

Episode 11

Elizabeth:

Julia, welcome to the Women In Product podcast. It's really lovely to have you here today.

Julia:

Thanks for having me, Elizabeth. It's really, really a pleasure, and I'm really proud to be here and hi, women in product.

Elizabeth:

So maybe you can also go back in time and tell me how you got started in product. What was your path into product management and your first role?

Julia:

So my first real job in tech was a QA engineer. So basically, I was testing software. However, during the first year of me working, I've gotten a team to manage. And I think that was because I was just asking too many questions, and I was giving a lot of improvement suggestions to my manager. And he was like, "Okay, you are so smart. Here are the team for yourself. Try to do it better than I do."

And so, then I joined a game publishing company as a director of quality. So there, I was invited to build engineering productivity team for a game publishing platform, as well as a testing team for the games we licensed and published. And at some point, we actually realized that the perception of product quality doesn't end with the low number of bugs. So I ended up owning and restructuring the customer support team, on top of managing testing and [eng 00:05:34] product teams. And we managed to significantly reduce the time that it took customer support team to solve a problem of a gamer who reached out to the company.

So I actually, you see that I touched almost entire cycle of product development, except the most exciting one, the very beginning, deciding what product actually to build. And I was lucky that that company, Innova, they were particularly great with matching people with challenges. And my manager at that time, he is by the way, currently a VP at Reddit. So he was like, "Hey, we have this game for kids. We've been developing it on the side. It's a secret project. Do you want to have a look at it? I think you'd be a fine product manager." And I was like, "I'm down for the new challenge, but what the heck is a product manager?" And so I read some blogs and websites. It sounded exciting. And I like big team, and so this is how I started being a product manager.

The product was a game for kids, for kids seven to 10 years old, in which they traveled to the planet Mars to meet with aliens who would teach them creative professions, such as fashion designer, DJ, photographer, dancer, singer. And so, I think that I was building that game for myself 20 years ago.

I think I empathized with my user so much that it actually helped me to fail tremendously the first product that I built. I thought about the user, but I have not thought about a real customer, a parent. Right.

Elizabeth:



Well, there's a couple of things that you have said already that I think are so interesting because I hear them over and over. And one of them is asking too many questions. That's usually a place where... I don't know if it's women and men, but I definitely hear this from a lot of women, where especially women who were in engineering roles, but not exclusively, that they asked so many questions that people pushed them into the product role over time.

And also, just that notion of getting... As somebody said to me recently, voluntold. Halfway volunteered, but also told, "You should go over there. You're a better fit over there." And they were like, "I'm not entirely sure what that is, but I'm interested. I'll go see what it is." So, that's something that I hear from lots of women in their path into the space. Yeah.

Julia:

I think I would say that we were lucky to have managers who noticed something in us that we hadn't noticed ourselves. And this has been type of manager I always aim to be. Because as a person, when you are working, you don't know what you don't know. And as a manager, I see you from the side, I can say where you struggling. I can tell whether you are asking too many questions, or whether you're not asking questions at all. Because I know how many questions every other person asks. But if you are in that position, you don't know, maybe you are bothering them by asking those questions. You don't know whether those questions are great or whether they're dumb. And so, I really, really celebrate managers of mine and of that person who said it to you. And I really encourage every manager to be like that.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. It's such a great point that you bring up. Managers have such a huge impact on people, and whether they're good managers or not so good managers.

Julia:

True.

Elizabeth:

When you get those people who are good, who can see where you're struggling, where you're strong, and help guide you. Because as you said, we all walk into our professional lives without knowing all of these things that we may know now. And so, having that guidance is always incredibly valuable. Yeah.

So, I usually follow up those questions with what kept you in product, because we definitely see people who step into product roles, but then step out into some other role. It may be product related, or it may be completely different. So what kept you in product?

Julia:

It would be surprising to find that the same things that kept me and other people in product are the same things that didn't keep people who didn't like them in product. So for me, it was a combination of several things. First of all, I fell in love with the level of impact that I could have on the final product. So when I work in quality, I couldn't do anything, if the user told me the product is not working the way I want it to work, the product doesn't solve my needs. So I could only help them if the product had a real bug.

But as a PM, I could make better decisions from the very beginning. Or I could actually invest in building the right expectations about the product, because sometimes it's okay that we don't solve your



problem. Maybe you should find another product. Why would I spend the time helping you, if I have my target customer? And so, it all helped me to get to the next level and to help me build the product better than if I were in the end of the product development.

Second, I would say it's the most addictive thing, to have that level of connections with customers. As a PM, I can talk to them from the very beginning. I could see their eyes, I could see their pain, I could understand their needs. And then, I could come up with a solution that they would appreciate. But here, the caveat to that, I wasn't afraid to hear that I failed because I was coming from quality. And so, I was working in a world where I only heard from people how we failed. And so, I think that helped me a little bit. Because I know that for some people, it's not very exciting to hear that your great idea is not working for me.

And lastly, I absolutely love the increased complexity of the work. To build the right product, I had to choose the target audience, determine what their needs, and separate must-haves from nice-haves. Decide how we are going to achieve the vision, contribute to product design, to engineering design, define the order of releases, then test, iterate. And again, as I said, to be comfortable with abandoning our great idea that the team has worked on for months. Brainstorming over marketing, it's so much fun. And then on top of that, actually, aligning stakeholders, meeting the team, setting up the processes. That context switching, I don't know, just gives me so much energy, and that's what I absolutely love.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. That's great. So one of the reasons that I really wanted to talk to you today is because you developed a really cool product called PM Daisy.

Julia:

Thank you.

Elizabeth:

So, can you tell me what PM Daisy is? Or tell our listeners what PM Daisy is.

Julia:

I will talk about my product with great pleasure. PM Daisy is a framework that helps you visualize the work you do on a daily basis as a product manager. So basically, it uses two dimensions, the breadths of your responsibilities and the depth of how much you involved in each of those. So it looks like a flower. Daisy is a flower. And so, you imagine a flower that has petals. And now imagine that every petal represents a work stream or an area that any PM potentially could be involved in.

For example, customer research, sales, UX design, engineering, the product management work itself, people management, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And now for each work stream, which is a petal, you could either have a petal uncolored, meaning you don't have any influence over that area, someone else is doing that work, or it can be slightly colored. Meaning you work with a standalone team that you submit your request for help, and then you work with them, if you are likely to get that request prioritized. So again, not much power.

Or the petal can get a bright color, if you have a dedicated team member or a team for this, and you actually can prioritize or reprioritize work for them. So that's already more influence, more impact and more power. But it gets to the darkest color, if it's only you who do the work by yourself. So that's



the deepest level of involvement. So basically, [inaudible 00:16:13] Daisy represents your day to day job responsibilities in a concise, visual manner. And you can see at a glance how much you are doing and how much resources you have to do what you are asked to do.

Elizabeth:

So talk a little bit about how other PMs, other women PMs, would use PM Daisy, and what they would get out of it. What is the result that they get? What's the process that they go through? And then how would they use that information?

Julia:

So the process is very simple. You come to a website, pmdaisy.com. You fill out a Google form, you submit it, and you get a picture on your email. It should happen in a couple of minutes. If you don't, then do it once again. You can actually do it multiple times for your different roles, and then you can compare those daisies for different roles.

And so, I did actually survey people who used it because I wanted to understand why people are using it, how people are finding value in this tool. And so, what I found was, first of all, it works best for mid-career professionals. Those are people who have been in the industry, they tried things here and there, they have some or maybe a high understanding of what they like and what they don't like. And it's less useful for us higher PMs. And it's less useful for people who are in executives position. I believe they have another set of challenges.

So I asked my users, what did it help them with, and what they see the best application for this. And so I offered four options. I asked them whether it's best for career happiness, career change, career growth, or transition into PM. And so, two options that one with significant distance, your career happiness and career change.

And so, the way I interpret those results are that basically, people use it in their exploration stage, when they don't feel happy in their career but haven't identified the why yet. And so, they are looking at different... They are reading articles, they're trying different frameworks, and maybe some of those frameworks click with them. Or it can help who already know they want to change, and they are in the process of defining what that change should be, and what to keep and what to get from the new role or from the new position. So I call it definition stage. Til there, basically PM Daisy can help you find the mismatch between what you want and what you currently have. But be cautious. It's not about everything. It's only about your responsibilities and the scope of your role.

Elizabeth:

So it's basically helping you to see what are the kinds of responsibilities that you have in a particular role, where somebody can then say, in that role, I'm pretty happy. I enjoy that.

Julia:

Yeah.

Elizabeth:

I enjoy that role, ergo, those kinds of responsibilities are things that I'm interested in.

Julia:



Definitely.

Elizabeth:

Or the reverse. This job had these responsibilities, and I really was unhappy in that job.

Julia:

Yeah. Yeah.

Elizabeth:

So one of the things that struck me about this tool was, it's the beginning of the year, and a lot of people are thinking about taking that step back and saying, "Am I happy in my current role? Or I want to advance, what are the best ways for me to advance?" And one of the things that you often do when you're in that mode is some amount of self assessment, or assessment of the situation that you're in.

Julia:

Yep.

Elizabeth:

And this just seemed like a really great tool to fuel that assessment, to give people some insight into what was working for them, where they might aspire to go, help them get clarity on what they were looking for. Which always seems to me is half the battle, in terms of either getting a promotion or finding your next thing, is if you are clear on what you want, then you definitely get a different response from people than if you're unclear.

Julia:

Yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth:

Yeah.

Julia:

Especially, and if you are clear on what you don't want, then it also helps you eliminate opportunity that might sound exciting, but they are not the best fit for you specifically, although they could be a great opportunity for other people. Right?

Elizabeth:

Right. Right. Exactly. So now, how many people have used PM Daisy, and can you tell us a little bit about that?

Julia:

Sure. So by this day, it was about 3500 people who generated about 4000 data. So as I said previously, some people do it as a comparison tool, so they do a daisy for several roles. I actually saw people who do it five times. And I'm like, "Wow, that's a hell of a career."



And so, I've gotten feedback from people that it's great to see how their responsibilities changed, and that it was surprising for them that sometimes the responsibility didn't grow, but actually shrank, but the happiness increased. So sometimes, going broader, it's not a path for a specific person. And so, this is also what resonated with me very well because I am a person who loves complex mission, but I know a lot of people who just are not the most efficient in that mode. And so, they just don't want to talk to marketing every single week. They want to do their data analysis, they want to talk to customers, and they want to work with engineers, and that's it. And there are a lot of products on the market who need that type of PM. So why don't you find the role that fits you and be happy? Because if you are not energized, it hurts everyone. It hurts you, it hurts your family, it hurts your company, it hurts your user. Yeah.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. It's such a great point because I think that we are all very conditioned to think of up and to the right. I should be in a higher level position than I'm at, or I should aspire over there. And maybe that actually isn't what you want. Maybe the thing for you is to find a different situation [crosstalk 00:24:08] one that you can thrive in and do really good work, have a big impact, like you said, and be happy about it. There's nothing wrong with that.

And I just think that it's helpful for people to see those differences, even things like... I have heard different people talk at different times about liking to be in certain size companies. That they like to be in early stage startups because they can have a big impact, and they really like that environment. They can take all of the adrenaline rush all the time. And other people who love being in big organizations and understanding those differences, so that you can be effective at what you're doing, being in an environment that makes them sense for you, the environment that takes the best advantage of what you have to offer.

Julia:

May I issue a warning here?

Elizabeth:

Yeah. Yeah.

Julia:

So I looked at the data in aggregate, and I actually found that it's not as straightforward as go to a smaller company, and then you have more responsibilities. Or go to a larger company, and then you have a lot of resources. Yes, there is a difference. But the difference is in 10 percentage points. And I don't think that's enough to define, to eliminate smaller companies or larger companies.

What's more important, I think it's not enough to think that if you come to a large company, you are done. No, you have to be carefully evaluating every single role. I'm coming from Google, and I'm joining Amazon's company. And I can assure you that there are such different teams, such different stages of product. And all my friends who are startuppers, there are startups that actually all the PM does, they do write product requirements when a CEO actually does customer research. There are other types of startups where CEO does fundraising, and then a PM can act as a CEO in everything else. So I would really, really encourage listeners to do their homework. And it's the sad news, it's not that easy, that large company versus a small company.



Elizabeth:

Yeah. I think you're absolutely right. And really understanding the structure and the differences of those structures and responsibilities in different organizations is really important. And having some of this information can help you in assessing a potential job that's in front of you, in terms of really thinking through, okay, so in this area, how much responsibility am I going to have there? How many... So that you really see the full range.

Julia:

Yeah. Yeah. True.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. So, I'm curious, how did you come up with PM Daisy? Tell me a little bit of the genesis of how you created this.

Julia:

It's a classic founder story. I built it for myself. I was the one who initially found myself in a role that literally any PM could dream about. Company, product, team, location, culture, salary, everything was awesome. But still, every evening when I was coming home from work, I had zero energy left to do the thing that I love to do. So something was clearly wrong.

And that actually was my first PM job after I came to the US. I'm originally from Ukraine. And so I didn't quite understand the landscape, the career progression, what define a vision or build product strategy demand. I didn't quite... Was capable in comparing roles to each other. And so, I took all that, ticked all the boxes. And so I was unhappy. But I am a PM. And so what at PM does when they see a problem, they do research.

I started talking to the people. I knew my MBA classmates who were in product management. And surprise, we found that our jobs were hugely different, although we all had the same title, product manager. And so I was like, okay. That means a game is not that easy. So I played with the information I've gotten from my classmate interviews. I tried to make sense of it. And I was focusing on what was unique about each role and where the differences were. And also, try to understand how my current role was different from the ones I have had before that I was happy with.

And so, this is how I arrived to these two dimensions, the breadth and the depth of involvement. And my insight was so simple. My role was just simply too narrow for me. And of course, as with many insights, it became obvious once you realize it. But when you are in the situation, especially when everyone tells you, "No, you have to be happy. It's a great company, it's a great product, it's a great everything. So why you are unhappy? Aren't you grateful?" And I'm like, "Yes, I am grateful, but it just not the right fit for me." And so, what actually means for me to be grateful is to leave and to free the position for a person who would be happy with it.

And so, back to PM Daisy, I built a Google form. I tried it with a couple of friends. They really liked it. Then I wrote an article on Medium. I got overwhelming responses, so I had to ask my husband to build a website for me. So he automated data creation, and now it just works by itself.

Elizabeth:



That is fantastic. What a great story. I love it. So now, for the people that are listening, is there any cost to using it, or can they just go to the website and fill it out as many times as they want and look in as many daisies as they want?

Julia:

Yeah. Yeah. It's totally free, and it will stay so in its current state. I'm not considering starting a consulting business. I want to stay in the industry as a practical product leader.

Elizabeth:

Okay. That is great. Well, I think we have talked about it quite a bit and how women should use it. Are there any other recommendations or warnings that you have for the women and the people who are listening that may go and use it? Any things that they should think about or any... the exact ways that you would recommend that they use it?

Julia:

Yeah. So I have dos and don'ts.

Elizabeth:

Okay.

Julia:

Okay. So the dos. Just do it. And literally, just take a deep look at it. Usually, as people told me, if there is an insight, it just stands out by itself. You just see that the picture is not something that you had expected, but if it doesn't, if you look at the data, and you are like, "What should I do with it?" Then I would really encourage you to spend 10 more minutes, give it a chance, and do a little bit of self coaching, asking yourself two sets of questions.

The first group of questions is to understand is this what I expected. If it's a surprise for you, is it a good surprise, is it a bad surprise? Do I do more or less than I have thought? Do I have more or less resources than I have thought?

And the second group of questions is to uncover, do I like what I see? Is my scope and my engagement is something that I want for myself at this stage of my career? Is it too much, is it too narrow? And if you still don't see any insights, well, that's an insight by itself. Looks like you are in peace with your current job responsibilities, so congrats. But if you still think that something needs to be changed, I think you just should go and look for another framework.

And so, like with any product, every product solves a particular problem. So this product is not an assessment, and it doesn't tell you what to do, and it doesn't give you advice. It's simply a visualization of your current scope. Moreover, because you are the one who put the information there, if you are biased, your Daisy would be biased too. So if something doesn't feel right, then I think it's not the Daisy's fault. I think I would encourage you to work with a coach to really uncover what's going on with your current role.

And the most important thing, there is no right or wrong shape of a Daisy. We talked a little bit about it recently with you. It's not a "design your life" type of a thing, where you should have all dimensions balanced. No, it's totally fine if you have only couple of petals colored, and it's okay if you have all of them colored. What matters if this picture match what you want it to be. And so, it's only you



who can tell if you need a change or if you are fine with where you are now, and if you need a change, then where and why.

Elizabeth:

It seems like also that it has some value also in being able to see from role to role how things might change. But that requires you to then answer the questions for different roles, so that you can see. Yeah.

Julia:

Yeah, definitely.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. Any insights that you have seen in the cumulative data from people who have used it so far?

Julia:

So the one that I've shared with you a couple of minutes ago, that you can be any type of PM at any type of a company. You can be a fully colored Daisy, either you are at a small startup or either you are at a 100,000 people company.

And so, as I said, I would really, really encourage you to understand a specific role. So please, torture your hiring manager, ask them a lot of questions, if this is something that you really need to understand for your personality. Because for some people, they just... That doesn't affect them so much. Some people are, "I want a challenge. I want this industry. I will do whatever it takes to get to this industry." That also is fair strategy.

But what else I wanted to share with you, so you know that famous essay, that PMs are CEOs of their products. And I don't think that people in their mid careers still believe it, but I hope to re-convince aspiring PMs that no, PMs are not CEOs of their product. And what the data shows me, it shows me that more than 70% of PMs are not involved in business decisions at all. And what else was interesting, that more than 50% of PMs actually do project management jobs solo. So they are leading the execution on a day to day basis. They're doing scrum meetings, they're checking timelines. And it's not an environment where you can do strategic decisions, if you do that on day to day basis.

So again, this picture is not dramatically different across company sizes. So do your homework. I would really, really love for you to get the job you want and be happy. So please, please, please, please, please do your homework and understand the specific role.

Elizabeth:

I think that data about PMs not really being the CEOs of their product is an interesting one, and one that I think might be an opportunity for people to think about a little bit more deeply, what being a CEO of your product would actually look like and what that balance is there that you might want.

So it's been wonderful talking to you and so much good information here for people who are thinking about their current roles, but to wrap up, it would be great if you could give us one piece of advice that you would give to women PMs who may be reconsidering their current roles or planning to look for a new position in the coming year. Do you have any one piece of advice you'd like to give them?

Julia:

I had prepared two. And so now I have to choose which one?

Elizabeth:

No, you could give us two. Go right ahead.

Julia:

Perfect. Thank you. It's just I'm thinking in bullet lists, and you cannot make a bullet list if you have only one. So the first one is the thing that always helped me was to monitor my energy level. I am personally, naturally very high energy person. I do extreme sports. I have side projects. So once I sense that I'm tired to do what I love to do, it usually means that my work much more energy than I wanted to take. And I have to deal with it.

The thing to remember here is that your energy wavelength is unique. Not everyone is doing extreme sports, and that's a good thing. For some, change in an energy level might mean not wanting a meal that you used to love, or becoming less patient with your family, or not being able to decide what movie to watch. Basically is look for a change, not for an absolute value. So if you see a high energy person, and you want to watch TV shows, and you don't want to go skiing with me, that's perfect. That's all right. We meet people of all types.

And so, once you find that role, your job takes more energy than it gives you back, try to understand, try to identify where it goes. Either through coaching or through self help exercises such as journaling, tracking your mood, PM Daisy might come handy too. And more often than not, I think you can fix it at your current role. You can redistribute a scope. You can change a process. You can have a tough conversation with your stakeholder or with your manager.

But sometimes, when the thing that burns your energy is fundamental, when you either cannot do what you want or you cannot do what you do not want to do, then I think it's a time to consider a change.

And the second bullet, and I'm really grateful to you, Elizabeth, for being so generous and allowing me to give two pieces of advice while you had initially asked me for one, say you decided you want to change. And now, welcome your best companion, fear. Let's all admit that the change is scary.

I have an example from my hobby, skiing. So you are standing on your ski on the top of a diamond slope, and you are about to drop, and your body's full with adrenaline, but can you say, is it fear or is it excitement? The thing is that they both have the same mechanism. It's adrenaline that is produced in your body to help you tackle a risky situation. And so, if you don't know what to do on a steep slope, if you haven't gone skiing for a while, or maybe you haven't skied at all, then probably it's a fear, and you should listen to it, and that prevents you from doing something really risky. But if you know that you have the skill, you are comfortable with steep blue slopes, you are in a good shape, you slept well, then it's likely a sign of excitement.

And so, with career change, when I talk to people, I found that it's the same. You should verify if that feeling is really a fear because you don't have skills, you don't have time, you don't have resources, you don't have support, you have some obligations to fulfill with your family, with your financial situation, then yes, definitely. It's a fear. But if you do have everything, then try to interpret that feeling as exhilaration or excitement.

Elizabeth:



Yeah. I think that you bring up a really, really great distinction about the difference between fear or exhilaration. And I go back to a personal story for me. A long time ago, I was working with a speech coach, and I was really nervous speaking publicly. And I really had it in my head that if I was good at it, I wouldn't be so nervous about it. And I had a wonderful coach who said to me, "Everyone who speaks publicly is nervous. But people who are good at it learn how to channel that nervous energy." They learn how to take all of that exuberance or excitement and project their voice and their presence out there, rather than just be afraid. Right?

Julia:

Yeah. Totally.

Elizabeth:

And sometimes, it's getting the tools so that you can do that. And sometimes, it's just doing it a few times. So it's a good distinction that you make between those two things and thinking about them. Yeah.

Julia:

So one of my favorite TED Talks is by Caroline Paul, and it's called To Raise Brave Girls, Encourage Adventure. So she talks about how in childhood, when a boy falls on the playground, parents tell him, "You are so brave for trying it." But when a girl falls, they tell her, "Be careful, it's dangerous. Don't do it anymore. You can hurt yourself." And so, girls actually learn from the very, very young age that trying is scary. It's not exciting. And so, it's not my words, it's Caroline's words, but I really, really encourage you to be that encouraging parent to yourself and tell yourself you are so brave for doing it.

Elizabeth:

I think that's a perfect note to end on and such a great story. So I hope all of our listeners are kind to themselves and give themselves the space to be brave, and to really think about their careers and create the career and product that helps them thrive. And hopefully, PM Daisy can help them know what that is.

Julia:

Plus 100. Thank you so much for having me, Elizabeth. That was a pleasure.

Elizabeth:

Thank you, Julia. It was great talking to you.