

Steve Welch 0:11

Hello and welcome to Silent Designers, a podcast about under the radar design activity, which goes on in many organisations, even though it's not seen as design, or even necessarily done by designers. Each month we'll have an expert guest to share their knowledge and the impact that design has had on what it is they do in their domain. I'm Steve Welsh from Innovate UK KTN. And I'd like to introduce my co host, Katherine Wildman, founder of B2B copywriting agency, Haydn Grey.

Katherine Wildman 0:47

Hi Steve, thank you very much the introduction. In today's episode of Silent Designers, we're going to be exploring the theme of healthy living and tech. And we're going to be talking to Anna Wilson. She's Head of Operations at 52 North.

Steve Welch 1:01

Excellent. And thank you so much for joining us today. You're most very welcome. How about you start by telling us about yourself and the area of innovation that you work in?

Anna Wilson 1:10

Yeah. So hello, and thank you so much for having me here today. It's a real pleasure. So my name's Anna. And actually, I originally kind of started my journey as a vet, which is maybe quite far away from design. I then actually, instead of working as a vet chose to start working in medical technology development, and initially worked at an innovation consultancy, where I worked with companies like Johnson and Johnson, and Medtronic to help them develop new things like new surgical tools, new orthopaedic implants, all sorts of things. What I do now, though, is firstly, I'm Head of Operations at a startup called 52 North. I joined as the first employee, at the beginning of 2020, right at the beginning of the pandemic. And what we're trying to do is really kind of reinvent people's healthcare journeys and make them work much better for everyone. And our first product is something called Neurocheck, which helps patients assess their risk of the most emergency complication of cancer chemotherapy at home. And this is something called neutropenic sepsis. And at the moment, if cancer patients on chemo have an infection, if they have a fever, or feel generally unwell, they're told to come into the hospital as an emergency, so they can get treatment. But actually, more than half of patients turn out to be low risk. And they've then taken this unnecessary journey, which is highly stressful. And then also patients should get treatment really quickly when in hospital. And often they're not getting that, because the hospital systems kind of so overwhelmed. So what Neurocheck is doing is allowing people to be triaged at home, rather than in the hospital, so that if they're low risk, they can potentially watch and wait at home or come, go to their GP, rather than having to make that stressful trip and time consuming trip to hospital. And if they're high risk, they can potentially start treatment at home, and then be seen much, much more quickly in the hospital. So that's what I do there. I'm also kind of spending (I won the Innovate UK Young Innovators Award earlier this year), and I'm spending kind of one day a week on my own projects as well, which is something called Tortoise. And we're trying to help people recover more quickly and more positively after musculoskeletal injury. So that in a nutshell is kind of me and what I do with my time at the moment.

Steve Welch 3:44

That's really interesting. What drew you to the muscular skeletal injuries?

Anna Wilson 3:49

Yeah so, I'm an athlete, I do a lot of sports, I absolutely love sports. Been doing them since I was around seven. And through that journey, I kind of had my first I'd say, real injury when I was around twenty. And it took a really long time to recover from like probably, it was a year/eighteen months until I could start playing sports at the level that I wanted to again. And that was a really hard experience. Because when you have an injury, you often have to do a lot of kind of physiotherapy by yourself. Often progress is quite slow. And then it had a really big negative impact on my mental health. And I found that really, like tough, and then kind of since then I've had numerous other little injuries which have been similarly tough. So really, it was kind of driven by personal experience. I was like, oh, there must be a way to kind of help support people through this journey, and help them kind of maintain positive mental health in particular, and also kind of motivate themselves so they can see their progress. So that's really where it came from. I just (before applying for the award), I had a physio appointment and I asked my physio - I said "I have this idea, what do you think? Do you think it's a good idea or not?" And he said "Oh, yeah, I genuinely think that would be helpful." So that kind of gave me the confidence to apply. And he's now working with me to like, try and develop a solution.

Katherine Wildman 4:53

That's fascinating. I think when when I've looked at the project, the Tortoise project, and this idea about the positivity, this thought that you've tapped into, obviously now makes sense, from personal experience. How did you use design? How did you come to use design in that area? And why was it important to the innovation of the app in particular?

Anna Wilson 5:34

Yeah, so I guess, I think in my work both across 52 North and Tortoise, I'd say there's like two big areas where I use design. So I say the first is your more classical in terms of like designing the product. So for both products, actually Neurocheck and Tortoise, we have engaged kind of users like really regularly, really early from early on in the process, whilst it was still an idea, kind of talking with them about their experiences, trying to identify what their kind of biggest pains were, like having empathy with them to try and see it from their perspective. And then as we've been then, kind of defining what the product needs to do, designing what it looks like, we've kind of engaged users, getting them to test the product, see where they're struggling, and then sort of iteratively improving it. So I've done a lot of that, in both roles. And what's like, so amazing is every time you look at it, or every time you test it, you see something new. You're like, oh, that's a problem, that could be better. So it's a super iterative journey. And then I'd say the second area, which is I think what people don't often think of so much as design, is process design. So particularly my job as Head of Operations, I joined 52 North very much in the beginning. So we didn't really have like any systems, or anything in place. So we're kind of trying to build a business as well as building a product. So I suppose one example is because we're a medical device company, we have to have a quality management system, that's like really important. So that the products and everything we do is safe and effective. And I say actually kind of designing that system is also design. So again, at the beginning, we're thinking about, ok, kind of like what are the needs, both from a regulatory perspective, but also from the users. So the people in our business are going to be interacting with this system, like, what are their needs, because we want people to be able to use it, and then sort of going through and defining, ok this is like, what we need to cover, this is how we should design the procedure to kind of meet the needs of the people, how much time they have, how tech savvy they are, how are we going to like get them to do the things. And then again, that's the same, like we've implemented a system and then you kind of notice, oh, that thing doesn't work so well. Let's come back to the drawing board and try and improve that. So I suppose that might be my

main experience of, or main learning is kind of it's really an iterative process. And actually, it's never finished, you just always kind of constantly iterating and improving.

Katherine Wildman 8:28

It sounds like a very holistic process and I think even if you know, the biggest apps send out their updates, don't they? So you're presumably on the ground doing those almost in real time. I think it's really interesting when you're saying that you're learning from the people that you're talking to, the proper market research and that's guiding your decision making. It's very powerful.

Anna Wilson 8:50

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And, and what's great as well, so particularly at 52 North, we really kind of involve the users in the process. So we've set up a collaboration with Macmillan Cancer Support, and they have a kind of innovation community of people that have had experience of cancer or like caring for someone, and we kind of work with them. So they, I'd say some of these people have been working with us now for three years. And I'd say they're actually becoming kind of designers as well. And what's like so wonderful is they see the product, they test it out, and then they'll be giving us ideas. So ok, this is how it can make it better. They'll just send us like random emails a few weeks or days after and you can tell they've been like mulling it over and they said, Oh, I think I've had an idea for how you can improve this bit. So even they're becoming kind of designers as well, which is really inspiring.

Steve Welch 9:46

That yeah, that whole holistic thinking is so much a design feature there. Has been anything that surprised you? Have you learned anything that you didn't expect in either of these endeavours?

Anna Wilson 9:59

Yeah, so I think most recently we have taught us. So I'm not a software developer, I've not had experience of coding really, or anything. So I was kind of having a bit of a block. I was like, Ok, how are we going to actually build this app, right? Because you have quite limited resources. Software developers are quite expensive. Also, you want to be able to kind of directly take your own ideas, and test it and being able to iterate really fast. So I was really struggling about sort of, ok, how am I going to navigate this space. And then I came across (I'd never heard of it before), this whole, like no code space. So this is basically a set of tools, I guess they're developed by companies or people that allow you to create software in a very, very user friendly, intuitive way. So you're not having to like write lines of code, or anything so through, and you can just like start to create things and prototype your ideas and test them with people. So I did a course called '100 Days of No Code' to kind of learn about what's possible in this space. And it really super blew my mind. And from that, so I'm now kind of using a tool, which was called Adolo, which is a no code app development programme. And with that, what I'm able to do, like with the team as well, is kind of actually create like a prototype of, ok this is what we want our app to do. It is functional, it works, people can use it. And then we can go out and test that with people. And that is just so much quicker, and easier than a more traditional software development process. Because even if that's not super scalable for the long term, it is allowing us as designers to be able to actually fully like prototype our ideas really, really quickly and be able to test them with people really quickly and sort of go through this build, test, learn feedback loop. So I'd say that is like the most recent thing that has just kind of really, I suppose blown my mind and opened my eyes to like what's now possible and

how designers themselves can go so much quicker and further through the iterative design process with these tools than they could before.

Steve Welch 12:26

That is awesome actually and I could imagine that even if downstream, we then are going to take it to an app developer specialist, you've got a really clear way of communicating with them.

Anna Wilson 12:38

Yeah, exactly. And you've already kind of discovered these small issues, which are quick to change when it's not fully in the programme. Like you think, oh, I want this button to be here. Or actually, I want a direct link here, which once it's written in code, to actually takes longer than you would think to change. Whereas here, you can get all those little easy, quick wind changes out of the way, like you say before, then going to an app developer and saying "Can you build this to scale?" and have much more confidence that people are actually going to want to use the thing that you've built or designed?

Katherine Wildman 13:17

I think there's something really important there in the collaborative process, that you've got in the design stages. But also, I know that the app is designed to empower people. And the scale of the problem is huge, isn't it? It's like over a billion people.

Anna Wilson 13:35

Yeah, so this again, surprised me. So Tortoise kind of started with my own personal experience. And then I started doing some research into the scale of the problem, that actually discovered that musculoskeletal problems, it's like over a billion people have one right now. Lower back pain is the leading cause of disability worldwide, and also the leading cause of early workforce exit, which is kind of crazy. And also, it's like the fifth biggest area of NHS spend. And I think often we hear a lot about cancer and this and that, and everyone knows that's a massive problem, but it actually kind of shocked me the scale of musculoskeletal health when I looked at the numbers. And then when you speak to people as well, just tell them about the project, everyone's like, oh, yeah, I had that problem, yeah, I had that problem and you realise it's so prevalent. But I think not talked about as much as a lot of other health issues.

Katherine Wildman 14:36

It's fascinating and like, I just have to say the name is genius. Skeletal and then the tortoise and the hare because you're busy, and you've got to do the activity, and it's a slow process - recovery.

Anna Wilson 14:49

Yeah. Yeah, we did some brainstorming and had a few other ideas. And then this one came and we asked a few people and they're like, Yeah, I really like that one, let's go with it. And then you can have a cute little tortoise logo and go from there.

Katherine Wildman 15:04

It's amazing. It's amazing. Do you find, you talked about the way that you've divided your working week as well? Could you explain a little bit more about the crossovers between the

work that you do the four days a week? And then, do you take ideas and innovation from the team there? And then bring them across to the one day a week on Tortoise?

Anna Wilson 15:23

Yeah. So I think it really goes both ways, actually. So going right back, I think things I've learned from my vet career about... So when you have an animal come to you with a problem, a lot they say, they always say like 80% of the diagnosis is in the history. So you learn a lot about like, how to talk to people and like, understand what the kind of root causes and what they're concerned about. And because often it's it's much more than what they just say at the beginning. So I think that skill and also looking at, ok, how to break down like a problem in a systematic way and test it. That I've sort of taken all the way through and has helped with kind of design process. Then at the innovation consultancy I was at, called Innovia, that was really big on kind of holistic innovation. So there, we had a really multidisciplinary team with kind of design, behavioural science, all the different science disciplines, people with backgrounds in business. So I learnt an enormous amount there, particularly like opening your eyes to what different disciplines do and I'd work a lot with the designers, with engineers, behavioural scientists, and just sort of how to approach a problem and develop a solution and things. But that was like very front end innovation. So very kind of concept - what's the right direction to go - less sort of actually producing something all the way and releasing it to the market. And then at 52 North, again, I've learned a huge amount. So how do you go from like, actually an idea to then raising money, kind of prototyping it, testing it, working with users going through that iterative journey, building a business case, managing the finances, the team and things like that. So all of that sort of helped me. Because I actually had this idea for Tortoise, even before I joined 52 North. I probably had it from I don't know, like 2019, or something. And it was just developing in my mind, but I didn't really know how to take it from the idea into actual reality. And then it was only really after the experience of 52 North and also seeing this Innovate UK Young Innovators Award. It was the last year otherwise, I'd be too old for it. So I was like, ok, I've just got to give it a go, because I've had this idea for so long. And what I've kind of taken from 52 North, I suppose is like, how is involving users in the process, prototyping early, testing it, getting feedback. Thinking holistically, both about the product, but also the business case. But then I'd say now I'm also bringing things back from Tortoise into 52 North. So this whole no code space, I've learnt through Tortoise, and actually, at 52 North, we can use that to sort of automate some of our processes. But then also we have, we do both a digital and a physical product. So I think we can also use it to then quickly prototype up our digital concepts, and test them with users before we do full software development. Because what I've learned with the no code as well, it's, it's not even... like actual software developers use it as well, because it's often quicker. So they might use it early in the process to test, if things are valuable or usable, before spending time on writing the code. And building something more, more permanent. So it's definitely, they're definitely like, really synergistic. To some extent, just the more things you do, and with more people as well, the more experiences and different viewpoints you get, which I then think help you do things better and see things in different ways. To a point, if you do too much, then you don't have enough time to focus.

Katherine Wildman 19:17

It's a real circular economy, isn't it? Of intelligence and knowledge. I know, we're coming to the end of our time today and I just want to thank you. I know you're joining us from a long, long way away in Texas, and it's very early in the morning there. So huge thanks for that. I know that Steve has one more question for you, if that's ok?

Steve Welch 19:37

Well, yes. It might be the hardest one yet. But as an innovator, what one piece of advice would you give to somebody wanting to incorporate design into what it is they do?

Anna Wilson 19:51

Yeah. So I think I'd say I'm gonna give two. So one is try and think holistically about the kind of requirements at the beginning. So think about the different stakeholders, think about the environmental impacts, what you're trying to achieve, and kind of like write it down so that you have a benchmark. And then my second piece of advice would be prototype and test early, and iteratively. So your first test can just be explaining your idea to people - you don't even need to write anything down. Maybe your next one can be like a drawing. And then maybe your next one is like a prototype. But just getting that feedback early and regularly will help shape your idea. And you'll learn things that you didn't know, and it will stop you going down rabbit holes that you didn't necessarily know existed, and it's much harder to change something that you spent a lot of time building, than it is to change something that's very, like not taking that much time, very malleable, etc. So they'd be my two pieces of advice.

Katherine Wildman 20:56

Fantastic. Anna, thank you so much for your time today. We do appreciate it. And thank you for sharing all your insights and advice.

Anna Wilson 21:04

Thank you for having me.

6Steve Welch 21:06

Yeah. And thank you for me, too. You're so engaging to talk to, you know we could go on longer than that. But I also loved that, the idea that your first, actually your first product delivery might be just you explaining the idea to somebody. I think that's quite enriching because often just getting past blank paper is almost a problem. So sectioning it down like that is really smart. Thank you for that.

Anna Wilson 21:32

No problem, thank you so much. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Steve Welch 21:36

So thanks again. Well, this podcast has been produced by the Design in Innovation Network, which is sponsored and supported by Innovate UK. If you want to find out more about design in innovation and gain access to other interesting people, just sign up to the network. And we'll see you next time on Silent Designers, when we'll be exploring what's happening around net zero and sustainable industries.