

Keep your project tracking up to date with Neo by Sagittal AI

As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Michael Smith, CEO of Sagittal AI about automating software development with Neo, the need to complete tasks quickly and getting hooked on constant learning.

Temps de lecture : minute

19 November 2024

Neo automates software development by gathering required context, completing work directly in your tools, and following team processes and standards. By seamlessly integrating into your team's workflow, Neo accelerates productivity 2-3x without disruptive transformation or reorganisation.

What was the catalyst for launching the product?

Applying AI to software development is undoubtedly a crowded field. However, my cofounder and I are generally underwhelmed with existing offerings. Most approaches to integrating AI fall into two categories: "help me code faster" or "bigger language models will bring artificial general intelligence." Neither of these claims holds true.

Throughout our extensive careers in engineering and product leadership, Jose and I never fretted about an engineer's typing speed. The real challenge businesses face is getting teams to complete tasks completely and quickly.

That's why we're rolling up our sleeves and tackling the messy work of tightly integrating an LLM into enterprise-grade processes.

Tell me about the product - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers, USP and so on?

Neo completes entire development tasks: from tickets to pull requests, transforming product requirements into tickets, creating unit tests, reviewing code, and fixing CI/CD errors.

When AI is truly integrated into a team, it can automate a significant amount of day-to-day work. This includes fixing bugs, implementing well-documented features, writing unit tests, reviewing code, and streamlining various aspects of product and project management—all at a much faster pace.

Our customers routinely see weeks of work compressed into days—and this happens *within the first week* of implementation. A 50% increase in team speed is easily achievable, and many quickly reach a 2x acceleration. Internally, we've hit a 3x speedup, and we're confident we can propel almost every team to this level. This kind of boost could revolutionise numerous industries, far surpassing any other solution available. And all of this is accomplished simply by integrating with your existing tools and processes.

Any business that writes software will benefit from Neo. Those companies who follow best practices such as good documentation and unit testing will see that AI can help them the most. So we can greatly accelerate disciplined, large enterprises.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

We have validated our product-market fit and now we're working on modifying user behaviours in our customers to use Neo to its full potential.

We have three great engineers in a cohesive team, and do not need more - Neo as their teammate makes us feel like a much bigger team.

What is your favourite thing about being a founder?

The constant learning is addictive, as is the opportunity to meet so many smart and ambitious people. Entrepreneurship demands that you go broad and learn fast - I am thankful for the resources and helpful people willing to help. I have to hold this celebration close when I am frustrated by my ignorance or being so time poor.

Which founders or businesses do you see as being the most inspirational? Which other figures in your life inspire you?

Irwin Jacobs and the entire upper management team of early Qualcomm created a culture that was both engineering-forward and commercially savvy. Their astonishingly good technology strategy and excellent middle management shaped my expectations in ways I couldn't find at other companies—even giants like Google, Amazon, and Yahoo. I aspire to be anywhere near as brilliant as Qualcomm's leadership, both in product strategy and culture. The Acquired podcast episode brilliantly lays out their genius. What's more, I've met few CEOs as genuinely nice as Irwin.

I was fortunate to have *Richard Rumelt*—arguably the most brilliant writer on business strategy—as my professor at UCLA. I poured my heart and soul into earning an A in his class, yet I've never exerted so much effort to grasp course material.

Both Irwin and Richard are not only brilliant, deep thinkers but also humble and kind. I'll never forget Irwin's graciousness when I presented my work to him, nor the lovely dinner Richard and his wife hosted for our class. Moreover, both men challenged me to push beyond my limits.

Given this background, it's no surprise that I gravitate towards human-centric management, as championed by thought leaders like Brené Brown and Adam Grant. I firmly believe you can—and should—strive to be the best human possible while excelling in leadership.

Lastly, I owe a debt of gratitude to my father, who instilled in me the art of critical thinking—particularly from an engineering perspective—from my earliest years.

What has been your biggest business fail?

During our fundraising efforts, we initially tried to cater to every VC's preferences. This approach inadvertently prolonged our fundraising timeline. We'd adjust our pitch deck in response to each rejection, addressing specific objections. However, we learned that VCs—especially at the pre-seed stage—either grasp your vision or they don't. They're adept at seeing past imperfect pitches to the core value proposition and the founders' potential, if they believe in it.

In hindsight, we made the fundraising process more challenging and time-consuming than necessary. When we finally connected with VCs who truly understood our offering, it was a revelation—like the skies had cleared after a storm.

What are the things you're really good at as a leader?

I enjoy aligning product, business and tech, especially when it comes to seeing where things are headed or "skating to where the puck will be". I've paid my dues in a multitude of environments and sectors, helping me to think laterally.

I try to empower and grow those who work for me, which makes for a hiring and retention power; I think this is why my cofounder was excited to work with me again. I credit some truly excellent managers in my past for teaching me this.

Finally, I think I'm great at customer empathy. I dig in and try to understand their problem, and try not to anchor too much on either my own ideas nor their desire for a "faster horse".

Which areas do you need to improve on?

My strength in lateral thinking and cross functional analysis can make it extremely challenging to craft and communicate a simple, linear and clear vision or strategy. This had bitten me as a product leader - even if my logic was sound I sometimes found it hard to bring others along. Luckily my cofounder is fantastic at clarity, and we both trust the others' strengths; our clashes are always useful to both of us.

I have a new appreciation how challenging the sales process can be. There's a combination of grit, process and experimentation that appear to be similar to - but is qualitatively extremely different - from product discovery.

What's in store for the future of the business?

We're bringing on new customers at a fast pace. But companies are not yet always ready to adopt AI; GTM can be challenging. So we're going to sort that out and help companies and people to build software better and faster than ever. Then we're going to work to change software processes - bring proper "engineering" to "software engineering"; some companies and people are doing this right already, but it's far too few.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

Hold your vision tight despite the naysayers. It's worth betting hard on yourself - even if you're wrong you'll learn more and grow faster than trying to adjust to the world. Make the world adjust to you.

And finally, a more personal question! We like to ask everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional?

I knew being a founder would be challenging. So I promised myself proper sleep and proper exercise. 7-8 hours/day and exercise in the form of gym or running at least 3 times/week.

Next up I'm going to incorporate singing into my weekly habits. There's nothing like music, especially proper, hard-core classical singing, to force you to listen to your body and instincts!

Michael Smith is the CEO of *Sagittal AI*.

Article écrit par Michael Smith