

## I'm a UI engineer at Citadel who's worked at Netflix and Google. Here are 7 important lessons that have been critical to my rise at Ken Griffin's \$57 billion hedge fund.

By Bianca Chan

- **Kristofer Baxter leads a team of about 20 UI engineers at Citadel, a \$57 billion hedge fund.**
- **His team designs tools used by Citadel employees to help them get the most out of the fund's tech.**
- **This is his story charting his career path and important lessons learned, as told to Bianca Chan**

**T**his as-told-to essay is based on a conversation with Kristofer Baxter, a 39-year-old engineer leading a UI team at Citadel, a \$57 billion hedge fund founded by billionaire Ken Griffin and headquartered in Miami. It has been edited for length and clarity.

I've been working professionally for quite some time in the tech field. Now I work at Citadel, leading user interface (UI) on the Citadel X team. I've worked at a lot of different places, but this has been my first job in the finance industry.

UI engineering is a really broad and vast thing. But software is very similar at many different places. So moving between industries has been a relatively easy transition. Having said that, it does pay off significantly to understand the users of your software.

I started my career at a golf tee-time reservation company, then worked in roles at Netflix, LinkedIn, and Google. Along the way, I've climbed the ranks using these seven



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Kristofer Baxter, head of UI for Citadel X, at Citadel.

lessons that have helped me succeed in the fast-paced world of Citadel:

### **Don't let perfect be the enemy of good**

I started working professionally at a company that did tee-time and hotel reservations right after college.

There, I really learned how to move quickly and balance concerns of perfect code quality with output volume. It's really easy to be lured by this idea that code needs to be perfect. But it's really important to be quick.

Speed is critical for many businesses, so don't let perfect be the enemy of good. Sometimes, in order to move quickly, you write code that you want to refactor later. But it's im-

portant to get the lessons out there sooner rather than later.

## **But speed for the sake of speed can create other problems**

The fast-paced culture is one of the things that I was really excited about coming to the finance industry. Things can change and priorities can shift and you end up building things that have tremendous value by iterating quickly.

The thing that really attracted me to this role at Citadel was being able to move quickly with a small team. The size of the company and the number of users that you're interfacing with allow you to get that really close, personal attention. That loop being so tight is something that really attracted me.

Speed is very important, but you want to make sure that you're communicating with users directly to find out the trade-off between things. Speed for the sake of speed can create other problems.

## **UI can be separate components, but view it as a collective whole**

After the reservations company, I went to work for a white-label search company that helped yellow- and white-page companies transition to the internet age. This was really the first time I operated with any kind of scale to my software, where lots of people were interacting with the software at once.

The biggest lesson I learned there is that creating a consistent experience is better than creating a great experience only in one place. Sometimes you see the user experience as a set of operations, as these discreet individual things. But when a person's using a product, they think of it as a collective, whole thing. If you have one part of your product experience that is subpar compared to the rest, that's what people remember.

It's important to make sure that you continue to elevate everything together as much as you can, or that you identify the areas that need more attention at some point soon and bring them back up with everything else.

## **Users act differently than you might expect**

After that, I went to work for a DVD company called Netflix. I worked on a bunch of interesting projects like the cloud migration, the migration to a streaming business, the international launch, and original content. Throughout those projects, I fondly remember writing lots of A/B tests to figure out what users prefer.

It's really easy as an engineer, designer, or UX specialist to build things that you think are intuitive and natural. But what you find when you go to the real world is that things

don't work the way that you expect them to. Users act differently than you would understand them too.

At Citadel, we definitely use this lesson quite a bit. We work really closely with front-office partners and investment professionals so we know what to build. Even more critically, it helps us understand where we're not building what we need to. That highlights opportunity for improvement.

## **Make sure there's a 'there' there**

This is something I learned from a partner that I worked with at Netflix who I really respected. When you're expecting to do a lot of work on something, it can be very expensive to build out a full product based on that idea. But if you can prove out there's merit behind the idea, do that first. Make sure there's a 'there' there before you jump in and build out a full product that represents it.

It can be really hard to do. But meeting with your real users and presenting fictional scenarios or understanding their workflows allows you to eliminate a whole class of work. You can take something that's rough and not complete to an investment professional, and they can say, 'Actually, I can't use this because of X, Y, and Z reasons.' So you want to make sure you're getting that input early and often and make sure there's a 'there' to continue to go for.

## **Metrics are key to understanding users**

After Netflix, I went to work for LinkedIn where I worked on mostly web-performance related efforts. It is a really difficult topic to get right because it depends on what you're trying to accomplish. The intent of the software and the user using that software helps to inform what performance metrics are important for them. So if your business is based on people being able to view your content or being able to experience your software, you need to make sure that that's true for all of your users.

At LinkedIn I learned a lot about how to accurately read metrics and record metrics, and it reinforced my focus on the valuable fronts of a business.

That's true also at Citadel. We want to understand when things are not working well, so we can adjust again to make that more consistent experience.

## **Failure can lead to your best work**

After working at LinkedIn, I went to work at Google where, again, I worked in web performance for quite a few efforts. From the Google search perspective, I think the scale and audience size of Google is really inspiring but also daunting. The really important thing there is that you can't be afraid of scale, or even failure. It can drive you to create your best work.