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EPISODE 12: NAVIGATING THROUGH UX IN BUSINESSES AND TECH

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

00:00:00 Chen: Hey, everyone. I am Chen from Accenture in the Philippines. Welcome to another episode of Pinays Talk Tech Podcast, the podcast for future forward Filipinas. Join us as we have inspiring conversations with Pinays in tech, from young innovators to industry leaders. This podcast will show you how Pinays in tech are leading through change. This is Pinays Talk Tech Podcast.

00:00:25 VO: Brought to you by Accenture.

00:00:29 Chen: UX has been disruptive, but also transformative. Today, we will learn about user experience and how relevant this is in the success of businesses and technology. Let's welcome, Niaw de Leon, the co-founder of consulting firm, Cognible. She combines her taste for technology with her love for language and design to help individuals and teams to build digital products. She's a strategist and an expert in the field of user experience and is a published author.

00:01:04 Chen: Hi, Niaw, welcome to the show. How are you doing so far?

00:01:07 Niaw: Hi, Chen. I'm good. Doing good.

00:01:10 Chen: First question for those listening and are not familiar with the user experience, can you tell us what it is about in simpler terms?

00:01:20 Niaw: All right. Well, there's many ways to explain user experience, but from the point of view of the user, it's pretty much how you feel about your interaction with the product or the service. How do you feel about the thing you're using. I'm sure you've experienced products, applications, technology that are both… there are frustrating ones, but they're also ones that you love to us like when we're ordering food for delivery, what apps do you use and how do you feel about them? That's basically user experience. So it's usually referring to technology but it can refer to any product or service. For example, when you order a gadget, from the moment that you think about

ordering it, looking for information about it, comparing products, then finally ordering it, tapos pagdating sa iyo, you unbox it. What's the experience like. Everything about it from the smell of the box to the onboarding experience of starting to use the product up to using it and then sharing it with your friends. So it's from start to finish. But there's another way of talking or thinking about user experience, and it's thinking about it as a discipline. So it's kind of a cross multidisciplinary field that combines psychology. There's anthropology, then combining it with technology and design to create user-centered products and services. So you can think of it as your subjective experience about a product or service, but there's also another way of explaining UX which is a discipline or a field.

00:03:10 Chen: So how integral is user experience or UX to the success of businesses?

00:03:15 Niaw: I think, nowadays, you can't talk about the success of a business without introducing UX into the conversation. In fact, 70% of business leaders see UX and CX customer experience and user experience as differentiators, meaning it's what sets brands or companies or products apart from their competitors. And yeah, this is from an article from UX Planet saying, 80% of people are willing to pay extra for a better user experience. So that's important for business. And just some specific examples for e-commerce, 70% of customers abandoned purchases because of bad user experience. And there's research that says that every $1 invested in UX brings $100 in return. So that's a pretty huge ROI, return on investment.

00:04:14 Chen: Now, I'd like to ask, how has the demand changed in the past few years. With, of course, different factors that's causing it. And what are users looking for in UX now? We've had disruptive applications that already popped up. So what are your thoughts on this?

00:04:34 Niaw: I think it's really because on the technical side, there's been a lot of growth or maturity. So it's not about just features anymore because maybe a decade ago, there was not really that many providers, but now with the market getting more saturated, UX's becoming more of a differentiator and, in some cases, even an essential part of digital products and services. So let me just give you a few examples. I'm sure you've heard of Slack, the enterprise chat software that allows teams to communicate. So they built a $17 billion business. And there's many factors. Of course, there's product market fit. There's this idea that they've built a lot of integrations with other apps, but then again, enterprise chat apps aren't new. There've been a lot of other enterprise communication applications before, but what really set them apart was their user experience.

00:05:44 Niaw: They did it very differently. They used playful visuals, vivid colors, imagery, and they used language. It's very conversational. When you finish all of your messages, it will say something like, you're all red, here's a tractor. Very different from what you think about us Enterprise. So whereas before, it was all about feature parity. Companies were just fighting or competing to get more and more features, but at some point, you get feature parity and everyone has the same features. So what would set your product apart? It would be user experience. Now how well can people use your product? And not only that, because user experience is not just about usability, it's going beyond usability and it goes to the level of emotions. How well does your product create an emotional bond with your users. So it goes beyond usability and includes emotional design, conversational design, branding.

00:06:54 Niaw: So there's a whole lot of other examples where the products are in the category space na, that are saturated feature-wise, but they've been able to disrupt the market through user experience. Another example is Tinder. One of its most important characteristics is the swipe right, although I've not used it myself---

00:07:20 Chen: I used it. Don't worry. I can relate.

00:07:22 Niaw: Yeah. But it built a $42 billion business because of that one differentiator and how it changed the dating experience from filling up profiles and going through this very tedious matching experience to just simply swiping right. So, yan, to answer your question, what changed? It's really all about setting yourself apart from a market that's saturated with so many options.

00:07:53 Chen: Niaw, So how did UX come about? And how did you get into UX, in the industry? How are you introduced to the UX industry?

00:08:04 Niaw: All right. Yeah. So when I started my career back in 2005, reveal. There wasn't that option. I actually began my career as a software developer doing ava enterprise apps for the ong ong government, kasi I was working for a company that was developing solutions for the ong ong government services. 2014, we were pitching for a video conferencing system in the U . And one of the re uirements for that pitch was exceptional user experience. So we developed a number of prototypes. Although I was a programmer, I was very into graphic design at that time. ne of my hobbies, before I started my career was web development and web design. Back then, we were called web designers, and then later on, when mobile apps became more popular, dun na lang nagkaroon ng term na user experience or UX design.

00:09:20 Niaw: But going back, we were pitching for this video conferencing system, and I developed a number of prototypes, did some research on what made good user experiences, and we won the project. So I was very happy about that being the team member that actually developed the mockups for that proposal.

So when   after winning that project, yun nga, we developed that with some of the principles that we included in that proposal. And then one of the re uirements for the project was a usability test, and there was no one else in the whole organization.   e were around 100 people at the time that knew how to do usability tests. So fortunately, I found a book by Steve   rug called   ocket Surgery for Dummies, I think. And it was all about how to set up your own usability tests on the chip , and the whole idea was to get five participants and to create your sample scenarios and simulate those scenarios with your five participants that closely match your target users.

00:10:32 Niaw: And it was that experience that really led me into the rabbit hole of user experience. I realized from there that you can apply all the best practices in the world, but without that user insight, that research, you wouldn't be able to find those things that made it hard to use. So, because it was a video conferencing system, we were testing some designs and we were using these buttons like launch uick meeting, and they couldn't find it. They couldn't complete the task because they were expecting to find something like Start eeting. So that really stuck with me and led me to really find out more about what this user experience thing is all about and the history of it, starting from human factors and ergonomics back in 1 00s up until the very first formal job title of UX architect by Don Norman when he became part of Apple in the   0s. So it's a really interesting field that played in, you know, matched all of my interests. So it matched my interest in linguistics, in language, and also my interest in cognitive psychology and how the mind worked and how using concepts like cognitive load made experiences better by reducing cognitive load.   asi at that time, I was also interested in marketing and what factors led people to buy things.

00:12:21 Chen: So those are various industries that led you to UX. So would you mind telling us, what was your course in college? So for our listeners who are thinking about joining this field or what to take up, they'll have an idea of what to take up.

00:12:36 Niaw: Yeah, so I took up BS Computer Science in UP Diliman. So the great thing about user experience is the people who practice UX today come from a variety of backgrounds. Some of them come from more of visual design backgrounds. Some of them are from graphic design careers, the others are from psychology or anthropology. And there are of course, sizable segment coming from IT, like me, computer science, information systems, those kinds of courses.

00:13:15 Chen: And correct me if I'm wrong, since this is one of the stories I've heard from my friends, that sometimes they need some experts, right? For example, they're creating a healthcare application. They try to add a nurse into the team for the user experience. So everyone is really emerged to get to know how things works. Is that correct or did I hear the story wrong from my friends?

00:13:43 Niaw: I've certainly heard of domain experts adding user experience into their skillset. So I think you got the story correct.

00:13:53 Chen: All right.

00:13:53 Niaw: Also they're called domain experts. If you're doing healthcare and you're a nurse, then I'd call you a domain or subject expert.

00:14:02 Chen: Then what technical skills are necessary to start or succeed in this field of technology?

00:14:08 Niaw: The interesting thing about UX is it's not really technical in the IT, technical sort of way. The skills you need are more of, in the areas of psychology, research. There's even a little bit of, if you're going into the research track of UX, there's kind of, like anthropology skill set of doing user interviews, field studies, understanding user behavior. So there's the psychology aspect of it. There's also, of course, communication is a very big part of UX, talking with users, talking with the stakeholders, communicating the value of your designs, why this works and why this doesn't work.

But then there's also the more technical part of UX, which is the prototyping, meaning actually creating the user interfaces, the UA design part of it, where you need to use tools like Sketch Figma, or Adobe XD. That's probably more technical side of UX.

00:15:09 Niaw: But there's also an overlap. There are roles where you combine a UX with the actual development, front end development. Sometimes they combine roles like that. But strictly speaking, just for UX or user experience, it's more of combining these psychology, research aspects with design. How do you arrange the elements together? So there's also the visual design aspect of it using colors, space, layout, information hierarchy, visual contrast to make information easier to digest. And then there's also the writing, which is my specialization in UX, the writing and the linguistic or verbal aspect of design. Then there's also a specialization that deals with content. How do you design the content, the images and the writing part of it to create better user experiences? And there's also parts of user experience where you design the information hierarchy, if you've done any sort of website, there's a part of it where you define the site map.

00:16:29 Niaw: So now, because we've gone beyond websites to mobile apps, wristwatch experiences, so, IoT connected devices. So we need to now design information architectures where we decide, okay, di ba, if you go to a grocery or a hardware store, where do you look for the screws? Where do you look for the hooks? Is it in the household section or is it in the adhesives section? So how do you design… how do you define or decide on that is a matter of information architecture. So that's another part of user experience. And there are many, many techniques to make sure that the information architecture you design matches your user's expectations. One of those techniques is called card sorting, which is an activity where you give users a number of topics and then, or topics and categories, and they decide what topics belong together or belong to a certain category.

00:18:06 Niaw: So it's a very wide and also very deep field with many, many different facets. So, yeah. So there's no single technical skill that you need to succeed,

but there are many areas of specialization, but many people in the user experience field start with either…start as either a UA designer, so meaning they use Figma or a similar tool to design the actual screens, or they start out as a UX researcher where they interview users or conduct or facilitate usability tests where they say facilitate scenarios and then observe how the users use the product and write up yung mga reports or observations, para ma-improve ng mga UI designers, and then later on that's where they branch out or delve deeper into these other areas of UX. But most people start out as either designers, UI designers, or UX researchers. But nowadays there's a more specialized role, entry level role called the UX Writer, where you write the text that forms the user experience.

00:19:02 Chen: Wow. You've actually answered my next question, which is, what can you do in UX and the career paths that they can take. So this is really an eye opener for me as well. So being an experienced UX professional, what challenges did you encounter in your journey? So can you share with us your outlook on UX?

00:19:21 Niaw: I guess from my story, the challenge was how do I get from my experiences doing UX as part of my other roles to an actual UX practitioner? So that was one of the challenges. And another is really just stay motivated and passionate. And one of the ways I've found to do that is really to just keep reading, finding new information that excites me about the field. Even having experienced, you know, having a lot of experience in UX, I still find a lot of new insights that surprise me and get me excited about the field, but it has to be a proactive effort to keep refreshing yourself and upgrading your skills. And once you get us to a certain level of competence, it's, this challenge is juggling work and with so many different projects and **finding your niche,** staying relevant and updated, finding your place, how are you going to set yourself apart from so many different UX practitioners nowadays, now that UX is becoming a more popular field within the IT industry.

00:20:44 Chen: Yeah. And I think really the hunger to learn more is there, right. I'm amazed that you discovered that book that you mentioned earlier, because if I look into it, it's not really something that I would think that,

hey, it's related to designing, right? But usability is really part of the user experience. So I'm curious to know, based on what you've encountered, or see in the local user experience space, are more women taking on UX roles compared to the previous years before?

00:21:17 Niaw: I think from the start, compared to other areas in tech or IT, there have been more representation of women in the UX space. I think it's because, and from the articles I've read, it's because UX has a more diverse background from what we talked about earlier na coming from different fields then. There was a study from Google and IGA, this is in the US, 53% of the design workforce are women. So, and 40% of UX jobs are women. So there's more representation in UX. And in the Philippines, there was this study from UXPH, UX Philippines,where they found out from the survey that a little over 50% identified as women from the survey. It's really good to see that there's more representation of women, more parity in the UX space.

00:22:20 Chen: Yeah, that's really good to know or good to hear, right? That of course, this is a field where women can really take part of, because I know for a fact that it might be intimidating at first. To close off our discussion for today, Niaw, what is your advice or tips for women who want to start a career in UX or other fields in technology?

00:23:49 Niaw: For me, just read more, attend conferences, you know, it was from the UXPH community that I found like-minded individuals and found… actually, I was able to refine my specialization, test ideas. And from the talks that I gave from that community is where I developed the idea for my first book that I published. So yeah, and then share your knowledge, write articles, publish, try to publish. Yeah, if you can, because that's what helped me a lot, sharing my knowledge and becoming more of an author that helped me build my credibility by sharing my knowledge. So just practice and explore your craft. That's, and with all of these AI tools coming out, it becomes less of a matter of producing designs, rather more of thinking, strategizing, thinking about how do I meet the user's needs and what's the research that backs

my decisions? So what's really important for a UX practitioner or designer is to really **become a thinker**. Think about what creates good experiences, what would help achieve the business goals and the user's goals at the same time. And what kind of experiments and tests and user research can I do to back up my claims and back up my designs. And then that's what would allow you to set yourself apart and become valuable as a professional na in the age of generative, everything.

00:24:43 Chen: I really learned about the user experience in today's session. Thank you so much for your time, Niaw. I'm sure our listeners are inspired by your journey and know more about the UX and tech space. Thanks, Niaw.

00:24:56 Niaw: Thank you then, Chen. Thanks for having me.

00:25:06 Chen: Thank you for listening to Pinays Talk Tech Podcast brought to you by Accenture. Don't forget to hit subscribe on all major podcast platforms.