What to do before the project? To build the model, we need a lot of data. We need a good quality data set with enough examples. These examples must be checked to understand what’s inside and if they’re good to build our model. Getting good and clear is what takes the major time of these kind of project; 80% of time is used for the data.  
A thing that can really help is the ability of select and connect the different features, in order to have clear difference. Always know what you’re expecting from a certain action on your model.  
Understanding the data is on of the most important thing in Machine Learning. Knowing that what you’ve build works as you want is really satisfying.   
No matter if you have a PhD, a certificate on Machine Learning, etcetera. The key is the experience. Try and retry, change things and experiments.  
What if the model doesn’t do what we were expecting? Try different algorithms. You can also try to change features