product. It is the product and therefore you have these thing built in around it. So that was a learning for me that, I think so far I really like working in that environment.

1:00:25 Michael Toland
Amazing. Well, I wanna thank the three of you for joining me today to just talk on this topic. It's a new de jour thing that's really percolated within the concept of data mesh, data products. I feel like everything is becoming from, as a service now to, as a product. And I'm not certain where we're gonna go with it, but I'm really thankful for the conversation today. I wanna thank the three of you, for your time again, for contributing to the Data Mesh Radio community, and, wish you all have a fantastic, rest of your day, and I look forward to connecting with all of you in the future.

1:01:00 Sean Gustafson
Thanks so much.

1:01:00 Sadie Martin
Thank you.

1:01:01 Marta Diaz
Thank you.

1:01:03 Scott Hirleman
I'd again like to thank our participants today, our wonderful facilitator, Michael Toland, who's a Senior Product Manager at TestDouble/Pathfinder Product Labs, as well as the host of the upcoming Data Product Management in Action podcast. And, as well our panelists, which were Sadie Martin, Product Manager at Fivetran and guest of episode 64. Sean Gusting, Director of Engineering Data platform at Delivery Hero, as well as guest of episode 274 and Marta Diaz Product Manager Data Platform at Adevinta Spain. You can find a link to their LinkedIns and videos from about The Magic of Platforms by Gregor Hohpe, and start with The Why by Simon Sinek in these show notes as per usual, thank you.

Panels really are my favorite. And no, it's not, just because I don't have to do the hard work. I swear they give you a chance to hear from folks entirely devoid of my own views, which I think is crucial in our learning journey to figure out how to do data mesh well. Hopefully this one was super useful for you. Please do consider getting in touch with guests from the show. Almost all guests have said that they'd really love

people to reach out. Data Mesh Radio is again provided by Data Mesh Understanding and is produced and usually hosted by, except for these panels by me, Scott Hirleman, do check out our website, datameshunderstanding.com for more information. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by our offerings and some of the free programs out there. I hope you have a great rest of your day. And with that, let's hear that funky outro music.