

Episode 37: Alexandra Hardiman, Chief Product Officer

Rashmi

Yeah. Thank you so much, Alex, for your time today and welcome to Women in Product. I'm sure some of the insights that you provide is going to probably help a lot of the senior women just like myself who are thinking about their next steps, so let's get started. And to begin with, how did you get started in product management, and at what point did you actually think you wanted to be a Chief Product Officer?

Alex

Well, thanks. I just want to start by saying thank you so much for having me. Women in Product has been such an important community for me and also just so many of the other product managers at The New York Times. And so, it's a real privilege to get to talk to you and kind of share thoughts about all of this.

So in terms of my story and how I got started in product, what I'll say is that in my heart of hearts, the one thing I've always known is that I am a builder and I like to make things, and things that solve real world problems and have the potential to really drive impact at scale. But just to be totally honest and humble, when I started my career 20 years ago, I had never even heard of product management. And so, I think, like a lot of product managers, over the last couple of decades I kind of found my way there serendipitously.

And my first job was actually in marketing in the beauty industry. And what I found very early on was that my happy place in kind of the life cycle of development of beauty products was out in New Jersey at the R&D lab, where we were just doing a ton of work around consumer research and prototyping and validation of consumer needs. I remember thinking, "This is the thing. I don't even know what to call it yet, but if I could do more of this and think about applying that in a bit of a different industry that I felt more personally connected to, that's the thing I want to do." I still didn't know quite how to name it.

And so, what I did next was I shifted over into the journalism industry. And I come from a family of journalists, and The New York Times was just a company that I felt such a kind of deep, deep personal connection to. It had just played a real role in my own life when I was growing up both on the West Coast and then I went to school in New York.

And my first job, because I'd come from a marketing background, was in product marketing and actually in the advertising department. And I loved it, but my job was basically to figure out how to bring new ad sponsorships to life around editorial products that the product teams and the newsroom were building. And this is going

back to 2006 when we were introducing the concept of a web blog. We're really going back to the early days of digital journalism.

Rashmi

Yep.

Alex

And again, I just remember looking at what the product team was doing and I was like, "Aha, that's what I call the work that I want to do." And so, I shifted pretty quickly from product marketing over into a junior product role working on the real estate vertical. And as I've gotten to know a lot more people kind of in senior product positions over the years, you kind of find that that's a pretty common path, going from kind of marketing or product marketing into products.

But I wish I had had the foresight to say, "It's a clear trajectory and I know what I want." But I found it just based on the elements of the work that I really found joy in. And so, when I finally moved into a product role at the New York Times, again, I didn't even know that Chief Product Officer was a role.

Rashmi

Right, right.

Alex

It wasn't a role that existed at the Times, but I was just struck working on different product challenges by how interesting and energizing and challenging each opportunity was. And it just felt like a career that I could do for a long time. So I fell into it kind of accidentally, but really, just by following the things that I was joyful and passionate about.

Rashmi

Oh, that's amazing. And in this journey, probably one of your pivots has been from marketing to really liking what a product person does and moving into product management.

Alex

Yes.

Rashmi

Were there any other detours or pivots that you took in order for you to get to a Chief Product Officer position?

Alex

Many. Yeah, and I think maybe what I can do too, just to level set it, I would say that I've been in product, the product management field, for about 15 years. And I would say that my career has had sort of three major chapters. The first chapter was being at The New York Times for about 10 years, and it was a moment of pretty dramatic transformation for the company.

I would say the two real standout things that I really helped lead and was able to be a part of was first, the shift from print to mobile. When I first joined The New York Times, it was still a very print first organization, known for the product being the newspaper. And then, in 2008, we really started to dabble with, as everyone was, kind of this idea of meeting consumers where they are, not only having a mobile website but also really thinking about reshaping journalism for apps. The 2G iPhone came out in 2008 along with the App Store, and it was this moment of incredible opportunity. And so, I spent a lot of time helping the organization pivot from being print first to really mobile first in all facets of new journalism we were creating, new product and features, and also just our monetization model, which was jointly subscriptions and advertising.

And then, the second really big pivot around The New York Times kind of transformation was really this shift to subscriptions. If you really... Now I think everyone kind of assumes that it's pretty normal to have direct-to-consumer subscriptions for high quality journalism.

Rashmi
Right.

Alex

But back in 2011 when we started testing the concept of a subscription model, there wasn't really a product market fit. A lot of people thought journalism was a commodity, no one would pay for it. And so, we spent a long time kind of focused on those two things, pivot to mobile and really help prove that quality journalism is worth paying for.

And then, after 10 years, I decided to shift out of media. I went to Facebook. And moving into big tech was a really great experience, and I can talk a little bit about more about that later on, but I wanted to get experience outside of traditional media and I wanted to work at a company that was really product-led from the founder on down. And so, that chapter, I spent time really on different problems focused on building commerce products for small businesses in India and APAC who were coming online for the first time and really transacting through social commerce. It was an extraordinary experience.

Then the 2016 election happened. As has been very well reported, there was just a ton of issues and a ton of kind of reckoning happening internally within the company and externally around misinformation and election integrity and the value of high quality news. And so, I pivoted over to lead the news team for a few years over at Facebook.

And then, after that, I remember thinking, "I've learned so much at Facebook. How do I bring that back into the third chapter of my career, which is bringing that sense of just craft and expertise and skill and ambition back to the mission of journalism?" And so, went to The Atlantic for a bit to relaunch their consumer business, and then came back to The New York Times in 2019, right before the pandemic.

And so, I would say somewhere in the intersection of tech and media is kind of my happy place when it comes to being in product. But it definitely was... I took some pretty big turns. And what I'll say is I think, in hindsight, a lot of the different pivots in my product career have shared a couple of different themes or characteristics, which again, I couldn't have named at the time. This is sort of where hindsight is 20/20.

Rashmi
Right.

Alex

But I think it's important for product leaders to really understand what they are most personally motivated by. And for me, it became clear that scale of impact was just so important. And so, a lot of the problems that I would try to go after to solve were in this space of things that hadn't really been solved before, like figuring out a market for paid journalism or trying to reestablish the idea of trusted, quality news on a big tech platform.

I think another one for me has always been around there needs to be a sense of purpose and timeliness. For me, I personally love when things are high stakes and there's a certain amount of kind of urgency. And so, for me, that is where focusing on helping The New York Times through a period like the pandemic is right in my wheelhouse, is something that I find to be appealing.

But I've also learned that if I work on problems that I don't care about as much, if I'm a little bit too distant, I don't perform as well. And I think that that, in hindsight, is what happened when I was focused in the beauty industry starting off. I was 22 years old, and the product that I was working on was this very elegant, luxury face cream for women who were 70 plus. And I remember just kind of having a hard time really connecting with the needs, which again is what I think of as one of my own gaps. But what I've learned to do is kind of use that gap as a helpful constraint on my

career and kind of figuring out what aligns with my own superpowers and strengths. And I can hopefully kind of find a little bit more of that connection.

And then, the only other thing that I'll say is, I think, been a key part of the journey for me is just really focusing on range. And by range, I mean range of experience and just the idea of really focusing on continuous learning. And I do think that having range has been one of the single most important qualities that I've seen in my own success, but also in the success of other really fantastic CPOs.

And range means multiple things. It means range of experience overseeing different product lines like consumer and B2B. It means working in a range of industries. So for me, that's been media and also tech, but there's so many other industries that really need incredible product leadership. And I also think range of company size is quite important. What I was able to learn at a place like Facebook, where the scope of the news team was pretty small compared to some of the other portfolios within Facebook, but the impact of just news at Facebook, we were reaching over 2 billion people every day.

And so, there's a certain amount of experience and skill that comes with being in that type of context compared to when I was at The Atlantic, much smaller company, much smaller scale, but I was able to oversee half the business and learn a bunch of different things by overseeing a P&L, five or six different functions. And so, I do think that type of range and that versatility, those are the types of experiences that I've personally found to be so helpful in terms of kind of figuring out how to get to CPO with it.

Rashmi

Oh, that's amazing. Thank you so much. I think there is so much of double click we can have across everything you mention.

Alex

Sure. Yeah.

Rashmi

It totally made sense with the way you described how each of the pivots led you to kind of the next chapter and how you actually embarked on them. One question before we kind of move on to the preparation to actually become a Chief Product Officer. One thing I would love to understand is, I know when you came back to New York Times the second time, you went from leading the products to actually a Chief Product Officer. Was that something that you sought to do or is it something that you were also looking outside of New York Times to do? Or how did that opportunity happen?

Alex

Yeah. It's a great question. So when I first left The Times, I left on really happy terms. I loved my role, but I remember thinking that if I did want to be the Chief Product Officer of The New York Times or a place like The New York Times, I would be so much better at my job if I had just a range of experience outside of the company, because I think many people have probably been in this position in their career where you might be at a place for a long time. I had been at The New York Times for a decade, and I had this pretty big internal question that I was grappling with, which was, "Was I really good at navigating product challenges at The New York Times, or was I actually a good product leader who could operate anywhere?"

And I really needed to answer that question for myself, because I felt like either way, if I could hopefully be in that latter camp, where I knew how to do product really well, at a high altitude, in a range of contexts, it would only mean that if I were to ever come back to The New York Times, which I'd always hoped would be a possibility, that I would just be so much better at my job and bring so much more value to The New York Times.

And so, when I left, I still kept a bunch of really open conversations and dialogues and relationships, because so many of my work friendships were with people at The Times. And we stayed in touch, and what I'll say is being away was one of the best decisions I did, because I just now, I think, have such better pattern recognition for different problems. I was also... I loved my time at Facebook and The Atlantic, just because the caliber of people I was working with. I just learned from such extraordinary people. And I remember again thinking, "To bring that back now and to come into The New York Times, I actually had more of an outside-in perspective," which I felt would be much more valuable to a company like The Times.

And I remember looking at The Times from the outside in, and thinking, "There's even more potential and more growth opportunity as I'm on the outside looking in than I think I saw when I was there originally," just because I got out of my comfort zone. I was able to be... There was a good amount of skepticism when you join a place like Facebook and they're like, "Wow, you came from journalism. What's going on there?" People just push you in really interesting ways. And I found that to be so exciting and so hard and so exhilarating. And it also, I guess, kind of reconfirmed how much belief I have in the potential and the impact and the importance of a place like The New York Times.

And so, I found it to be a very kind of helpful and healthy life cycle. And about three and a half years outside of The Times, that was when my boss, who's now the CEO, she and I just started talking about the potential of the company and the product suite and the idea of building up to this vision that we now have of being the essential subscription for any English speaker around the world who not only wants

to understand the world but wants to deeply engage with it. And we got really excited talking about that.

And it's a privilege to be able to interview with a company when you know the operating context so well, they know so much about you. I kind of joke that it sort of felt like therapy, because I would be like, "Do you still have that funny thing happening over there?" And they would say, "Do you still get triggered by that person or that thing?" You're like, "You know what? I have grown. We've all grown."

Rashmi

Right.

Alex

And so, it was just such an intentional, and for me, very happy way to return. And I feel very lucky and very privileged, but I really don't think I would be in this position if I hadn't had the chance to leave. I really do think that that external experience has made me a much better product leader.

Rashmi

That's an amazing clarity there, to step out and come back and make it a better place, so thank you for that. Let's kind of talk about the preparation to actually become a Chief Product Officer. What skills did you think you actively seek to acquire over the course of time to get to a Chief Product Officer? I know there are a couple of things that you mentioned about the outside-in look and kind of being able to operate not just in New York Times, but anywhere, per se. But are there anything else that you want to add from some of the skills that you had to acquire?

Alex

Definitely. And I think it's such a good question, because when I was looking back at the experience I gained, in particular, when I was gone from New York Times. I've had the opportunity to get new skills under my belt that I wouldn't have otherwise had the chance to do. And so, there are a couple of things that I think that are really important. The first is being able to not just be a part of creating an ambitious vision and strategy, but actually being the person who is setting the agenda and then getting a full organization behind it.

And so that, I think, is one of the single most important things that will kind of help ready you for being a Chief Product Officer. And it takes a lot of tries, it takes a lot of energy and a lot of effort. And for me, being able to do that first within the context of news at Facebook and then being able to do that in the context of the whole organization of The Atlantic, I think really was helpful in terms of setting me up to come back to The New York Times. And so, I think that's one of them.

A second thing that I think is really helpful is, as a leader, really demonstrating how product-driven growth can deliver on really large business goals and targets. So much of what I find is, and we can talk about this later, the difference between just a Head of Product and a Chief Product Officer is really understanding how the product investments and interventions are dramatically advancing the overarching business. And so, that is a place where, for me, I had a good amount of experience at The Times focusing on this through the lens of say, mobile investment and really understanding the ROI of investing in mobile and looking at its impact on audience growth, engagement growth, consumer revenue, advertising revenue.

Doing that at Facebook, it was really helpful. I was overseeing consumer products and publishing products within news. And instant articles, for instance, was just a huge business. And so, really understanding what it took to scale that business was great experience. And then, by the time I got to The Atlantic, I was overseeing the entire consumer business P&L, which was also just a really kind of great set of experiences. So I think really understanding the connection between product investments and business goals and targets is a big one.

Another one that I think is really useful is having the ability to lead functions beyond product. So when I was at Facebook, I was the Product Group Lead for News, which meant that I got to oversee product and engineering, which was just such a fantastic experience and learning curve. When I was at The Atlantic, I was overseeing the whole digital organization, so it included design, data science, marketing, customer care, and kind of other functions. And so, really making sure that you know how to support functions across the board, enabling them to do their best work, advocating for them, understanding their craft, making sure that they have incredible leadership in place to help them thrive, that's a set of experiences that I've found to be incredibly useful.

And then, I would say the last one, the more time you have to interface with company leadership, board members, investors, especially in both private and publicly held companies, those are really different contexts. And so, learning how to bring the right information in the room, influence the right outcomes, really make sure that the work that your team is doing is well understood and is driving the impact at the altitude and level that it should. I have found that that experience has also been invaluable in terms of the journey to CPO.

Rashmi

Got it. And kind of narrowing down my question, I know you touched upon this, if a person or if people are, let's say a step or two away from being a Chief Product Officer, maybe they're a VP position, what skills do you think at that point in their career, should they actually acquire or tweak in order to get to the CPO position?

Alex

Yeah. If we're going to go... I think that's a great narrowing question. I would say make sure that you have the chance to go from leading maybe one product line to multiple. I think that that expansion of scope really demonstrates how you're able to manage complexity and trade-offs. And I'll just say in the context of The New York Times, really managing a subscription business and an advertising business and a commerce and licensing business, these are things that can work harmoniously and sometimes you've got to make some calls. And so, understanding kind of how to manage that ambiguity and complexity is a part of the CPO job. And if you can do that as you expand your scope, I think that that is a really big one.

I would say something we touched on a little bit, just being really clear about the direct causal impact of what your product is doing to drive the business forward is just such an important and helpful skillset. And then, really learning how to work effectively with the leadership of your company, both the people above you, but also your peers around you. Who is your first team? And how do you make sure that you all have this same shared reality and context about what's happening, the same shared goals, a real sense of trust, the ability to disagree openly, but in a very good intent and positive way. Those are all cultural elements that the more you can build up those skills and that experience, I think, is really useful.

Rashmi

No, great examples. And so, were there any other additional resources for learning or any other training that you took possibly that helped you with being a CPO?

Alex

I wish I had a really good example for this. I think the best training is really on the ground experience. I do think that nothing beats that. And so, raising your hand, finding great opportunities where you see a gap in the business that could use incredible product thinking, go for it. Just be really proactive. I have found that to be some of the most magical and kind of unexpected experience. And then, beyond that, what you're doing was Women in Product didn't exist when I was first getting going in my career, and I wish it did. But the network, the expertise, the allyship is incredible. And so, I really do hope... The people listening to this podcast already know about Women in Product, but I do hope that others who don't, we can really help spread the word, because there's an incredible amount of guidance and support and just brilliance in this group.

And then, the other thing is just be curious and ask for help and make friends. I really do find that even beyond formal communities and networking structures, so many of the best conversations happen when you find someone who you admire and you just say, "Hey, can I exchange some notes with you? Can I take you out for a cup of coffee?"

Rashmi

Right.

Alex

So many people, they feel so kind of humbled and excited, they'd be like, "Oh, wow. You noticed that thing I built and you're interested in it? You care? That's so great. Let's chat." And so, I would just be really open and bullish, and then pay it back and pay it forward. There's so many people who I know have helped me just kind of think about things differently or helped with an introduction. And so, I really try to take on that responsibility to help others, too.

Rashmi

I think my simple answer for that learning or resources would be to just have a masterclass with all of you powerful women, and that gives us so much more there. And what do you think was the hardest or the biggest barrier to break in order to become a Chief Product Officer? And why was it hard, and how did you overcome that?

Alex

Yeah. It's a good question. I think the hardest thing that just takes time, both for me to see it and I think to help others see it, is demonstrating my own leadership capacity beyond the product function. And so, really not only doing the job of, say, taking on multiple products and business lines, overseeing multiple functions, but really demonstrating to myself and to the organization that you're kind of shifting from a head of a function to a real executive that can navigate really complicated situations, really complicated personalities and stakeholders. Again, everyone from your peers at the leadership level to board of directors to investors, really making sure that I and others didn't box me into just the category of Head of Product.

And I think that's a challenge that we all kind of face, and some of it stems from a little bit of, or maybe a lot of imposter syndrome. We all have our own... We're all on the continuum there, I think, or many of us are. And so, just really reminding yourself that, "I might not look like every other CPO that I've seen in the world."

Rashmi

Right.

Alex

"But I really have the skills, and clearly I've been given the opportunity to show that I can operate at that level" and just really helping other people see you at that level. And it can take a little bit of time,, but just showing up the way you want to be seen and being unabashed about it, I think, is one of the hardest and also one of the most rewarding things.

Rashmi

Got it. And was there any specific challenge that you faced as a female leader during your time to get to a CPO?

Alex

Of course. I don't look like a lot of the Chief Product Officers who had come before me. And there was actually never a Chief Product Officer at The New York Times before me.

Rashmi

Right, right. Mm-hmm.

Alex

And I know I'm sitting in a chair right now, but I'm only 5'2". I'm small in physical stature. I am 40 years old, but sometimes people think I'm younger and they sometimes just assume I'm less experienced. I remember earlier in my career, this happened multiple times, where I was told that I didn't have the same gravitas or I didn't look like I had the same executive presence as other male leaders. And so, again, I worked hard to figure out what feedback I thought was fair and useful, what feedback I actually decided to ignore. And then, I just worked hard to show up as the type of leader that I wanted to be, and really be a leader that I thought could be effective in the role and could help just demonstrate to other women, in particular, a potential path for them to take.

And one of the luxuries that I now have is that I can be very choosy about who I work for, both in terms of the company and the leader. And this is really important and one of the main reasons why I came back to The New York Times. I came back because I wanted to work for my boss, who's the CEO, Meredith Kopit Levien. And she has made it a real point to help me and other female leaders lean into our strengths and differences instead of asking us to show up as somebody else. And The New York Times leadership team now on the business side looks so much different than it did when I first joined back in 2006. Over half of the senior leadership team is made up of women. It is just much more inclusive and welcoming, and I would say even more ambitious environment that you see.

Rashmi

Right.

Alex

And that matters and that counts for something. And I am really kind of proud of what we've built up. And I've got a lot more work to do, but I do think that who you work for and the culture and the values of the company, it just matters so much. And so, that's a place where we should all be more choosy and picky. And I was very lucky

to have found an amazing person to work with and for an amazing group of female leaders who are really my first team and a company that has really prioritized that.

Rashmi

Oh, that's awesome. And you touched upon this with respect to some other board approval and the board interaction in things. So how did you kind of learn to work with the board, and how was your first interaction with them been and some tips around that?

Alex

Yeah. I think... So I was lucky enough to interface with the board in my first stint with The New York Times. When I came back, one of the things that I noticed that I actually found to be really wonderful was that the board composition had changed a little bit, in the sense that we actually have now a couple of Chief Product Officers on the board. We have people who are really expert in not only the role of CPO, but in really understanding the value of product thinking and the value of investment in product and product-driven growth for the overarching business. And so, for me, the relationship that I have with the board is really making sure that we are as accountable as possible to demonstrating why the investments we're making within the realm of kind of products are really driving growth for the business and returning shareholder value.

And then, what I also love is being able to ask this incredible group of people advice, because they just have a range of experiences. We have board members who work at Roblox and Etsy and just all of these companies that are doing really extraordinary things, and are kind of helping just make sure that we're leading the business as responsibly and ambitious as possible.

And so, I've found the board experience to be actually some of the most rewarding. And so much of it comes from, I think, that give and take where not only do you have to show up as CPO and kind of do your job to make sure that they know that you're doing your job well, but it's a great moment just to say, "Can I get your take and your advice?" and really tap into their expertise and their networks and their relationships. And I feel like we've got a really exceptional board. And so, I really try to make them or have them help us be better at what we're doing.

Rashmi

No, that's amazing. And I think one of the things that probably everyone is curious about when you compare to tech company is building the product teams. And of course, at this level a team is everything. And what the team does really denotes your success as well. So first of all actually, taking a step back, how are the product teams built from a New York Times perspective compared to any tech company, per se?

And how did you know to build the right teams, and any learnings from just having the right people in there?

Alex

Yeah. So it's been such a journey for the product team at the New York Times. Early on, the product team was really small, and it was a group of generalists just because the product portfolio was so, so much smaller. But over time, I would say that, and I'll kind of describe our structure, over time, we look a lot more like a tech company, I think, than a traditional news or journalism organization.

So the way that we're set up is that we have what we call our missions. And these missions are cross-functional teams, and it's a mix of, they're led by a general manager or product leader, and it includes product managers, engineers, data scientists, designers, product marketers, and in our case, journalists in many cases, just because so much of what we're doing is trying to figure out how to make our journalism more accessible and more powerful and more relevant to people's lives.

And the missions that we have basically fall into three different categories. We have consumer missions, and so this could be a mission focused on our news product or our games product. And in games, for instance, they both make hit games like Spelling Bee and they're also behind acquisitions like Wordle, which has been a very, very fun thing.

Rashmi

Yeah.

Alex

Cooking, Audio, Wirecutter, The Athletic, another acquisition, those are all consumer teams that kind of are structured that way. Then we have monetization teams that are centralized, and we have two major ones. Our subscriber growth mission, and so they own all of the commercial assets across individual products and the bundle, because we sell what we call kind of the essential subscription bundle. And they just have, whereas on the consumer side, the product teams have really incredible judgment around identifying consumer needs and understanding how to build and validate that and value at scale. They're really focused more on audience and engagement metrics.

On the monetization side, if you're working on the subscription side, you are obsessed with your subscription funnel. And so, that's where we have built up, I would say, a product team that is much more oriented towards kind of the classic growth PM mindset. So they understand every step of their funnel intimately, and they are optimizing for every step from conversion down to churn in a really extraordinary way.

And then, we have a digital advertising mission, which also similarly, we have some incredible leaders and thinkers there who are obsessed and really believe in the beauty of premium, differentiated advertising that can live within a high quality subscriber experience. And there's a ton of innovation that's happening there.

And so, you have the consumer PMs, you have the monetization PMs, and then we also have platform PMs. And this was something that up until about four years ago was not, I would say, a core PM strength of ours. But I brought in someone, a really amazing leader from Google actually, her name is Lisa Kamm. And she came in to run the majority of our platform teams. And I really credit her with helping us bring a different, specialized, technical PM skillset into the company. It's just been transformational in terms of our ability to think about building the right platforms, systems, and infrastructure that drives incredible efficiency and really works across all of our products in a really elegant way.

And so, that's been the single biggest shift for us, is going from a small, generalist group of PMs to being much more nuanced about valuing different expertise. And we're also getting better, I think, about helping PMs kind of shift and grow in their skilling so that you might start off as a growth PM, but then over time, you want to shift into more of a consumer role. And how do we build up those opportunities so that you can do more of that? And so that, we're over a hundred PMs now at The Times. We have a very large and diverse group of people and skills, which has been incredible.

The other thing that's been really important for us in terms of building out a high functioning and successful product team has been the investment in product operations, which is something that we didn't have. Everyone did a little bit of it, but a couple years ago, I actually took one of my best product leaders and she was just very passionate about product operations. And so, she has helped build out so much of that infrastructure around career frameworks and skilling and community and experimentation best practices. And so much of the things that, again, when you hit a certain threshold in terms of scale of team, you need just to be able to unlock so much more impact and so much more creativity among your teams. And so, that has also been a thing that we didn't need up until a few years ago, but is really starting to make such a difference in terms of our teams.

Rashmi

No, pretty amazing. Coming from the tech world, as you said, it is very similar to tech, but there are so many other nuances in the product teams.

Alex

Yeah.

Rashmi

It's pretty amazing. I'm sure we can absorb some of those ways of how you think about the solutions and how they're distributed and things within our own product teams, I think. Thank you for that.

Alex

Yeah, of course.

Rashmi

Taking a look at translating your experiences, I know you touched upon a lot of them initially. So one question I had is, how did you kind of make these choices across those companies? Were you kind of prioritizing for certain things from translating your experiences, per se?

Alex

I think, yeah, going back to a couple of the themes that have kind of been constant for me, when I've looked at new opportunities, I've really tried to figure out how I can somehow get better at my job and learn new things. And so, if I think about within The New York Times, in my very first chapter, so of 10 years, what was really important for me was even if I started off as a Junior PM in real estate, I then started doing a lot within real estate in a mobile context and then went to saying, "Okay, I would like to expand my scope to lead the whole mobile team." And then, we got to a place where mobile was leading everything that we did, and so I started overseeing the entire news team.

And so, those are really trying to figure out on the scope front how to make sure that as you get better and better, you're adding a little bit more complexity and kind of new problem sets in. I think that has been pretty important. And it's not scope for scope's sake.

Rashmi

Right.

Alex

It's really scope because there's an incredible learning curve and I have something that the business thinks I can bring to kind of help solve that problem. And so, I do think that scope has been a really big thing.

The other one for me, I think I touched on this a little bit, is just purpose. I have really kind of understood where I get joyful and excited, and also things where I'm like, "Oh, there's somebody else who could probably go sell that better than me." And so, I think just being really honest and comfortable with yourself about what motivates

you and also what doesn't, because you might have a problem that needs solving, but you might be able to hire someone or find someone who's so much better at solving it. And that's an amazing thing if you can do that. So I think that has been a really big, I think, part for me about how I choose what I do, the companies and the role.

And then, leaning into, we talked a little bit just about superpowers.

Rashmi

Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Alex

I think really finding a place where I can just add value is really important for me. And so, when I look at the things that I think I've been better at kind of over the course of my career, it's taking high level product strategy and connecting it to work on the ground to business results, really knowing the customers, knowing the market we're in, knowing each unique business, and how to pull all that into a compelling strategy with objectives and a roadmap that teams can just go incredibly execute against.

I think it's also, I've been in a lot of situations where leading strategic and cultural transformation is part of the job, and I love doing that. And then, I think the other thing that I look for is when I can take on hard things, and in some cases, even if I don't have a lot of direct experience. And that can feel really uncomfortable, but I remember at The New York Times, for instance, right when I came back, our CTO left. And so, we started a new search, but it took us over a year to find a new CTO. And so, my boss was like, "Great. You're the interim CTO." I was like, "Okay. Let's do this." And it was hard and incredible. I got to work with just some of the best engineering minds we have at the company. And so, not just tolerating that discomfort but actually seeking it out, I think has been really, really important as well.

Rashmi

And coming to now as a Chief Product Officer, I know you touched upon this a little bit with respect to your responsibilities and how you leapt from a VP of Product to this, but could you kind of elaborate a little bit more on your responsibilities as a Chief Product Officer and anything else you want to add with respect to difference between you mentioned Head of Product or a VP of Product to a Chief Product Officer. Anything that you want to add further.

Alex

Yeah, of course. So because I've had both roles, I can kind of get a little bit specific.

Rashmi

Yeah.

Alex

So I would say a great VP of Product, which sometimes is interchanged with just Head of Product, that was certainly the case at The Times and I think in other organizations, you need to be an amazing functional leader of product management. So you need to be really good at defining and implementing the processes that allow product managers to work smoothly. And I think we look for, at least what I've certainly seen and what I needed to do at the VP level, was be a very well-rounded leader across the key dimensions of great product management, so product sense and strategy, product execution and leadership.

And a lot of what this would look like day-to-day was around prioritization, like aligning teams around objectives that are downstream from the company's strategy, pulling together the roadmap across all product managers, setting ambitious and measurable goals, and then hitting them. A ton around just the functional elements of talent, right? Hiring, retaining, training really great product managers, helping people up-level their craft. There are some very hard skills about great product managers that you look for, and really making sure that you open up those opportunities. And then, just also fostering a sense of community and learning. Those are a lot of the hallmarks that I certainly was responsible for when I was a VP of Product overseeing just the news product at The New York Times.

The shift to Chief Product Officer, I think, is a big one. And it's all about becoming an executive and taking on just a lot more scope. And so, the big differences between VP of Product and CPO for me have been, we talked about this a little bit, but interfacing with the board and investors, not just taking an existing strategy but actually creating a company strategy and product vision with input from leaders across the company, understanding the business and the company financials really, really deeply so that you can create revenue projections off of your roadmaps and really understand the ROI of your investments, really then having to deeply understand how to get from roadmap to revenue and how to analyze those things and put them into perspective.

My peer set is different. I am joined at the hip with our Chief Growth Officer, who oversees our day-to-day subscription numbers. At other companies, this might be the CFO.

Rashmi

Right.

Alex

I am also a very close partner to a lot of other executives across the company: our CTO, our Chief Data Officer, our Executive Editor, and other top editors because we're at a news organization. And that really requires, I would say, a mix of art and science

because you're working with very, very creative leaders and very quantitative leaders, and kind of knowing how to speak to both type of leaders, again, to rally them across a common view.

And then, back to this point of scope, I oversee multiple business lines and product portfolios. So in my capacity right now, I oversee most of the consumer teams. I oversee our news product, cooking, games, audio. I also oversee our digital ad product mission, and then I oversee product and design as functions. And so, just going from overseeing just the function of product to kind of that type of scope gives me the capacity to kind of practice a lot of the things that I was just describing.

So I do think it's a pretty meaningful step up. But again, when you are a functional Head of Product or a VP of Product, you can really start to do some of those things. And so, I just really encourage anyone who wants to make that next leap, you've got a lot of power and influence as the functional Head of Product, and there's a lot that you can start to test and try and ask to do to get that experience.

Rashmi

Wow. You very clearly articulated that. Thank you so much.

Alex

Of course.

Rashmi

I think lots of nuggets in that few sentences you mentioned. And I know you spoke a bit about the CEO and things, so what do you think is the key to successfully working with your CEO, especially the first time, the few years you were at New York Times as fresh there, and in particular, how about the rest of the leadership team at large? What's the key to working with all of them successfully?

Alex

Yeah. So, if we start with our CEO, I really can't say enough about how lucky I feel that I get to work for her again, Meredith. And part of what makes our relationship, I think, really effective is that she really understands what an effective CPO does. And I think I just mentioned how even the composition of the board has changed a bit. She's added Chief Product Officers to our board, and she also sees really great Chief Product Officers in action just by virtue of being on other boards herself. She's on the board of Instacart.

And so, I feel like my primary job is that I don't need to explain what I do. What I need to do is understand what context she needs to manage the company, and in particular to manage our board of directors and kind of The Street. And so, we just

stay in very close touch, because a lot of the information that I am working with day-to-day internally kind of needs to be reshaped and kind of up-leveled in a way that really helps her make the best decisions as the Chief Executive of the company.

I would say with the rest of the leadership team, we just talk a lot about being each other's first team. And I can't say enough about the importance of making sure that everybody has shared context and just the same reality. Everybody really needs to understand, "What's happening in the business? Do they believe in the same headwinds and tailwinds? What is happening with our collective talent and workforce and more?" And so, really feeling like you have a team of peers who are owning the hole with you. So if there's an engineering problem, that's my job as much as the CTO's job. That is a very, I think, important way to kind of set up that first team, because from there it is so much easier to align goals, to build a really high trust culture where you feel like you have the permission to tackle really hard things together, where people are assuming good intent, and you can focus again more on the work because the relationship and the ties are so strong. And it takes real investment.

Rashmi

Right, right.

Alex

You have to put a ton of time into setting those relationships up and that culture up, but it pays off. It is an incredible feeling when you feel supported by your peers and clearly they know you have their back. And so, it's investment that is so worth it.

Rashmi

No, thank you. All I could say is just, "Wow," at some of the things that you've talked and the passion behind all of that. I could really see that through. And in this course of time, did you think you had to make any professional or personal sacrifice to become a Chief Product Officer? And do you even think of it as a sacrifice, per se?

Alex

I don't think of it as a sacrifice, but I do think that we all talk about balance and it's just such a highly relative word.

Rashmi

Right, right.

Alex

I think it means very, very different things to different people. For me, achieving balance is about having a very fulfilling and ambitious career as CPO, and also having a really ambitious family and personal life. But it doesn't mean that I work 9:00-5:00.

It doesn't mean that I have a lot of downtime. I have a very full life. It can be a little crazy, but it's my own choice and it's a very deliberate choice.

And I think right now, I am, again, I'm 40 years old and I've been through so many different personal and professional adventures that I feel much more in control kind of of my time in my life, but it didn't always feel that way. And I think it's important that we actually all talk about this, so I'm happy to share a story that I've shared in some other contexts.

But when I first went over to Facebook, I had two young kids, two and a half and a couple months old, and my husband got quite ill. And I remember having this moment of like, "Oh, no. Do I actually just need to stop working in order to help care for him and the family? Or can I come up with something a little bit different?" And we came up with a solution that is not normal. We just moved in his best friend, who was wonderful, who was like, "You know what? I'm in a position in my life where I can come help care for him and help you parent." You're still present. But I was going to India and Europe and South America for my job. It was wild. And I remember thinking, "This is not traditional. This is not normal, but it's working.", And so just the idea of being okay having unconventional solutions that work for your life, I think, is really important.

Asking for help, it can be really hard. And so, for me, the single best thing I did was reach out to family and friends and say, "I want to be able to do both. I can't do it alone. Things are really tricky." And I was just so overwhelmed kind of by the amount of support. And I know that that's very lucky. Not everybody has that.

But so, all of it to say, if I described my life now, our friend still live with us by the way, and it's amazing. Now we just have... My husband's feeling better, it's just this very joyous household of family and friends. It sounds like... People describe it to a Showtime tragedy, comedy of some sort, which is probably right.

Rashmi

Right.

Alex

But there's just no... Everyone has their own unique circumstances in life. And I hope we just all talk about it more, because it's not straightforward. People need different things personally and professionally. And I hope that there are a lot more creative and kind of unorthodox solutions that, in particular, allow women to be in really big, bold, important jobs. And we really have to kind of figure out how to not only help each other, but how to train our peers, the companies that support us, to kind of know that things might look a little bit different, but that's okay. And our job is to help make that possible.

Rashmi

No, absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing that, and I'm so glad you did. Yeah, thinking of unconventional ways, per se, right? So thank you for that. And maybe fast forward five years down the line, how do you think this Chief Product Officer role will change, if you think it will change?

Alex

I can tell you a little bit about my hopes, which is I think the Chief Product Officer role will just become a lot more common across even more companies and industries. It's just such... The best Chief Product Officers that I've seen in action are so dynamic and so versatile in the skills that they bring. And I think that those skills can just provide so much value and impact in a lot of contexts where they don't yet live. So I just hope that so many more companies have CPOs at the top really helping to drive their businesses forward.

I also think something that we're seeing, which is quite exciting, and you can just look at a lot of the Women in Products kind of founders. You look at Fidji Simo or Deb Liu, and this idea of the CPO role becoming more of a training ground for future CEOs is really incredible. And so, I'm very encouraged by that.

And then, I just hope that more people look to the CPO role as a very ambitious and purposeful career path, because I have truly found it to be that way. And I think it can appeal to a lot of people with a lot of different backgrounds and interests.

Rashmi

That's awesome. And what headline would Alex make beyond a Chief Product Officer? What do you want to do beyond the Chief Product Officer?

Alex

For now, I really am so focused on my role, and we have so much that we're trying to do at The New York Times that I am so excited about. So for now, it's like, "Just do the Chief Product Officer at the Times job well." And near term, I will say that one of the things that I hope to be able to do is put my skills to good use in other contexts, maybe in a board capacity or advisory role. Because at this point, as soon as you feel like you've got something to give back, you want to make sure that you can apply it.

Rashmi

Right.

Alex

And it's just an incredible operating context, again, in the spirit of learning for myself. But longer term, I don't know. And kind of removing those constraints is again, part

of what I'm trying to get more comfortable with. I'm excited that I don't know, and I guess we'll see.

Rashmi

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Alex

But I think you were such a great interviewer. Thank you.