

Episode 31 - Women In Product Past and Future

Elizabeth

In 2019 when I stepped in as CEO of Women In Product I found a vibrant, engaged community that generously shared insight and knowledge, helped one another succeed and provided a place where women could share their experiences,

So I set out in this episode to share how it all started, what it means today as we think about how we can evolve in the future.

My first guest is Deb Liu, Co-Founder and Board President of Women In Product. I wanted to hear from Deb about how it all started.

Deb

We had been hosting these dinners for Women in Product, the predecessor of Women in Product, which is a bunch of senior women just wanted to get together and spent time together and we'd be hosting dinners for four years. And at one of these dinners we said wouldn't it be great if we had our own conference? And suddenly we got a small group of people together, it was about 10 people. And we started planning our own conference. And we said, we'll just see what happens. We'll open up registration, and we had 300 slots and over 3000 people applied suddenly. And we thought, well this is what product market fit looks like and we better get this conference off the ground. So then we created the community, the Facebook group, and suddenly we're off to the races.

Elizabeth

So tell me a little bit about how you started with the dinners and why.

Deb

Part of it was I had been at PayPal and eBay and it was half women in product management. When I went to Facebook, I actually wasn't even a product manager because I didn't have a computer science degree. And when I was invited into the product team, there were four product managers who were women out of 50. And later I think there were six. And we thought, okay, we need to build community and it's hard to build community with six people. So we went out there and we said, why don't we create our own community of people who work in companies maybe where they feel kind of alone and there're just a small number of people. And so every time three out of six of us would go to these dinners and we would just keep doing it. And it was just amazing. We rotated over many years and it was amazing.

Elizabeth

So I know that you are one of those people who is often in the Facebook group, which I think sort of blows people away occasionally. But tell me why you do that and what you get out of it, right? Because I know you give a lot by being there, but there's got to be something else that keeps you coming back.

Deb

Well part of it is I have a philosophy of paying it forward. So many people helped me along the way and there weren't things like the Facebook group. And so there have been times when somebody said, hey, I'm struggling with this thing. And I said, cCall me. And I picked up the phone and actually called somebody and helped them kind of figure out what they wanted to do as they were choosing their next job. And so I feel like so many people were there for me and so often I'll just go in and pop in and see what's happening. I'm on Facebook a lot, obviously. I see a lot of the messages and it's just so great to

see the community come to life. And I think more women paying it forward, I think each of us can help. If you can help 10 people who read that thread, that's something that can advance their career so they can help the next 10 people and the next 10 people.

Elizabeth

Yeah, there's really a really strong ethos in the community. But I would also say I talk to individual women all the time, whether they're at your level or just starting out or in the middle of their career, and there's such a strong drive towards helping one another. It's a really beautiful thing.

Deb

Yeah, I love that.

Elizabeth

That generosity of spirit, that interest in seeing more women rise up in the profession, but just overall

Deb

Yes, especially when I go to the community and I see somebody say, hey, this group helped me find a new job and interview and prep for it. I'm open to anybody who wants interview prep. And it's just so nice to see people really amplifying the impact. And it's like you drop a pebble in the water and it drives concentric circles of impact. And I think that's what we wanted with this community was that they help one another. We were never going to have a massive central staff, actually this was a community where we lift each other up.

Elizabeth

Yeah, absolutely. It's really at the core of what we do and I always like for people to know that it was really at the start. It isn't something that we built on afterwards, it's at the heart of what we do. So what I just want to ask you, what is your greatest hope for the state of Women in Product?

Deb

I hope someday we won't need it. If we're really great, we will work ourselves out of a job that it will be equal and half the CPO roles are taken by women and half the founder is funded are women. And I would love that day because that day we could say, you know what? We're done with this work. And until then we still have a lot of work to do.

Elizabeth

Yes. And we still have a lot of work to do, but I think we can get there to that goal. So if you could give one piece of advice to another woman in Women in Product, doesn't have to be entry level, doesn't have to be executive, could be wherever you want. What is that one piece of advice that you would give them?

Deb

Recently I wrote this, it's called The Guide for Networking For People Who Hate Networking or something like that. And I wrote that because I hate networking. But in some ways Women Product is not just a networking organization, it's a connection organization. And I said, if you call it networking, you're not going to do it. If you call it connection or building relationships or finding new friends, you

were absolutely going to do it. And so in that community, we've had a lot of people help each other find new jobs and get a raise and build groups of mentorship. And it's just so incredible. And so I would advise you to, how many new connections are you making? They've done studies that said new opportunities actually come not from your strong ties, the people you see every day, because you tend to be in the same circles. It's actually from the weak ties.

Deb

It's the people who are just far enough away that somebody called me today, they said, "Hey, I'm looking for X, can you put me in touch?" And it was somebody who's pretty far away from me. And I said, "Absolutely, I'll put you in touch with them." And it was just a small ask. And the thing is, that person only knows me very peripherally and yet I was happy to spend the two minutes it took to kind of set up that introduction. And I think sometimes we're afraid to connect and then second, we're afraid to ask. And I hope that you will all do both of those things.

Elizabeth:

There we go. Thank you. Thanks for taking the time.

Deb:

Thank you

Elizabeth

After talking with Deb about the beginnings of Women In Product, I spent time with some members of the community to find out more about what Women In Product has meant to them so as we grow and evolve we are building the things the community wants and needs.

So joining me are:

- [Ambreen Molitor](#) - National Director, Innovation at Planned Parenthood
- [Jess Sherlock](#) - Product Management Coach and Instructor and Co-Leader of our Denver Chapter
- [Mini Thangaswamy](#) - Head of Payment Products at GoFundMe and Co-Leader of one of our SF Bay Area Chapters
- [Sarah Mckee](#) - Director of Products at STC health
- [Vanessa Garber](#) - Previously Director of Product Management at Grove Collective, currently taking a sabbatical and Co-Leader of our SF Bay Area Chapter for the East Bay

Welcome everyone. I know we have a few local chapter leads here but there are lots of ways to participate with Women In Product. So let's start with describing what ways you are currently involved?

Mini

Yeah. Yeah. I lead one of the San Francisco Bay Area chapters. I've been involved with Women in Product for five years as someone who's attended the conferences, but more at the chapter lead since 2018.

The first conference that I was with Women in Product. It was such an amazing experience just being there and looking at the sea of women in product, in technology at all levels in that power, The power of sisterhood, feeling that that was just like, I still feel it when I talk about it.

Sarah

Yeah, so I'm involved in a few different ways. I've joined the local Phoenix chapter and I'll attend various events and different webinars. I also am in a peer to peer group right now, so coaching peer to peer group right now, which has been just fabulous. I also attend the conference every year. I do try to join different webinars and different events as my schedule permits as well. So anything that I find useful or beneficial, which is most things, I definitely try to join.

Ambreen

So currently I am in the Senior Programming Committee of Women In Product, which is something that I didn't even know existed until recently. And I've just been part of the Women In Product community for a while and love what you all do and was really happy to be part of another opportunity to be even more involved.

And actually, just so you know, I was part of Women In Product even before the pandemic started, and I remember going to an in-person conference. And it was interesting, because the things that we were talking about at the conference, like the lack of women's health data and the lack of representation in the C-suite, was something that we were already seeing in the data that you all were bringing up and were talking about. And it didn't feel surprising when 2020 happened and that became the mainstream headlines. I was like, "Oh, this is something we've been talking about in the community for a while." And it's interesting pushing forward to 2022 and seeing, we talked about it, mainstream learned about it a few years later, and now we're starting to see people being like, "Okay, let's try to solve the problem." And so what I love about Women In Product is I felt like, in the experience that I've had, is you all have been on the forefront of things that are already trending way before. So I think that's been really interesting for me to see in this capacity.

Elizabeth

In what ways has being a part of Women In Product impacted your career?

Sarah

I really feel like being a part of this community has helped me to continue to want to pursue product management and continue to want to be involved in this type of organization as a whole. And I really feel like it's been a big diving part for how I was able to be successful and actually end up becoming director of product at my company.

Jess

Mm-hmm. Tons. I really leaned into the community as I started my own business because I thought, I'm not ready to be a product manager day to day again, but I'm ready to help product managers thrive, and I'm ready to help organizations make better decisions as they build and develop their product organizations.

Ambreen

I think for me it is on the growth and learning side. Once I started going into... Again, my life journey is a little different from when I started. I was not married with a child. But I think that the growth there was going into those community events and conversations and being like, "Someone else also felt like this was a problem they were solving, or a problem they had at work, and this is how they solve for it, but with the conversations I had, I think what has helped me was the learning opportunity to be like, "Actually, I've heard someone else talk about it this way. Could we bring this in?" So I think that has been helpful.

Mini

I've had the opportunity to closely interact with so many product leaders, industry leaders. I was with PayPal until recently and I've hosted Women in Product events at PayPal and I've kind of helped bring in the amazing women leaders that I've seen there have helped host events with them. What I've learned through those experiences has been, I've improved my communication skills so much. I have been a moderator on panels. I have been a speaker on some panels. I have kicked off and introduced speakers, right? So it's very different kind of communication styles that's needed. And what I've realized is that of course everything's practiced. The more I've done it and the more I thoughtfully think about approaching things, it's helped me develop my communication skills. It helps me build more of an executor presence.

Vanessa

I think to emphasize something that you've talked about before, asking questions. As product people, that should be our forte, but we don't always ask questions for ourselves. And I think watching even just the Facebook group and people raising their hand and saying, "I don't know. I don't X, and I need to solve for X, and I'm sure out of these 30 plus thousand people who are here with me, someone can help me out." And that then people give, right? It's this ease of ask and give where people are willingly sharing their time, sometimes with no ask to participate. I think that's really wonderful and welcoming and safe.

So in terms of what I've seen with the community for others, I really see that reciprocal relationship as people move and evolve into whatever their next role or function is. From tiny, tiny startups to giant fang companies, we're seeing the same kinds of questions, at least I've seen the same kind of questions, about not just product management craft, but also just about the fundamentals of being a good business person for yourself and seeing that shared, those universal truths of how to ask for a raise or stand up to a manager or give really hard feedback to a team. There's a lot of really good information available.

I think something that's already started to change is resources for that middle group that I mentioned. The people managers, the new directors or the senior directors looking to get to VP or executive resources for that transition rather than the entrance into product is an area of opportunity. And I see that starting to happen more and more, especially as a lot of people are getting laid off. How do I get that next role? How do I stand out and represent as a product person who's got 5, 6, 7 jobs under their belt? I've seen a need there and I've seen the opportunities start to arise in community for those people.

Elizabeth

In the spirit of sharing, if you could give one piece of advice to another woman in PM, what would it be?

Sarah

I would've to say along the same lines that we've been talking about, don't be afraid to dream big and to go for it. It may seem that it's scary or it's unachievable or unattainable, but it's really not.

Vanessa

Hold on to that beginner's mindset. Hold on. Grip real tight because we think we know things, and we do. You bake, you learn more, you create value and you ship. But as we see with entrepreneurs and product people that have one great hit, musicians, anyone who's made something and it was wonderful, and you try to replicate that and do that again, it might not work. And so to keep asking questions and to admit when you don't know, maybe your work environment doesn't let you do that out loud, but you could at least admit it to yourself and be inquisitive and curious. I think that will allow you to go farther over the course of the different stages of your product management career. I think that's a central tenant of creating wonderful things.

Jess

Curate your community, and find a group of women that you can learn from and be inspired by. There's a saying, I don't remember where it came from, something like you're the average of the five people that you spend the most time with. And so I think back to when I was a lonely director of product, managing a group of PMs at a high-growth startup and surrounded by mostly men in leadership and didn't really have those relationships that I could lean on. And I wonder how it might have been different if those folks could have pointed out ways to do things differently or supported me as I was going through all that stress and having to make difficult decisions over all those years, how that might have changed my outcome.

But it's really important to not just take advantage of the large community resources like Women in Product conferences or Women in Product templates or articles. Those are important, but take the time to curate a group of like-minded folks who excel in areas that you want to grow in. Maybe that's product strategy strength. Maybe it's leadership. But whatever it is for you, if you curate that small group of folks and you get to know them deeply and you can be vulnerable with each other, the benefits are just magical.

Ambreen

I think the biggest advice I could give, and I totally underestimated this early in my career, is how important working on your soft skills are. Because as you grow in your product career, you transition from being the person that's accountable to empowering a team that's accountable, and then also spending so much time building buy-in with stakeholders and leadership, and that's a completely different skill set. So all of these technical skills that I personally learned in grad school and in my earlier careers in product, they're important. But I think what has been the thing that I feel like I'm spending most of my time learning and building those skill sets on are all of the soft skills.

So I think as much as it is so exciting to be the person in charge and being held accountable and building something, I think there's more emphasis that we should probably relay earlier on to people that we know are going to be growing in their careers and give them opportunities to build those soft skill sets. Because what we don't want is a team of managers that are first-time managers and they lack the experience to connect with people, or having first-time execs in seats at the table, and they're lacking the opportunity to really connect in the way that other people do in order to build buy-in or in order to

facilitate change or foster innovation, all those things. So much of that relies on being able to connect to a human at a human level. So yeah, that's the advice I would give to my younger self, is don't underestimate that, even though you're so focused on the accountability side.

Mini

This is an advice I have to remind myself about from time to time as well. It's about talk to yourself like you would talk to your best friend.

And let me repeat that. Talk to yourself the way you would talk to your best friend. And I say that because if you're my best friend comes and says, "Oh, I didn't have a good day. I didn't do well here. I think I messed up in this meeting." I don't beat them up, neither does my best friend beat me up when I've messed up. They don't say you suck. "Oh my God, you've done this too many times." But a lot of times that's the kind of self criticism, the inside voice we give ourselves.

Or when I go to my best friend and I say, "Hey, I think I saw this opportunity," or there's this role. My manager's thinking about this. My best friend's not going to be saying, "I don't think you're ready yet. Just don't do this," right? And I feel like the inner wise that many of us, especially women have that tells them to get better, that tells them to be more competent before they aim for something else. I think that's a big thing that kind of holds us back.

And so I would say think that when those thoughts come think that you're talking to your best friend, would your best friend talk to you that way and replace it? Well talk to your best friend if you can, but if you cannot, my best friend is on the other side of the world and a different time zone. But if you cannot internalize the voice and think what your best friend would say to you.

Elizabeth

What is your greatest hope for the state of Women In Product?

Sarah

I think just being able to continue to have a seat at the table. We're continuing to shatter glass ceilings all the time and I don't want us to ever lose that momentum of being able. I love how Women in Product is able to showcase women in major organizations, Fortune 500 companies all across the world. And it's so great to see that continue to be showcased that this is possible for women to have a seat at the table.

Ambreen

Oh, so much. I mean, think for me, in the career that I've been in, in the industry of media and startups and tech, I would want us to show up in a male-dominated industry. I want us to show up. I want us to be in positions where we're able to make decisions alongside other industry leaders, and when we do that we're not in a place where we're not giving other women opportunities. So I think it's a combination of showing up, being in those seats, having a seat at the table, making seats for other people at the table but also showing people how a respectable environment can be built when we have a seat at the table. That's what I hope.

Mini

I've had different roles and I've seen different organizations, Women PMs are represented differently. There are organizations where I've seen women product managers at all level of management. They're organizations where I've seen PMs, a lot of PMs at IC level, but I haven't seen PMs at more senior levels. My greatest hope is that women represent half or we're half of the population. And when product tech and products are built for half of the population, my hope is that half or more of women in every product leadership level. From principal PMs, to directors, to the C-suite level and beyond, that is my greatest hope.

Elizabeth

I'm with you on that. That is definitely one of my greatest hopes. And I would add on that one of my greatest hopes is that those women are happy in those roles, that they can thrive, that it's not a drudge for them, but that they can, in a way, joyfully make those contributions and provide leadership and be a part of it.

Mini

I love that. I love that. I love what you said. I think that's really important, especially in today's world as we come out of the pandemic and we kind of look at our whole lives that we do it in a way that people have joined their lives.

Vanessa

I hope it keeps changing. When I joined product, I was told, "Oh, you've got to know design." And now product is data, data, data, and it's going to change again and again. And I hope it continues to change and I hope it continues to... And especially with women in mind, women, we need to make sure that when we're making things for people, making them for a whole audience, not half an audience, and women can fall into that same trap of building something for just one group. It shouldn't just be for... Unless that's your audience, and it's a machine or a robot that only does that one thing, in which case please focus. But in general, we want products that are made for all types of people and then we're going to find another way to do it. There isn't one methodology. If we knew it, we'd all do very well and all of our products would be successful and we'd be done here. So my one hope is that things continue to change.

Elizabeth

Thank you so much everyone for joining.

I share your hopes and wishes for the future of women in product.

Community is the heart and soul of what we do so you are going to see more opportunities to participate, more opportunities to advance and more opportunities to be equal partners at all levels in this profession.

So in the coming weeks and months check out our new look that embodies community and our new website to discover our events, programs, resources, and many more new opportunities as we work together to build the future of women in product.