

Albert Chou:

This is IT Visionaries, your number one source for actionable insights and exclusive interviews with CIOs, CTOs, and CISOs, and many more. I'm your host, Albert Chou, a former CIO, former sales VP, and now podcast host. Welcome everyone to another episode of IT Visionaries. And today, we have a special guest. His name is Chris Byers. He is the CEO of a company called Formstack. If you go visit Formstack at formstack.com, they say they automate work and innovate faster. Chris, welcome to the show.

Chris Byers:

Thanks. Great to be here and looking forward to the conversation.

Albert Chou:

Hey listen, I love that proposition that your company has. I'm excited to meet you. But I also got to be totally transparent. And I don't really know what that means. Automate work, innovate faster. Give us, and for anyone who's listening who's not as familiar with Formstack, can you tell us what does the company do and give us an idea of what your customers experience when they install Formstack?

Chris Byers:

Let's start with just the basic question. Would you like to automate more in your life? Especially in your work life, would you like to save time with what you're doing? I see some positive affirmation there.

Albert Chou:

Oh yeah.

Chris Byers:

But that's what we think about every day. And so the way that we do that is through data collection. So think about building an online web form document generations. So think about generating templated documents that you use over and over again and then taking that all the way to e-signature. So if you pair all those things up, all of a sudden, you've got a platform that allows people to build really interesting and complex workflows, but all without any technical knowledge at all.

And so the way that plays out often is, think about, maybe in a sales environment where a client fills out some sort of lead form or whatever, they want to get a quote, and so that it's automatically generated, maybe based on some information they give you. Then you want to take that to a contract and maybe it's just salesperson says, "Yep, this is great. Let's go for it." And then that goes to e-signature. And so all of a sudden, you've got a transaction that historically has been really complicated, a lot of back and forth emails. And it's just dead simple and happens in moments.

So that's what we love to try to do and try to do that for, again, the non-technical users so they can build these really powerful workflows.

Albert Chou:

So I am going to predate Formstack a little bit. Well, I guess Formstack's been around for a little bit, but I had experiences like this, and I used to always joke with people that are starting up software companies and they want to invest in certain things like you mentioned before, CRM, sales, automation. I always say it's not necessary in the beginning. Let it become a problem before you automate it. Because I was a

part of a startup where at first, like you said, producing proposals, producing quotes wasn't really a big deal. They didn't occupy much of my day. But it became a big deal and it got really annoying really fast.

And we would hire people to integrate. And I remember, the key word I just said is, we hired outside help to help integrate and automate some things for us. And this is back in 2014, 2015. But we could immediately tell, just because we were producing quotes faster, because we were being able to be responsive for our customers faster, our sales cycles, our sales windows started to drop. And our general, I would say, dissatisfaction in our sales force started to drop as well. Because I used to complain. Most of my day is doing paperwork. This is annoying.

Chris Byers:

Absolutely.

Albert Chou:

And I'm sure that's a story you hear over and over again. But the big key here is you or your team's developing more ways to make this so that you don't need an outside vendor. We literally hired an outside vendor because we made an assessment that it was not worth our engineer's time to do this when they could keep building the product. Give us an idea of what has changed to make what I experienced five, six years ago, completely different to what your customers are experiencing now?

Chris Byers:

And I think this was probably true for you even five, six, seven years ago, which is, if I came to you and said, "Hey, can you just scratch this out on a piece of paper how is this process supposed to work better?" You'd have no problem with that. Where your challenge might be is maybe you didn't have the coding skills or language or background or you didn't have the platforms to get that done. And so you said, "Well, I know where to go get that. I can find an outside resource and I can describe this to them and they'll take care of it."

What we've really tried to invest in is making every tool that we build easy, drag and drop style experiences where you can take that thing that you scratched out on a piece of paper and just start to build it and start to see it visualized quickly. And then the other thing we've invested in, I love that you mentioned integration. We've invested in what is more than 200 native integrations because we believe, sure, you can use tools like Power Automate or Zapier, but we want to make sure that we can provide that with our own platform, because everything you do on our platform needs to touch those other systems that you have, those CRMs, those marketing automation systems or if you're in maybe a vertical and EMR or something like that.

And so we've tried to just make that user experience so easy that hopefully you never have to even talk to us. You can get in, start to just use it, and in 10 or 15 minutes, you're like, "Okay. At least, I have a sense of how this works. I'm ready to commit to." I think we can get this done in a bigger way.

Albert Chou:

Well, I know that we grew and we added a new product skew. And so adding into the CRM was easy, but then getting it to show up on our proposals, the pitches and quotes became a little bit harder. I remember, we called up our service provider and they said, "You got to fill out a change order." Which is, we're like-

Chris Byers:

Yep.

Albert Chou:

... that's not fun, but okay. Still it was worth it. We did it. When I think of how quickly enterprise software specifically, I would say enterprise software or B2B software is changing so fast is the user-friendly elements that keeps improving to the point where, like you said, a non-technical person could integrate it or could build it or could possibly connect it to another application that needs data from another application to fill out whatever form you're doing.

How much, I guess, testing or how much development, research, effort, how would you say your resource is tilted between the backend engineering and the front end experience to make it that simple? Because it's got to work, but it also, your value prop is, it's got to be simple.

Chris Byers:

There's a lot of ways to engineer products. We've, over time, experimented with a lot of them. But for a long time, we would say we were a user experience driven product development company. So user experience was usually the first to the table. They were talking to customers and then they'd go sketch out whatever the look needed to be or the tool set or whatever, put it in front of customers, get them to test it. And then that's actually really where we brought engineering in.

That's a little bit more even today, but we still invest heavily in user experience. And in fact, human design interaction. We have someone on our team who leads the team and she is a professor and human design interaction. And it's all about just making sure that as we're building our tools, as we're building our products, customers can quickly get in and get the fastest result.

Because as we all know, we're all fatigued by trying something out, it doesn't work, we try again, maybe we go to support. And somewhere in there, we just give up and we say this is not going to work anymore. And you're like, "I'll just write the check for somebody to do it for me." We want people to feel that win themselves. Like, "Man, I'm powerful. I got this done on my own."

Albert Chou:

How do you and your team, how do you guys think of a successful integration or a successful customer using the Formstack product? Is it based upon how many integrations they build? Is it based upon how many, I don't know, lack of calls you get? I don't know. I don't know. What does success look like to your team?

Chris Byers:

At its core, one of the things we're always thinking about is how do we get people to what we term as interactions. And so an interaction might be, I got someone to fill out a form or to generate a document or to take something to e-signature or dropped something into an integration. And so as those are building, as those are growing with customers, that's where we see really good success. So a great example is large hospital system in the southeast. They started with us with some simple marketing, lead capture forms. And they had a lot of websites to manage and so they had a lot of those forms.

Well, one day, they had a security breach on their core platform and they said, "You know what? We need to do something more secure." And so they moved 400 forms over to Formstack over just a handful of days and have continued to grow since then. So if you actually look in their usage patterns, they've got 50 different use cases that live across our platform, and that's patient registration, clinical operations, billing. And so those are where we see really amazing successes is, is somebody internally,

often the IT department says, "Oh, I want to invest in this because I don't have to do the work anymore. I can actually go to the marketing team and say, 'Hey, why don't you use Formstack? You can probably solve some of these problems on your own.' And then I can get back to managing these behemoth systems that live behind the scenes," which is probably really what their core job is.

Albert Chou:

And I'm assuming the answer is yes, but I just wanted to clarify. I'm assuming you're securely writing the data back to the destination database, or is it still the old school way where you get an e-sig, and the person has to lift the data out of the form into whatever they're using?

Chris Byers:

That's a great point. That the beauty of our product. We can produce that end PDF document that you need for the record. But you can pull all that data right back out of it to use in the next workflow or to enrich your customer data or just to keep in your CRM record. And so it does create this simple way to pull everything together.

Albert Chou:

You see, this is where people that are cloud native, I always joke, I always say this because I've observed this quite frequently, is when you talk to someone who's cloud native, they, a lot of times, have skipped over or they're not familiar with what is actually happening at most enterprises. And to that point where you just said, which is, at a medical facility... It's funny you mentioned that because the thing I was thinking about was one of my friends who did an RPA project for an eye doctor. It's like a franchise. It's called MyEyeDr. or something like that.

It's got all these locations. And how the franchisees report the data back up the accounting systems. And the old way, they told us, was through forms. They off-shored it where people were literally keying the data into the database after that. And I was like, "That's got to be full of errors. There has to be. It cannot be accurate." And they're explaining how ledgers had to close. RPA came that solved that. But now you're saying, "Why even use RPA? Just drop the data straight to the database."

Chris Byers:

Yeah, that's exactly right. To your point, there's no errors, it's immediate. And I love the medical example always because every one of us still walks into doctor's offices and still fill out paperwork. And so I always have this thing that's like, we've got work to do until we can walk in and get our car registration and see the doctor and these just legacy processes that just continue to be paper based. Until those are gone, there's just so much work and opportunity ahead.

Albert Chou:

So Formstack is one of those companies, it's been building over time. And for audience who's not familiar, give us an idea, what's the history of the company and where did you get involved?

Chris Byers:

The company was launched in 2006, and it was actually launched by a friend of mine. His name is Ade Olonoh. We had actually met in college, started at a software company together, totally different software company. We did that for a handful of years. And eventually, we were like, "We're never going to make any money." We were paying the insurance more than we were making. And so we said, "All

right, let's move on." And then a couple years later, he started Formstack. He's an engineer. But he was like, "You know what? Hand coding forms is the worst thing I do all day and it's in everything. And so I want to make this easier for myself and then for my customers."

Eventually in 2010, he had started yet at another company. And so I said, "Hey, I'll come in." I'd been an early investor, early user of the product. And I said, "I'll come in and help you find a CEO to run it for the long term." And then it's been 12 years and I'm still here. So been a great journey where, early days, we raised less than a million dollars in angel dollars, really built the business all the way to 12 million in ARR before we took our first institutional investor. And then that happened in 2018. And since then, have accelerated growth, not only organic growth, but then doing acquisitions at the same time.

Albert Chou:

It's an interesting run because... We mention this in every show, but before we have any guests on, of course we get pitched different ideas. We always review the company and say, "Okay, what's this about? What's interesting hooks? What are some interesting stories we can tell?" And one of the things that we saw or observed and we think we're observing is just this rise, this very much so rise of automating the office work. You're in that group. I would put you in that group. And the funding rounds demonstrate that. We saw a billion dollar plus valuation just not too long ago, even though the company's been around.

So you see other competitors that get type form job. But there's not just that. There's all these other document based companies are trying to figure out ways to make document handling better, easier, simpler, faster. Something tells me something that's fundamentally shifted more recently. What do you think the major shift is? Has the UI technology finally caught up to integrate into all these systems? Is it that, over time, you've integrated enough systems? Is it because APIs have gotten polished enough? Is it all the things? Give us an idea where this acceleration is coming from.

Chris Byers:

Well, I think a couple things have happened. One is, you see this rise of endless new products and applications.

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Chris Byers:

And we all go adopt this one product for this tiny sliver of work that we do every day. We'll find these little things. But then they stack up over time and nothing integrates well enough. And so this creates this opportunity for us to live in the middle, connecting systems, bringing them together. I'd say the other thing that's been really cool in the past handful of years is companies are finding that they need to employ people who really sit around all day and simply ask the question, "How can I help other people in this company save time and save money?" And so they'll go, maybe audit a process, and they'll say, "Hey, let me bring Formstack in or another product and let's solve this process."

And great example, I talked to a customer not that long ago who, her entire job is doing just that. And she went in actually to a nurse and listened to the process that she at a bedside would do and quickly automated it with Formstack and saved 40 hours a month for that nurse. And so just one person. And so that type of really genius level person that's sitting in an organization who can help bring people along

and say, "Hey, I can help you." I think that investment has made our success better, but lots of companies just like us more successful.

Albert Chou:

So that story is very similar in many stories that I've read where the best ideas, a lot of times, they come from the people that are closest to the work. So if they have the tools to do something about it, you might be pleasantly surprised at how much innovation actually is inside your organization. I think famous examples are, the Big Mac wasn't Ray Kroc's idea, it came from a franchisee. They developed that recipe. Right? It wasn't Jeff Bezos who figured out, "Hey, you don't need to actually stack products in alpha or locator order." He was just like, "Put them wherever."

And to your point, someone who's practicing on the floor is the one that's most likely to observe, "Hey, this is a better way to complete this task." You get an interesting seat because you get to oversee all these different companies doing different things. Is that really who's coming up with innovations? It's a two-way innovation street where it's like, "Hey, maybe central office or center of excellence is coming up with ways to automate and make things better, and also the field is doing the same thing." Do you get insight into that?

Chris Byers:

Yeah. I mean, I actually think we see more and more that frontline individual contributor is actually usually the first point of contact with Formstack. So they'll come in, start to build something, and then they'll share it with somebody in the next department or in their department, and then it tends to balloon over time. And so eventually, IT comes in and it's like, "Oh, this is a great tool." But we think about, we've got 25,000 customers, they have 35 million employees. And so there are so many people out there who are solving these or feeling the pain of these really important problems in anything from retailers, to travel companies, to law firms.

And they can solve these complex problems, and they can do it for their department. They get this big win as a department, and don't have to go to IT always. It's great to bring IT in often, but it doesn't always have to happen. And so yeah, we're seeing more and more of that, just innovative personality who always lives in a department. You always have them. You know that person to go to when you're like, "Oh, I've got this problem. I know they can help me solve it."

Albert Chou:

I think we got a couple of those people on our team right now in our company. We know we're a podcast production company. You wouldn't think that that much technology was necessary, at least I wouldn't think so. But it's amazing how many SaaS tools we use and how disconnected they are and how information... I always used to joke that, no matter what your data looks like, ask three people, three customers how they should get it, they all have three different answers. The administrative work is starting to eat into our day. We see it. What you're describing right now is our producers are coming up with new innovative ways. They're the ones shopping the tools to figure out how can we automate this faster.

Is that something when you guys talk to, let's say CIOs, CTOs, when your team is talking to new customers, prospective customers, is that the new CIO mindset which is, "I need to acquire tooling that my people, the team can leverage and build up." Because of course, the old school way as I dictate down, is that a big concern of CIOs and CTOs? They want to see the product like, "Hey, how could

someone else use it?" They're not worried about how they're going to use it. They're like, "Hey, how would someone else use this?"

Chris Byers:

Couple things that we think about. First, we did a report earlier this year which we called the state of workflow automation. And so we did research with hundreds of companies, actually I think it was a couple thousand in the end, who said a couple things like, 96% of org organizations actually said we are not optimized, we know from a workflow perspective there's so much more opportunity. And yet 60% of businesses said we are investing in the move to digital, moving more processes that way, et cetera. And so that's absolutely a representation of the CIO and the IT team, et cetera, saying security is vital.

So they want the controls which are super important to make sure are there. But if they have those controls over security and they can feel good there, they want to give those tools over to people. And they'll often ask these user experience related questions. I can remember a higher ed institution, almost their entire interview process for our product was about user experience, because they knew people loved, and it was just easier to use products when the user experience was dead simple. And so that's where they spent a lot of time trying to understand how the product work.

Albert Chou:

That's interesting. So it's bled into the buying cycle.

Chris Byers:

Absolutely. Because we all know this. And funny enough, there's even a morale factor to it. If you use legacy software, you have to go to work every day knowing you're going to use that legacy software that's hard to use, that's clunky. These days, because people are digital forward, they know that they can get jobs that have cool new software that works well.

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Chris Byers:

And so it does become a really important part of the buying process.

Albert Chou:

I got a funny story to tell about that. For those of you... Chris, you said you work a lot with medical systems, one of the major EMR players. I'm going to dog them right now. When my wife was pregnant, we had filled out these forms for early intake so that when the baby came, we didn't have to do all that check-in process. They would have it on file, on everything, and we could walk right in, she can deliver the baby. And this was going to be the third one.

We get there. They didn't have the paper. They didn't have the record. She's literally in labor screaming and they're asking her, "What's your social?" I was like, "This can't be the way." So this was 2015. And you could see the frustration on the nurse. I could see it. The nurse wanted to help but she's like, "I'm required to fill in all this info before I can take care of you."

Chris Byers:

Absolutely. And unfortunately, even seven years later, it's not gotten as much better as you'd have hoped.

Albert Chou:

Yeah.

Chris Byers:

COVID did actually spike some of those uses because they were just forced to. But we would love to see that improve over a lot more time or shorter period of time.

Albert Chou:

Yeah. Are you seeing, I guess, for yourself, for your industry, are you seeing more sales cycles happening? Is this starting to accelerate even more? How are you seeing the adoption happening? Because I think if we all sit back... Because I think when we all think to our own jobs, maybe a lot of us are in technical jobs where maybe we don't work with paper as much. But then if you're in medical cases, I'm saying if you've done any legal work, anyone out there? Government for sure. A lot of our lives are on paper still.

They're in PDFs. It's annoying. But I just got a form from my bank, it's a PDF. I have to fill it out, save it, send it back to them. I don't know how they're going to get all the info off, but okay. They want it via email.

Chris Byers:

Yeah.

Albert Chou:

Okay buddy. But give us an idea, are these industries starting to call you more, like finance, government, medical? Are you getting more and more calls all the time? Give us an idea of how these industries are adopting this.

Chris Byers:

Yeah, what's interesting is, really it was last week, I was looking at, we'll see hundreds of people sign up for maybe a trial of our product or to learn more every single day. And across just a day of signups are multiple hospital systems, multiple universities, digital companies like consulting companies, hotels. Because of course, think about even the paper processes. If you think about checking out of your room and the cleaning crew coming to show up, that is often a very, very manual process.

And so there are so many opportunities in so many industries that need more and more of what we do. And in fact, like you described, I still am just shocked every single, I call it even week, where I get something who's like, "Type your credit card on this PDF and then email it back to me." It's like, "Oh my gosh. So insecure." Also, you're going to have to go type this somewhere else, and then you're going to keep it and use it again in the future. It's just like, there's still just so much paper, PDF, email work. And so we see the opportunity as still this 130 billion opportunity to convert people to really powerful digital experiences.

Albert Chou:

For anyone who's listening... And you might say to yourself, "No, we already have mobile checkout." Chris, I have the process that it's still definitely paper for sure at one of the major hotel chains because I just witnessed it last week. When the cleaning crew was going through, I could see that they actually have this manifest, this paper manifest that tells them who's in what rooms, as well as if they're a diamond member or whatever the case may be. And do I leave a chocolate or not? Do they get water or not? Do they have laundry? Literally this.

So I asked the person, because I'm curious and I'm always curious about things like this. I asked, "Well, okay. So you've done it. How you report back that it's done." And so she was describing that she has to fill out her paperwork, and I guess there's a terminal at the workstation, and she gets back to the workstation, she'll key these things in. And I was like, "Oh my gosh." And I was like, "So what happens if you miss scratch one?" You know how it is. You're counting down a column, you accidentally skip one, and you fill the other one in. Then all of your records from that point down are incorrect.

Chris Byers:

And think about that process as a consumer of a hotel. The most critical part of your experience is when do I get to check in? Do I get to check in early? And it's always a question of, is your room clean? And so if there's a delay in getting that information, you're just delaying that positive experience for that many more people. In addition to that, you're causing employees to just spend endless amounts of time on manual and tedious work.

Albert Chou:

Can't they just register your key card. Like you went in, and you left. By the time you scan into another room, can't they just mark that one clean? And the person just looked at me just like... I mean, I was thinking about these things. But to your point, there's so many systems that we just haven't integrated or haven't built ways to bring information from system A to system B. So we see companies in your area or arena doing these kinds of things. For yourself, what has it been like for you personally overseeing growth like this?

Because you have an interesting background. We looked it up. You have a background in financial services. We saw that you were part of a software company back in the day. But you've seen this grow so much, right? You've been CEO for 12 years. Most of the growth has been towards the... If we were to split your time as CEO into quarters, most of it's in the last quarter. You know what I mean? It's been in the last quarter of your career. Give us an idea for yourself. What's it been like for you overseeing a team? Like you mentioned, you were doing 12 million of revenue, or your valuation is into the billions.

Chris Byers:

The day, I started with seven people. And today, well over 300 people. And the thing that I experience over and over again is, every time you hit these stages of growth, I would say the last one was... About the time we hit 250 people, you have to recraft the company. Sure some values stay the same, you're still ultimately selling the same product. But all of a sudden, you need team members to think very, very differently. You used to be able to survive on these team members who could do everything and they could jump on any problem, they love to just be in the grind. All of a sudden, you need team members who have seen some scale and they know how to build systems that can keep growing and they know how to build team members and build teams.

And so I'd say that it's been a fascinating journey. And of course, we've gone through acquisitions. And so that was a very new thing for us to go from completely organically building the company to buying a

company and trying to find ways to integrate the team and then integrate the product so that users could have a great experience. And so it's been a fascinating journey along the way.

Albert Chou:

For yourself, what do you think is going to happen if you were to... Because one of the things that CEOs get tasked with is to have that foresight. Right? What do you see for yourself or for your company in the next five years?

Chris Byers:

Right now, I'm thinking a whole lot about how can we pay attention to just the markets. Like the economy is in, we'll call it questionable territory.

Albert Chou:

Sure.

Chris Byers:

And so for us, we know that the great thing about our product is, since we save people time, we should be able to interact and intersect with people who are still needing to solve time saving problems and still needing to solve money saving problems. And so we're trying to build some really powerful insights so that we know what industries most need our product, what buyers, what types of use cases are most important. And then over time, we're really just trying to build a culture that is a great winning culture that's super diverse and can represent our customer base, which is diverse, global and represent so much around the world. And so we're trying to just build the systems, build the team, build the people to make that super successful.

Albert Chou:

One of the things you talked about a couple times and we heard on some of your podcast is this idea of diverse thought and process. Because your team is literally solving problems that, I don't want to say it's unknown, but each company's going to do things their own way, or they're going to have unique team members or staff or requirements. Everything's going to be unique. And your team's job is to help them use your technology to slot their process in a way that automates it.

What kind of skills have you seen for yourself that work great for this? Because I'm pretty sure there's not a playbook. You can't give someone a playbook, "Oh, if A, then do B. If C, then do D." I don't think there's a playbook for your team. I think they have to hear a problem and be like, "Okay, Formstack is going to be the tool that connects pieces, but I got to understand what pieces to connect." What kind of skill does that require?

Chris Byers:

One of our cultural values is something we call get to work on solving problems. And so we culturally hire people who, if faced with a problem, they don't go spend endless hours researching. They don't go ask for a bunch of permission. They just say, "Hey, I think I'm going to go tackle this and see if I can figure it out." And the great part about that is it does translate into what you just described, which is customers come along and they describe thing. The first layer of description of their problem, you're usually, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Albert Chou:

You know the thing in the place, I want to change that.

Chris Byers:

Absolutely. And they're using industry specific language. And so you have to be a problem solver to not only connect how should our products tie together to solve that problem, but even to understand and help them map out the solution. And so culturally, we've tried to build these cultural values that we hire for. So we've got an actual group of people during the hiring process that all they really care about is culture. So your skills, of course we want to make sure good, and background et cetera, but if you don't fit that culture, it's going to be hard to survive and succeed here.

And so I think, for all companies, really... And I actually think, even if companies have overarching values, I think teams have an opportunity to build their own value system that don't conflict with that overarching values, but they're just a little bit more specific. Our engineers, for instance, are always thinking about how do we solve problems efficiently and with the least amount of code? And that looks different than how does HR solve problems? And so I think, where we've been able to build and invest in culture, it's been a great win.

Albert Chou:

So when you think about the type of backgrounds and personalities, you mentioned that problem solving culture, you mentioned this idea like, hey, you see problems as things that you want to tackle versus ask for permission or get guidelines to do. Has that changed over the years? Did you develop that more recently? And if so, how have you seen, I guess, the marketplace fulfill that problem set? Because one of the things that we continuously hear about tech workers and other software leaders they talk about is the skills gap.

And so this skill gap of problem solving, it's not quite a technical skill, it's not a soft skill, it's certainly a hard to assess skill, right? It's a hard to assess skill. Do you see more and more people fitting the mold of what you're looking for? Is it still you think is a bit of a skills gap in your dimension?

Chris Byers:

Yeah, that's a great question. Because even just being at it 12 years, all of a sudden, 10, 12 years ago, our youngest team member might have been even 18 or 19 or 20 or whatever. And now, we've skipped to a new generation of people. And so it's interesting to bring new generations in and see they have certain skills that, say, my generation doesn't have, and then they don't have some skills that we've got to teach. And so, one of the things we've tried to do is embrace a much more diverse culture. And so we're thinking across age, we're thinking across background, origin of birth, et cetera.

And one of the things I've seen that's been amazing is, you pair up somebody who is in their 50s or whatever with somebody who's in their 20s, and the person in their 20s is still like, they're willing to knock down walls in ways that someone who's a little bit more seasoned is like, "Ah, I don't need to do that anymore." But they bring the patience. They're like, "Hey, let's keep working at this problem. Let's look at it a little bit differently." And so it's almost the same values, but really helping bringing a more diverse perspective to those values just fills them out in a more powerful way. And so I think, those people working together, even if there are skill gaps coming in, it becomes relatively easy to teach them and get people on board quickly.

Albert Chou:

So if I was listening to this podcast, and let's say I've just chosen my major, I'm in school or maybe I'm not in school, I guess it doesn't really matter, give us an idea, what would you advise a young person or a person that's looking to go into a new field or career? What would you advise them? Like skills wise, what should they work on?

Chris Byers:

I still go back to, if you can... This may sound way oversimplified, but if you can learn to master Excel or Google Sheets or something like that, I mean really one of those two products, that one skillset, I still believe... There's a lot of others you need to learn, you need to understand-

Albert Chou:

Yeah. I'm a big believer too.

Chris Byers:

You can build these endless examples of what you're trying to build, or literally it's the solution because you're modeling out something for someone. But take that even a little bit further, and maybe it's Excel, but go use an Airtable, use a Formstack, use a tool that's a little bit of a blank slate and start to solve, just try to solve some problems. Because if you can bring that into your work, you just add so much more value to your team, because you're going to be the one that people go to and say, "Our sales process, our marketing process is not working right. What do we do?" And then you're like, "Hey, well let me go pull this product out. Let me model something for you or literally build the solution."

And all those products have free trials too. So you can get in and learn. And often they have certifications that they want you to take that are free. You can just stack up this education and learning that you can walk into your next job with and be able to share, "Hey, I'm ready to go."

Albert Chou:

Chris, I got to say, I love that you said that because this is something that we identified. So first off, our company I was a part of, we were social media enterprise, social media marketing system. We had the same problem you have, which is like you can't go ask for that skill because social media advertising is, this isn't really been around. So what kind of skills would you need? And we identified independently, for everyone listening, I didn't know Chris at the time. We found out the same thing, which is people that were good at Excel ended up being able to be better at their job than others. We started requesting it.

There's another personality trait we found was really good too, which was teachers. And I still live by that today. Former teachers make great team members because they have some level of patience. And this sounds bad, but it's actually quite good for you, the employer, which is, they tend to have been maybe not as respected as much, so they have a little bit of a chip on their shoulder. So you find a teacher who's exceptional in Excel, you're going to have yourself a great team member. I'm telling you.

Chris Byers:

Actually, I love the teacher example. The one other thing they do exceptionally is they know how to explain things. And in a business, you run across a lot of people who struggle to explain the thing that's in their head. And so I love that example.

Albert Chou:

There you go. Well Chris, man, it was a lot of fun having you today on IT Visionaries. Thanks for sharing us the story of Formstack. It's one of those companies, like I said, it's very interesting because it has a longer history, which most cloud companies just don't. They just don't, right? And then you can tell doing just a little bit of homework that most of your growth has exploded in the last four years. And so it's really cool having you on the show, like you said, you sat through. For those that didn't catch it, he was overseeing a company of seven employees to now a company valued into the billions, going global, trying to build forms everywhere.

And Chris, man, I hope you succeed because, let me tell you something, if I have to fill out another pdf... Because I've been doing this for banks and hospitals and because I got kids, every pediatrician's office, same thing. I'm still filling out forms. Someone's got to automate this, Chris. It's got to be you. You got to get it done.

Chris Byers:

That sounds good. Albert, awesome to talk.

Albert Chou:

I want to say, before you go, it is time for the lightning round. The lightning round's brought to us by Salesforce platform, the number one cloud platform for digital transformation of every experience. Chris, this is where we ask you questions outside of the world of work so our audience can get to know you a little bit better. You ready?

Chris Byers:

I'm ready.

Albert Chou:

All right. A lot of CEOs, not going to lie, they may not use their product anymore. Do you use Formstack?

Chris Byers:

Oh yes. And I'm still irritated when I meet team members who have not gotten in and built a form and built a document and connected them together. So I love using the product.

Albert Chou:

Listen, if you're out there listening and you're trying to interview at Formstack, go ahead, learn the product first before you talk to Chris. Don't let him see we're not knowing out what to do. For yourself, what do you like to do for fun outside of work?

Chris Byers:

I've picked up kayaking recently. So I get out on the water and just row. It's quiet, it's peaceful, and that's been a lot of fun.

Albert Chou:

So are you a flat water kayaker, open ocean kayaker, or are you a white water kayaker, or do you do it all?

Chris Byers:

I theoretically should be doing it all. So far, all I've gotten is the flat water. So we'll advance eventually to the rapids and things like that.

Albert Chou:

When you're not kayaking, what do you like to do to innovate, think, pontificate. When you're starting to get in your deep thought of how you're going to strategize for the future, what are you doing? Are you a walker, or do you cook? What do you do where you're thinking just starts going forward?

Chris Byers:

I do love walking. But one of the most effective things I do is I take my phone, I leave it at home, I go get in the car, and I'll go to a coffee shop and know that I've got maybe two, three, four hours where nothing is going to distract me. And all of a sudden, just not having your phone for a handful of hours, just things start popping in your mind that didn't exist beforehand. And so that's been a newer habit, but been super helpful and innovating.

Albert Chou:

Oh, that's so simple. Yet, it's something I think a lot of people are not willing to do. We go to these great lengths like, "Oh, we got to learn how to meditate." You're like, "Hey man, just put the phone away. Just put the distraction tool away and see what happens."

Chris Byers:

Absolutely. And the first time, you're like, "I'm going to go be gone from my phone for four hours." You have to think about like, "Oh, well, do I really know where I'm going? And do I have my insurance card not on my phone?" And all kinds of really stupid stuff.

Albert Chou:

If you could turn back the clock and give yourself some advice. You've sat in the seat for 12 years, you've seen the company grow tremendously. If you go back in time and give younger self advice, what would you tell yourself?

Chris Byers:

Well, I think of myself as extremely practical. So if you can't prove it to me on an Excel spreadsheet, I struggle to get my mind around it. What I've tried to learn more recently is how to be a little bit impractical, a little bit irrational, and just say, "How do we set goals that are, yeah, maybe they're completely unachievable, but they really set us out there with a much more powerful trajectory?" And so I'm really trying to set aside reality more often to try to embrace what the possibilities are.

Albert Chou:

Oh, that is awesome. Yeah. I think most people are dreamers. I'm actually a bit like you. I don't want to say I'm negative, but I tend to find-

Chris Byers:

Realistic.

Albert Chou:

Yeah. I tend to find what's not possible versus what is possible. But I would say the same thing. That's something I've been working on for myself. What have you done to work on that optimism, that belief system? What are you doing to improve that?

Chris Byers:

Probably the most powerful thing is just surrounding myself with people who are willing to think that way with me. Because I mean, if you're practical, for instance, you tend to surround yourself with practical people because that's how you like to hear things. And so if you can put some people around you who are willing to think bigger, all of a sudden, you feel like, "Oh yeah, that's possible. Let's do it. We can do this." And so I think just that simple orientation of finding people who can help you move in the direction you want to move in is amazing.

Albert Chou:

Well, that is certainly good advice. You'll become a little bit of what your peer circle is like. Chris, I want to say thanks again for joining us today on IT Visionaries. For those listening that are interested, we got to do a big shout out to our sponsor. Our sponsor, as everyone knows, is Salesforce platform. Formstack fits in very nicely with Salesforce. If you're a customer of Salesforce, give Formstack a look. I'm sure it'll help automate some of your work faster.

I know it will because there's so much information in Salesforce used for so many different things, there's got to be something you're doing right now that requires paper or some type of manual copy and paste transfer. That's the thing of the past. Let's not do that anymore. Chris, thank you again for joining us today on IT Visionaries.

Chris Byers:

Awesome, Albert. Great to talk. Look forward to it in the future.