Embedding a product management mindset in a digital platform

Supporting an online business to develop its digital platform and enable developers to build the right things at the right time.

EQUAL EXPERTS

Our client, a large online auction and classifieds website, wanted to develop its Digital Platform and support its developers to build the right things at the right time.

Equal Experts helped identify gaps in the development process and worked with engineers in the organisation to co-create processes which would help to define and plan work based on the value added to the organisation, rather than just ploughing through a never ending backlog.

By creating an exemplar process and through project-based learning, we introduced the concepts of Digital Platform as Product and paved roads. This helped engineers mature as proxy product managers of their respective platforms by encouraging them to focus on user experience and lean delivery of solutions. This shift in mindsets enabled a move away from an output-based approach to one which actively balanced the digital platform with the needs of the users and the needs of the business.

A bespoke, co-created playbook outlining the processes and ways of working, within the company's own organisational context, was delivered and a core group of engineers have become platform product champions to carry on the job of advocating for a product approach.

A bespoke, co-created playbook

providing a single source of reference to upskill developers

Reducing time to deliver

New processes helped the business deliver a project six months ahead of schedule

Improving prioritisation processes

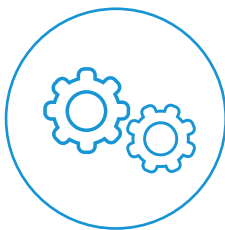Clear ways of working in place

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About the client

Our client is a large online auction and classifieds website in Oceania. Selling everything from cameras to cars, the site has rapidly grown over the past two decades and now has 9 million listings online at any one time with almost two million site visits each day.
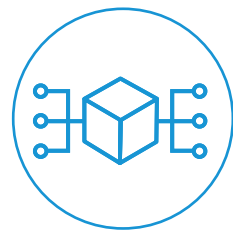

INDUSTRY	ORGANISATION SIZE	LOCATIONS	SERVICES
Retail E-Commerce	500 employees	Australia and New Zealand	Design/Scale

Challenge

Tackling siloed working and an emphasis on quantity rather than quality feature development

Our client wanted to develop its Digital Platform and support its developers to build the right things at the right time. However, while the teams working on the customer-facing digital services were well-established and cross-functional, its internal Digital Platform remained in a traditional, siloed set-up and focused on one specific area, such as infrastructure, dev ops, or databases.

This siloed way of working resulted in a gap between the strategic vision for the Digital Platform and the day-to-day development of features as there was no system for collaboration and prioritisation of work. It meant every idea within a team's backlog was ultimately delivered, regardless of whether it fulfilled a business need or not. Within the Digital Platform, the organisation also emphasised the amount of work delivered rather than the value added to the business, leaving no room for the teams to intentionally experiment or share learnings and ideas if they wanted to meet their arbitrary quarterly output targets.

These issues were slowing down the time to market for new, value-adding features and resulted in a significant amount of time being wasted on features which did not fill a business need.

Solution

Introducing concepts of Digital Platform as Product and Paved Roads

We worked together with senior engineers and those acting as proxy product managers to shift the mindset to focus on prioritisation based on value. A new, more thorough value stream was defined which would enable the team to decide whether ideas would be progressed or discarded before any time was wasted on development. This new system required the introduction of new processes, artefacts and agile tech principles as well as creating a vision for the Digital Platform, utilising value-based road mapping and communicating these priorities to executive teams.

We encouraged teams to see the Digital Platform as a Product itself, with services to be built with the needs of the engineers and developers in mind. By creating a series of paved roads, which would enable engineers to follow tried and tested processes to implement solutions to common but complex problems, the Digital Platform could reduce waste and improve the time to market for features and create a better experience for engineers using the Digital Platform.

We also mapped the required capabilities against the new value stream in a human-centred, collaborative way. This helped the organisation to clarify where existing skills were held, and where new skills were required, helping to define who within the teams was best placed to help deliver some of the new activity. It enabled more collaborative working, breaking down the silos between teams while also calling to attention areas where there was a skills gap to be addressed, either through training, development or recruitment.
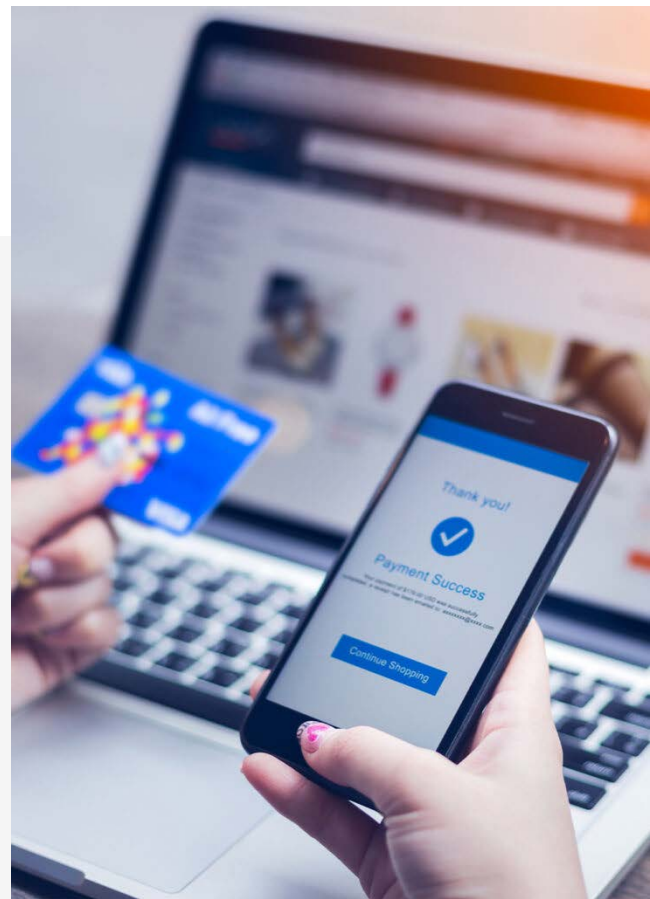
A true partnership approach

Key to our work with the business was a partnership approach – with members of both organisations each learning from the other and co-creating the process together.

While we coached the team using industry best practices artefacts, we also recognised where they may not be useful for the organisation's own specific context. Working in partnership allowed ongoing interactions and changes to be made quickly without resulting in delays to the project as well as for better overall results.

By also embedding an engineer within the digital platform team we were able to model best practices and upskill team members so they could continue the Digital Platform development process after the engagement ended.

Results

A roadmap for the future

The implementation of new approaches and the use of various artefacts created a single source of truth for the team – a roadmap that the team could view and use to make decisions when determining which features to work on and, crucially, which features would not add value. It also improved productivity and reduced the amount of time spent getting decisions approved as the team were aligned to a single vision and roadmap. On one occasion, the new process and elimination of waste enabled a defined project to be delivered six months earlier than envisaged.

The organisation also reported ad-hoc pressures on the team are also reducing. Previously the team would spend between 30% and 40% of its capacity working on ad-hoc, unplanned features. However, the introduction and embedding of new ways of working should help reduce this to a negligible amount. This has also dramatically reduced the cognitive load on developers, reducing the need for them to manage unexpected work and instead focus on their own workload and the next priority. As a result, there has been a positive impact on team morale and reduced churn within the organisation.

A tangible output from our engagement was the creation of a business-specific Playbook for the development of the Digital Platform. The Playbook sets out good product management and product development processes, in the context of their own organisation, which teams can follow and refer back to when needed. It also acts as a useful onboarding tool for new software engineers joining the organisation, enabling them to get up to speed much quicker and can start delivering value sooner. It has also enabled the development teams to identify further improvements and enabled the easier spread of learning between engineers and digital platform teams, improving overall collaboration.

Want to know more?

Are you interested in this project?

Or do you have one just like it?

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