



Execs In The Know



BRAND SPOTLIGHT

Airbnb

Creating a World Where Anyone Can Belong Anywhere

An interview with Jerry Hong, Product Lead, AI/ML and Data Platform at Airbnb, and Andy Yasutake, Global Director of Platform at Airbnb.

Jerry and Andy are a dynamic pair, powering many of the CX innovations taking place at Airbnb. Execs In The Know recently had a chance to catch up with the two who were kind enough to tag-team a series of questions aimed at providing insight into the Airbnb story, especially as it pertains to the company's mission and its unique philosophy on the customer experience.

Execs In The Know (EITK): Please share a little bit about your background, how you came to be at Airbnb, and describe the day-to-day focus of your current role.

Jerry Hong: It all started with a tennis match. A longtime friend of mine and I were battling it out, and during one of the changeovers, we started chatting about life – work, travel, future plans, etc. He told me about his amazing experience in his five-plus years at Airbnb. Naturally, the topic came up on whether I would be interested in exploring new opportunities.

At that time, I was still enjoying my role at Electronic Arts as the Director of Product Management, leading the Data & Artificial Intelligence (AI) organization. Little did I know that one seemingly normal tennis session would



turn out to be a life-changing game, set, match. One conversation led to another and now, coming up on my one-year anniversary with the company, I couldn't be happier to have gotten the opportunity to join the Airbnb family.

In my current role at Airbnb, I'm the Product Leader for the Intelligent Support Platform Products team, which builds the core foundation to power and democratize intelligent automation and data within Airbnb, unlocking our ability to provide a world-class customer experience at scale to our Community of guests and Hosts. The team has delivered amazing



ANDY YASUTAKE

Global Director of Platform



JERRY HONG

Product Lead, AI/ML and Data Platform



[intelligent automation advancements](#)¹ in 2021, and I'm incredibly excited to continue this journey with the rest of the team for many years to come.

EITK: How would you describe Airbnb's culture, values, and overall mission when it comes to serving both guests and Hosts?

Andy Yasutake: Airbnb is a truly unique company to be a part of – an absolute unicorn. This word, unicorn, helps sum up a company that is rare and mythical, which Airbnb definitely is. From its very beginning, Airbnb has been a purpose- and mission-driven company. Airbnb's three co-founders, Brian, Joe, and Nate, have helped guide the company to do work that serves multiple stakeholders, building a Community where people live, work, and focus on our employees as key differentiators. This is very different compared to many other companies that focus on shareholders and financially motivated drivers alone.

The Airbnb mission is to, *"Create a world where anyone can Belong anywhere."* Belonging is such a personal thing, specific to everyone's own situation and life experiences. If Airbnb can help facilitate just one small feeling of Belonging for an individual staying in a

stranger's home in a different city or foreign land, this is when the magic of our platform shines through.

The culture we foster at Airbnb, our Core Values that drive *how* we work and the focus on our Community of guests and Hosts first, is what differentiates us – not as a brand that is well recognized globally in 221+ countries now – but instead, as a place where everyone can literally Belong anywhere. There is magic when this happens – for our employees, our Community, and for all of Airbnb. I'm excited to be a part of the present and the future.

EITK: What does a typical customer success engagement look like at Airbnb? On which channels are you and your team serving guests and Hosts? Is the approach different between guests and Hosts?

Jerry: Airbnb's goal is to provide support wherever and whenever our Community needs us. To realize this vision, we offer our Community the option to contact one of our highly trained "Support Ambassadors," as well as provide access to our intelligent, self-service channels, including Airbnb Help Center, Airbnb Chatbot, and others. Whatever channel or combination of channels our Community of guests and Hosts decide to utilize, we aim to resolve their issues as efficiently as possible, helping them get back to their journey.

At Airbnb, we recognize that one size does not fit all. For instance, a new guest who just joined our Community will most likely run into very different issues compared to those of our Superhosts. To address the various needs of our Community, and to provide efficient support across all of our channels, context is key. Understanding this, we have made





investments to unlock personalization at scale.

This past January, our world-class team of engineers shared a [blog post](#)² on how Airbnb's Intelligent Automation Platform creates the foundation that enables Machine Learning (ML)-based issue detection, accelerating how Airbnb provides amazing customer experience at scale. The blog post mentioned in my earlier response also references our initial use of this Automation Platform to power a holistic self-serve experience for both the guests and Hosts, assisting in pre-trip, mutually agreed-upon cancellation scenarios via automated workflows. Check out both articles to learn more!

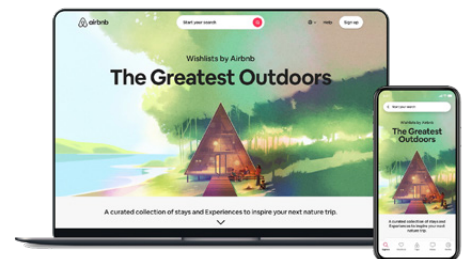
EITK: Self-service and autonomous solutions have never been more important in helping consumers get what they need, easily and conveniently. Regarding this space, what are some of the technologies where Airbnb is most heavily invested, and what's coming next?

Jerry: At Airbnb, we employ (and continue to invest in) various cutting-edge AI/ML technologies to power intelligent resolutions for both guest and Host issues, while also more accurately understand user intents through the use of conversational AI. We are very fortunate

to have a world-class ML team that constantly trains, iterates, and deploys various AI/ML models (e.g., intent classifications, automated speech recognition, sequence-to-sequence learning, large-scale unsupervised training, task-oriented dialog systems, generative language models, etc.), enabling us to apply and leverage these exciting technologies as a part of our toolkit.

I'm constantly amazed by our teams, by how they are able to innovate new approaches that leverage ML technology to address key business challenges.

Another recent blog published just last month shares Airbnb's approach for tackling a very common problem: the inability to run a truly randomized controlled experiment, whether due to operational/business constraints or the challenges of obtaining a large enough sample size. The solution? [Use ML-based casual inference](#)³! Our team has developed an "ACE" up our sleeve.



Airbnb has already anticipated the importance of using intelligent automation and AI to unlock and power personalized support in the future. Huge investments have been put in place to help transform how Airbnb provides a world-class customer experience at scale. But honestly, we've only just begun scratching the surface on what's possible. It's an incredibly exciting time to be on the team, and I can't wait to share more in the future. That said, I'll leave one general area that is always top of mind for me. This is something that I constantly challenge my team to overcome every day ... having amazing technology is great, but how do we best harness that power and democratize it so that it is accessible and easy to use across all of Airbnb? How do we empower all of our teams to create magical and exceptional experiences for our Community of guests and Hosts, especially in times when they need us the most? Stay tuned!

EITK: How is Airbnb using Voice of the Customer and other program data to improve the customer experience? From where does this data originate, and how is it being managed and actioned?

Andy: At Airbnb, we believe that our engaged Community of global guests and Hosts are the core reason we have been successful as a company. Our platform is fully built on trust, something required in a multi-sided marketplace. Our Airbnb global marketplace platform helps connect guests with unique listings of Hosts, and with experiences where guests can have an opportunity to "live like a local."

Understanding these principles, the only way we can improve our overall experience (and the services we provide to our Community) is by truly and continuously listening to the Voice of the Community (VoC). We do this, but we also make data-driven Community experience improvements over time, leveraging the trust we build as our Community uses our platform time and again.

The rich VoC data we have comes from many captured signals which we inspect and

analyze, turning these Community insights into actions each and every day. We have invested in dedicated teams that are passionate in providing VoC insights and transforming them into actionable improvements to address frustration that may stem from existing Airbnb policies, product, or operational challenges. We take these Community insights seriously, and we give our leadership high visibility into what we've learned and our plan of action. Airbnb takes a shared accountability approach across the whole company, collectively making progress in improving the overall experience. Many of these pain points are a direct view into unintentional friction points that the Community could experience, so getting this right is key.

How we collectively filter the signal from the noise to improve Airbnb's product and service experiences requires robust feedback mechanisms that consist of ML-based sentiment analysis tools, in-context surveys, speech-to-text voice analytics, and old-fashioned case categorization of CS interaction issues that take place every day on our platform.

With the combination of focus, investment, prioritization, and rigor, we believe that we will only continue to improve the overall experience for our Community. Furthermore, we believe improving the experience is key to the long-term success of our global Airbnb platform.

EITK: Many companies have ascribed to the idea that happy employees make for happy customers. What is Airbnb's philosophy in this regard, and what are some of the ways those beliefs are being put into action?

Andy: It is well known that strong levels of employee engagement within a company are statistically correlated to employee happiness and/or job satisfaction. This is typically captured with annual employee surveys, which is one method we leverage at Airbnb. The global pandemic has shown us that many of the things that employees appreciate most have changed. Here are a few of the things we do to continue our world-class approach to employee engagement during this challenging time:

1. Transparency - Prior to the global pandemic, Airbnb's culture of internal transparency was already world-class. Our CEO, Brian Chesky, would host live weekly or bi-weekly CEO Q&A Chats in person, answering the top five questions voted on by employees prior to the session. The open topics could range from the latest company strategy to employee-level topics – always answered as directly and transparently as possible, both by Brian and the executive team. When the start of the pandemic occurred, this transparency went to a whole new level, with specific steps that were being taken on a week-to-week basis as the company saw 80% of its global business drop within six weeks of the global pandemic starting. Brian and the executive team decided to do weekly Zoom CEO Q&A sessions for the whole company, keeping everyone in the loop with every key decision that impacted the company, internally or externally. When there were tough decisions made at the time to impact the global workforce, there was focus on the individuals being impacted and how Airbnb could help individuals land on their feet, which became a connecting force for all employees. How and why decisions were being made, and why it mattered to employees, is what brought engagement to a whole new level. There was a high level of consistency in this transparency, even as the business turned around. This helped every employee feel like they were connected and that they "Belonged" as the company navigated those trying times. Even today, we continue to have incredibly transparent CEO Q&A chats, and this forum continues to drive clarity, connection, and alignment across the Airbnb organization.

2. Living our Core Values every day - At Airbnb, our Core Values are a foundation for our global culture. These Core Values are not something easily understood during

"New Hire Check-In" – a week-long (virtual for now), onboarding process across all roles and job levels, where each new Airbnb employee learns about everything they need to know to work successfully at Airbnb. Instead, these Core Values became a fundamental part of how we work together. Whether we're working in the San Francisco, Singapore, or Dublin, no matter where we go, there is a foundational set of principles that we live and work by. These drive a connection wherever we live and work.

Be a Host - The Hosts on our platform create unique listings and bring the local places to life. To have a "Be a Host" mindset means employees engage with each other in a constructive and helpful way, like someone who is hosting a guest at their own place.

Champion the Mission - Each Airbnb employee strives to champion our mission to create a world where anyone can belong anywhere. To do this, we are asked to row the boat together to achieve this mission, a mission bigger than our individual selves.

Embrace the Adventure - This Core Value has been used heavily the last few years. At times, it seemed every week was a new, unexpected adventure that we had to assess, react to, and change direction to support our Community's needs. This Core Value has allowed individuals to adapt to the change that has constantly been thrown our way, and has helped us make a continued difference to our Community.

Be a Cereal Entrepreneur - The wordplay on cereal goes back to the Founders story of making cereal boxes to raise money to keep Airbnb afloat in the early days. This Core Value allows individuals to think outside of the box and innovate, without constraint, to create solutions that work in support of our Community.

It's an exciting time for our employees at Airbnb. How we live our Core Values helps us move forward together in this ever-changing world.

EITK: When you look out into the second half of 2022, which Airbnb initiatives are you most excited about? What's going to move the CX needle the most for Airbnb guests and Hosts?

Andy: It's an exciting time to be at Airbnb. Exciting is a word that has had different meanings over the last few years, and "exciting" hasn't always meant simple and straightforward plans. We've had to adapt constantly to our global Community's needs, and this means continuously adjusting our plans accordingly. If we project out to the second half of 2022, the exciting initiatives that we are working on align to the unique needs of our guests and Hosts. As we've learned from one of Jerry's previous responses, one size does not fit all. The needs of a guest or Host will vary based on who they are, what part of the journey they are on, and what their specific needs and expectations are.

The general theme we're working toward in the second half of 2022 is to prepare for our Summer Peak travel season, when we see the largest volume of travelers staying in Airbnbs. This is especially true in the northern hemisphere. But with this preparation, we're looking to create end-to-end solutions that focus on understanding the context of the user, who they are, and what their situations are so we can provide contextual, timely, and relevant support to our guest and Hosts, wherever and whenever they need support from us. I will also add, watch closely for some announcements coming out soon from



our CEO. There are exciting things ahead, and we're actively working on capabilities for our Community that we are very excited about. And you will be, too, when you stay in your next Airbnb! 🌟

Links:

- 1 <https://medium.com/airbnb-engineering/task-oriented-conversational-ai-in-airbnb-customer-support-5ebf49169eaa>
- 2 <https://medium.com/airbnb-engineering/intelligent-automation-platform-empowering-conversational-ai-and-beyond-at-airbnb-869c44833ff2>
- 3 <https://medium.com/airbnb-engineering/artificial-counterfactual-estimation-ace-machine-learning-based-causal-inference-at-airbnb-ee32ee4d0512>



Execs In The Know

Execs In The Know partners with brands that are providing outstanding customer service (CX) experiences. The Brand Spotlight Series showcases innovations and solutions to CX challenges faced by today's leading brands.

Thank you to Jerry Hong, Andy Yasutake, and the entire team at Airbnb for contributing to the Execs In The Know Brand Spotlight.

Interested in taking part in a future Brand Spotlight feature and sharing your story?

Contact us at info@execsintheknow.com.