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KPCB Product Fellows Challenge: Noom

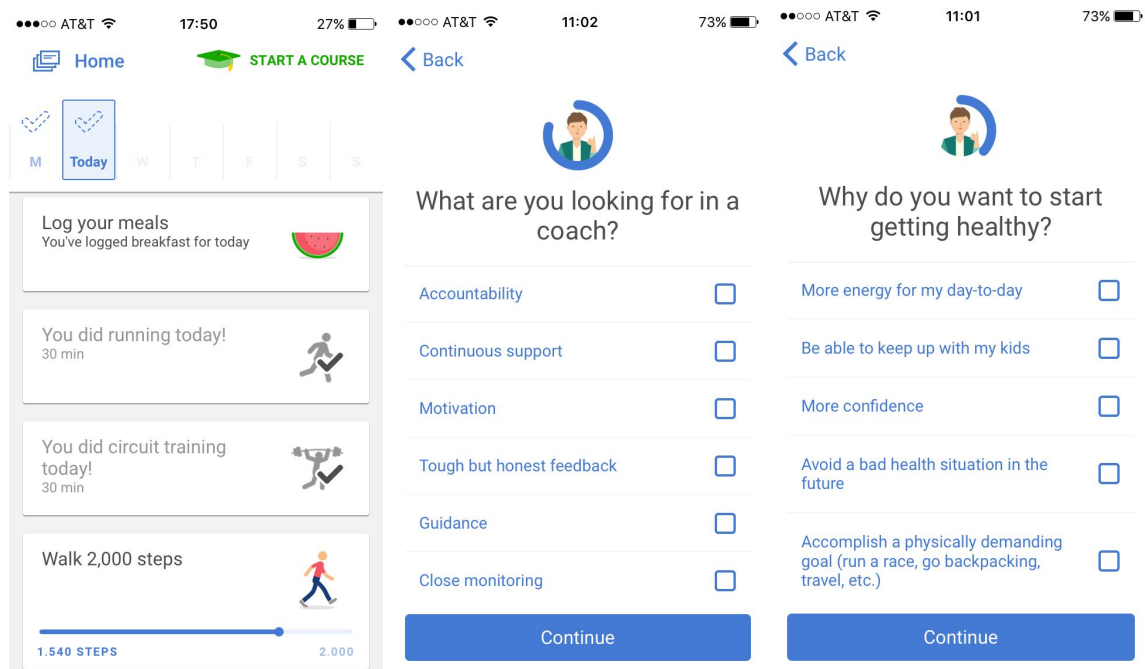
Recently, as a consumer and a product builder, I have become fascinated with how technology can be better built for human interaction. It is easy to become enamored with “AI of the future” seen in movies like *Her* and *Star Trek*, where humans are able to seamlessly interact with technology just as they would a human, but with much greater processing power. Siri, Cortana, Amazon Echo, and Google Home are leading communication technologies in the space, but all function as a directive machine: the user inputs some spoken action into the device and it then performs that action. The problem is that we are limited to the set of capabilities these products can perform: set a timer, play a song, read the news, among a few others. While it is certainly true that these products will naturally improve with better natural / spoken language processing, I believe that they can profoundly enhance their current offering by focusing less on feature iteration and more on strengthening their ability to handle more nuanced human conversation patterns. This is the key strength of products like AI-equipped professional secretary [Accompany](#), messenger bots like subscription manager [Trim](#), weight-loss program [Noom](#), and AI-equipped *Her*-like OS [Fin](#). Although most of these products are not fully autonomous, functioning with a mix of auto- and human-generated responses and actions, the goal is to create an environment where the user feels like they are interacting with something that continuously learns.

Fin, for example, remembers everything. You can one day say “Hey, Weston recommended Pisticci for brunch brunch, supposedly has a cool atmosphere.” Then several weeks later ask “Hey, Jason is in town, could you book a reservation at that brunch place Weston recommended?” And it works! Fin is not launched publically yet, but I have been lucky enough to speak with the co-founders Sam Lessin (former Facebook VP of Product) and Andrew Kortina (Venmo co-founder) who describe the experience as feeling “[like a person ...like a multiplicity of people](#).” Since my interaction with the actual product is limited to using it through their hands, I’ll move on to an example I have experienced more closely, but the point is that AI that is meant to be used by humans can and needs to be built in such a way where it can remember, organize, and act on your behalf. If it lacks that memory and familiarity component, it will never feel friend-like or human (just a spoken way to query data and elicit action).

Noom is a product I have enjoyed and is, truly speaking, the last product I used that took my breath away. Enrolled in an intro to Psych course, I became enchanted by all the quirky and counterintuitive ways our body works. Specifically, [Parkinson's law](#) and how deadlines work as an unconscious forcing function (work will expand to fill the time you give it) and [decision fatigue](#) and how there is a biological price to overloading even the small decisions we make throughout the day. With this in mind I searched for a product that adapts for and addresses these psychological processes innate to human beings and came across Noom Coach (the iOS app). Noom Coach helps builds healthy living habits with simplicity in its UI, but, more impressively, tackles “the thoughts, triggers, and obstacles that are sabotaging your progress” (Noom Coach iOS app).

When you first open the app, you have a daily toolkit of items listed in a clean layout, similar to some other weight-loss and -tracking products: calorie counter, pedometer, you can input meals you have eaten and exercises you have done throughout the day, etc. The greatest difference comes from its human-like, bespoke support and how it learns to care for you throughout your use of the product.

When starting a course, you do not just choose your goal and get to it, rather Noom walks you through a series of survey questions that aim to build a starting ground for which the app can best motivate you. It asks questions to learn what your motivation to get healthy is, what obstacles are keeping you from being healthier, and what type of support you are looking for, among others.



The user is not following a static diet and workout routine, rather they are building a relationship with Noom as if it were their personal trainer. The survey explains “Noom’s approach helps you tackle the mental and emotional barriers between where you are and where you want to be” and, from having used the app, it truly accomplishes that difficult task in a way I have not experienced from other products.

The more I use and interact with Noom, the more familiar it becomes with my eating and exercising habits. It is this familiarity that has really impressed me, most products I use are entirely directive – with certain input there is an expected output. However Noom has focused its offering on accounting for the human-like impulses and nuances that make task management (in their case, working out and eating well) hard, they created a product that is reshaped to fit the end-users needs, a supportive, friend-like UX.