



Episode 43: Insights on the Path to CPO

Elizabeth

To get things started, I want to reintroduce my collaborator on this series, Rashmi Ramesh. Rashmi is a senior woman in product. Rashmi, it's been a while since we last spoke on this podcast, and since then, we've heard your interviews with Alex Hardiman, Chief Product Officer of the New York Times, Anneka Gupta, CPO at Rubrik, Jennifer Taylor at CloudFlare, and Nupur Srivastava, CPO of Included Health.

Rashmi

Yeah. Thanks, Elizabeth, and it feels great to tag team with you once again. You think it's been a while? I actually just feel, I just finished the interviews. The reason I feel so is that, there've been so many insights that have been influencing my perspective all this time. I've also not been shy sharing them during my conversations with other women leaders in product.

Elizabeth

Yeah. We launched the series in February, and really have had an amazing response.

Rashmi

Yeah. Overall, we've had over 4,000 listens across the five podcasts. Our first episode, which was with Alex Hardiman, has over 1,000 listens. I'm extremely proud that it has secured the second spot in the Women In Product podcast series within just three months of its launch.

Rashmi

I'd like to share some of the things I've heard from people. After listening to the interview with Alex, Linda Zebian says, "I'm not sure I know of a more eloquent speaker than you, and though I'll never be a CPO, hearing how you left New York Times to expand your experience only to return to serve the mission is so inspiring. Thank you for giving us this gift to learn from." Linda, my only feedback to you is, never say never.

Jessica Duben says, "I've really enjoyed the Path To CPO series from Women In Product. The interviews with Anneka Gupta and Nupur Srivastava have been my favorites so far. Their insights, as well as their humility, has been inspirational. I strongly recommend the series for any aspiring product leader. Thank you to Rashmi Remesh for your vision to create such practical and



empowering content. Looking forward to the series resuming in May." We are definitely looking forward for the series to resume as well, Jessica.

Rachel Venn says, "Making decisions with imperfect information is an incredible way to transform your career. You'll find that you do more, learn more, and achieve better results. We should definitely be talking more about it." Thank you for sharing, Jen. Thank you, Linda, Jessica, and Rachel, and actually many others for supporting us. We've also had a number of community members write blog posts about the series and the episodes.

Elizabeth

How does it feel seeing that response?

Rashmi

It has been overwhelming, yet incredibly gratifying. The Bhagavad Gita, which is one of the Indian mythologies, teaches the principle of Nishkama Karma, which means performing an action without expecting anything in return. It is kind of an act of being selfless. Although we live in an era where success is often measured quantitatively, which we have for this podcast as well, I personally didn't give a lot of thought about it, about even my intrinsic happiness, or how it would be affected once we went live. I think I just wanted to live in the moment.

As we've discussed at length previously, Elizabeth, the primary goal for this podcast was to inspire our community members to pursue executive roles and provide guidance on how to achieve them. However, there was a small part of me that also wanted to encourage women to be more innovative and tackle difficult problems that's promoting the birth of new ideas inspired by this podcast series, and we are already beginning to see some action there, right? Some of my friends have been even asking me about what's next, what's our next project, and I have my ears and eyes open for a problem that we can solve to benefit our community.

Elizabeth

Yeah. It's just incredibly gratifying to hear how well-received this series is. How it's influencing the community, and to see your success as a part of it. It seems like a great time to talk about what stuck out for us in the first four interviews and some of our takeaways. There were just so, so many great insights, compelling stories, and valuable perspectives. Maybe we could start with your interview with Alex. What really struck you about Alex's story and her comments about her path to CPO?



Rashmi

I want to start out by saying that Alex is such a great storyteller, which is a critical skill personally, as well as professionally. She framed her pivots as different chapters in her career. What was fascinating for her regarding the problems she solved across those pivots and her impact?

Elizabeth

I thought Alex provided great insight on what led her to and prepared her for the CPO role. Here's a clip of her talking about scale of impact as an important motivator for her.

Alex

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.

Elizabeth

This isn't always something we talk about, but it drove her to take on products that were tough challenges and mission-critical to the success of the business. They had huge potential impact. Often, these types of products are high-risk and high-reward, and in this clip, she talks about range. Range of experience and continuous learning.

Alex

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.

Elizabeth

For me, this really drove home the type of approach that is necessary to step into a high profile CPO role like hers. I think some of us would see her as brave in taking on these things, and I think she is, but she's also curious and driven to make a difference.

Rashmi

Agreed. When she thought about obtaining those range of experiences, it almost immediately had her think about her leadership skills. If they were well-suited to navigate product challenges only at New York Times, or could she actually operate anywhere, which led her to take on the unconventional path with Facebook. Her passion for journalism also pushed her to take that outside-in approach, and evaluate what was required for New York Times for its next chapter and if she could bring in those skills back. Hence, unconventional as it seems with Facebook for us, I think it seems so obvious for her. She clearly articulates the preparation required to be a CPO, where you need to get the entire organization behind a vision, how product investments advance business goals, and being able to take on functions beyond product. She humbly admits that demonstrating her leadership outside of the product function also has been one of the barriers that she had to overcome.

Elizabeth

I have to say that I also found her approach to life challenges that threatened to overwhelm her career refreshing, because she and her family found creative ways to make things work. Here's a clip of her on that topic.

Alex

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.

Elizabeth

I thought it was such a great story of creative problem-solving and not always assuming all responsibilities fall on women.

Rashmi

Yes. That is such a great example of out-of-the-box thinking. As product leaders, we are often looking for creative solutions and thinking outside the box professionally, but not personally, and this example serves as an excellent reminder that such concepts have validity even beyond our professional lives.

Elizabeth

It's so true. With Anneka, I really found her big ambitions were refreshingly on display. Here's a great example.

Anneka

I've always had big career ambitions. So I think for me, even when I was starting in my career, I knew I wanted to be in leadership at some point in time. Both of my parents were actually entrepreneurs and ran their own company, so I had these amazing role models growing up, and both of them set very high aspirations for me in terms of what I should do in my career and what I should aspire to. So leadership was always in the cards for me.

And of course, be ambitious, because I really feel like more women should aspire to be chief product officers. There's not enough of us yet in the industry.

Elizabeth

What resonated for you?

Rashmi

I think, to begin with, one of the areas that resonated with me was to set yourself up in such a way where you get an opportunity to observe leaders in



action and learn. You can't just fly a plane by reading a book, right? Let's listen to her regarding this.

Anneka

I think figuring out what path I wanted to go down, what function I wanted to lead in took me a couple years of self-discovery, and seeing really how companies operate and what these roles actually entail, because you can talk to a lot of people, you can read things online, but you don't really know what the day-to-day looks like until you see leaders in action.

Elizabeth

Yes, and that path of self-discovery was fueled by curiosity. Something we heard in many of our interviews, and it seems like a quality that drives many product managers.

Anneka

I've always been an intensely curious person. So I love learning about what other people do and I love experimenting and trying new things. And within my career, I was able to go from a software engineer to becoming a chief product officer, all at the same company, which was a really special and a unique opportunity, I think. But along the way, I had so many detours. I did a lot of different roles in trying to figure out exactly what I wanted to do. I did a detour into running marketing and recruiting because we were a startup, there was a need to do that, I was interested in expanding what my own experience is because I knew the technical side of product management, but I didn't really know the outward marketing side of it.

So I took a few different detours. And then, even after that, becoming a chief product officer, I had the opportunity to run our customer implementation and support team, I had an opportunity to run a part of the sales team for a period of time. And all of those experiences, I think, have helped me become a better leader for the company and a better chief product officer.

Rashmi

Yeah. A unique path within the same company also meant looking for companies with a growth profile in the first place, with a culture of promoting within, and as a leader, also being able to reinvent yourself to that growth. Let's hear from her.

Anneka



What worked for you yesterday, or even today, isn't necessarily going to work for you tomorrow. And in my 11-year journey at LiveRamp, I had to constantly reinvent myself as a leader. And anytime I got stuck in the past was a time where I started to not be doing as well in my role, and I could tell because of the feedback I was getting, because I wasn't able to help the business achieve what it needed to do next. And I had to reevaluate and realize that, "Okay, I need to change how I'm thinking about things, and I need to let go of what was done in the past and really look at this with fresh eyes." So I think that's a really big piece.

Elizabeth

Another thing that really stuck out was her learning to create a big vision, yet also finding ways to support true innovation. Bridging from incremental to breakthrough. Let's listen to her thoughts on that.

Anneka

I think on the product management, functional side of things, the part that I really had to work on was how to, I think, bridge the vision for where the company was going with an ambitious enough plan for execution. And what I mean by that is that it's really easy, when you're doing or thinking about execution within the product, to focus on incremental changes that you know your customers want, that can deliver incremental value. And it's harder to say like, "What are those big leaps and the big bets that we should make? And how should we make those in a disciplined enough way where there's a higher chance of likelihood that those bets are going to play out?" Because it's easy to make big swings and then not do it in a very disciplined way, and then you just are wasting time and money.

I think figuring out that balance of like, "Okay, we have an ambitious vision. How are we going to get there," what does it take to organically do innovation within a company and do something that's totally new and different from what you've done before, what are the types of people that you need for that, and then also, how do you think about acquisitions or partnerships or non-organic ways for innovation, and doing that well, too, because those are also risky, challenging, time-consuming efforts, too. So figuring those pieces out, that was a very challenging, and figuring out how to balance, it took a lot of trial and error, again. It's not like every time you get it right, but you try to keep iterating and seeing what works and fixing things that aren't working.

Rashmi



Yes. Product leaders, we are exposed to a lot of these questions that Anneka just raised, but they're only in the context of the product function, and answering these questions at the company level is a real breakthrough moment, where you're aligning product capabilities to business outcomes.

Elizabeth

"Working at the C level, you're on a new team," was a sentiment that we heard over and over. The others at the C level are your team. Anneka expressed this well.

Anneka

As a chief product officer, my role is to set the three-year vision, along with the rest of the leaders at the company, and then chart the path for how we're going to get there. And that means collaborating very closely with all of these different executives and kind of doing a mind meld of how do you take... because it's not all my ideas, it's not all the CEO's ideas; it's really everyone, where you have to kind of take all of their approaches, their ideas, their concerns for what is it going to take to get there, and really meld that into a plan that everyone can get behind.

Elizabeth

Moving on to Jen Taylor, Chief Product Officer at CloudFlare.

Rashmi

Hands down, Elizabeth, Jen provides clear examples of self-assessment through a process of elimination. Let's hear more from her.

Jennifer

I worked in consulting and found that I really loved collaborating and meeting with customers, but I wanted to have a more sustained and strategic point of view.

I worked in banking and I realized that I loved spending time with customers thinking about their strategy, but I wanted to be a part of executing it. I worked in venture capital and I found that I like working with entrepreneurs, but I wanted to be in it. And so a lot of that sort of passion for customers, passion for building businesses, passion for collaboration, sort gradually led me to product management.

Early in my career, I'm like, "Am I a B2C product manager? Or a B2B product manager?" And they're very different pieces of DNA that are required to really find joy in either of those journeys.



For me, B2B was about building relationships with customers for the long haul. And I was like, "That's what I want." B2C was a lot more about experimentation, which I love is just not my natural jam.

Elizabeth

I think so many people in our community will relate to Jen's non-linear journey and learning to embrace that.

Jennifer

And I think one of the things I really love about product is there's no linear journey. Going back to when I was an undergrad I thought I was going to be a lawyer. And at that point it was like, "Okay, graduate from university. And then you go to law school and then you get a job at a firm and then you are a partner track and..." There's a very... Or you an academia and there's a tenure track.

Product is actually completely different. And at moments I will be honest, that's been scary for me when I kind of look over the precipice of the next career move or my next step is as a product manager. I'm a little like, "Ah, I'm not sure." But it's also been really fun and I've learned a lot and I've had the opportunity to build some amazing products and work with some amazing people.

Rashmi

My next takeaway from Jen has been the necessity to assess yourself deeply and understand what interests you and motivates you. Basically, what are your superpowers? Let's hear more.

Jennifer

I was actually looking at a leadership team of a company I admire today and looking at the bio of their chief product officer and that person has 50 patents and a degree in computer science. And I think sounds like they're very involved in the day-to-day deeply technical decisions. Whereas I think for me, my sort of superpower is coming in and partnering deeply with technical teams and figuring out how to help them operationalize and scale and build teams and really draw those strengths out of other people. So there are lots of different ways to skin it. And I think that's kind what guided me and helped me think about each one of the roles as I went.

Elizabeth



I think she really shows us that making sure the situation you are walking into is a good match is so important. That brings to the table what the organization needs.

Jennifer

I'm probably not the kind of person you want to put on a two or three person founding team because of my sort passion for operationalizing and scaling, I'm really the sweet spot for me is after an organization had found product market fit, kind of how do we amplify that? And then how do we extend the product line and grow and scale the business and the team.

My training by nature... I am not a technologist by nature. I'm not the kind of person you want to bring into your organization to write or review code, but I partner really closely with the technical leaders and I've found that there's a really nice synergy and chemistry and balance of skill set there. And so I knew that I wanted to go into an organization where of what I was going to offer was what they needed. And that there were really open and honest conversations as we walked in about what I was looking for, what they were looking for and really the interview process of getting to know each other and really figuring out that chemistry and that fit.

Elizabeth

Generally, helps you see that what is right for you changes over time.

Rashmi

That's a great point. Having clarity about the kind of companies you would fit in and thrive is key here.

Elizabeth

I also want to highlight that one should not shy away from asking your network for help, and understanding you don't have to do or figure everything out on your own. Let's hear more from Jen.

Jennifer

I had phenomenal examples throughout my career and phenomenal partners that I'd worked with from design and program management. And so I had kind of blueprints or understandings of what that should look like, but I'll be honest, I picked up the phone and I called those people and I said, "Hey, listen. I'm standing up a design team. I've never stood up a design team before. What should I be thinking about?"



Or when I went out to build our product content team, I recruited very specifically for somebody who I felt like had been there, done that, but had the aptitude and passion to come in and build it and do that in partnership with me. And that I think has been... They've built a phenomenal team and I feel really fortunate to be learning from them. So it's a lot about asking for help and really looking to find ways to build your team with strong leaders.

Elizabeth

She also talks about how building your network is critical to career growth.

Jennifer

One of the things I talk a lot about when people are like, "How do you build your career?" It's a lot about finding mentorship and finding advocates within the organization that will help give you feedback and help you find ways to grow.

It's also about finding community because I mean, I'll be honest a lot of what I do now as a chief product officer is talk to other chief product officers, which is sort of like, "How do you do this?" There's no manual for it, there's no product management board examination. It's a lot of how do you do it? How you tried this? This isn't working. How do I get that perspective? And I think a lot of that is about community.

Elizabeth

Nupur really emphasized, early on, focusing on products and initiatives that are high value and important to the company. I think this is such great advice, whether you want to be a CPO or not.

Nupur

I'm always of a believer that you need to know what's most important to the company, it started off with just the intellectual curiosity or the desire to be involved in some of these products or new product initiatives, that were going to propel the company, to expand our product line and to do more.

And so, the opportunities I always look for, is to have a seat at the table or drive some of these big, high impact projects. I love cross functional work. I love working with teams to solve hard problems, and I also raise my hand a lot, to lead things, and so, I think that certainly helps, like looking for big projects that were able to impact the trajectory of the company, was pretty important for me.



The thing that I always try and do, is understand how you craft product strategy or product priorities, against the business priorities. And so, I think truly taking the time to understand the fundamentals of the business, really go a long way. I would encourage people to be really pressed on, do you understand how the company makes money? What are your sustainable competitive differentiators? What are the top risks you all have as a company?

Rashmi

Yeah. At its core, it is really important to be passionate about the product and the company's mission, and not forget that even as a CPO, you need to expose yourself to customers.

Elizabeth

Nupur also spoke about recognizing, who is your first team? How this shapes your thinking as CPO. This came up earlier in the interview with Anneka. I love that Nupur shared some resources to get people thinking about it.

Nupur

There's a book I recommend to everyone. You may have read it, it's called Five Dysfunctions of a Team, really good book, and the concept that was really important to me, was the concept of the first team. So, when I first became a director, I thought my job was to protect my team and to fight for them, to always be happy and content, and for us to have all the resources we need, irrespective of anybody, and that was a big mistake. I was lucky to get coaching on that pretty early on from my CEO, where you grow as a leader, the more you can consider your first team to be your peers, which are other leaders, and the more you optimize for your company, the better your team will actually be, because you will orient your thinking in a way, that will ultimately reward you and your team.

And so, just this shift, as a leader, in thinking about the success of the company first, and your team being in service of that, was hugely important for me and for my team, as well.

Rashmi

Yeah, I think this is a great concept. This does not just shape your thinking, where your peers see the value, but is also beneficial for the entire company.

Elizabeth



I was also struck by Nupur's comments on self-doubt. We often assume that people at the C-level don't have doubts, but they are human. Her insights on how you prepare yourself and get yourself out of it, knowing that you truly deserve the current position as an executive, was instructive.

Nupur

The ability to just find my confidence, to keep owning it. I do have moments of self doubt, even now, there's times where I'm like, "Whoa, what am I doing as CEO of this awesome company?" But, just finding the confidence, or even faking it at times, just because as a leader, you have to be confident, and there are moments of self doubt that come in, but just finding ways to validate or to recognize that, of course, you're in the role because you deserve it and it's important. People are looking up to you as a leader, so it's important to make sure that you just own it a little bit more, and you are able to project confidence, even though you may not always feel that way, a hundred percent of the time.

Rashmi

It shows her humility and humbleness when she spoke about self-doubt. It is a great call out to our audience to figure out ways to validate this with others, as one of the options to combat that emotion. I actually have been seeing such validations even in our Women In Product Facebook group, and I think that's a great start. Sacrifices and balance. It's all a matter of perspective. I think this is one of our favorites. Right, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth

Absolutely.

Rashmi

Nupur gave me an entirely new way of thinking about balance. Let's listen more to her.

Nupur

I think on a personal level, the decisions I've made have been oriented around what I want out of life, which is, I think I orient my life around having an impact on the world. And so, I don't view it as a sacrifice as much as a choice. Certainly, I've worked a lot and have worked a lot for many years, but I truly do enjoy what we do. The thing that the realization I had many years ago was, I probably have a tendency to really throw myself into work, but it's more fun if the work that you're doing, you feel really good about.



So, if you're making people healthier, doesn't feel as bad if you're working many hours, there's ups and downs on any job. So, I view it as less of a sacrifice, versus a conscious choice, because I was clear on, at least for this phase of my life, that creating an impact on healthcare is what's most important to me, and the venue through which I'll do it for now, is included health. It's a personal choice I made, the many things where I've been lucky in life, I've had good health, I've had a family that's provided for me, I've had a supportive husband, a good company. And so, doesn't feel as a sacrifice as much as a conscious choice, and once it's a conscious choice, you then just deal with the consequences.

Elizabeth

I thought that was such a beautiful way of thinking of things, and finding one's balance and motivation. Also, her recommendation to women to ask. Just ask, don't be shy. Don't be afraid to ask.

Nupur

The biggest thing that I would say to other women that are directors or even senior PMs looking to be a CPO someday is, there's this thing that someone said to me, which is, you miss all the shots you don't take. The biggest issue I see is, they just don't ask. They won't ask for the promotion. They won't ask for the... I mean, this is generalizing on a very gross level. They won't ask for the promotion. They won't ask for the bigger role. They won't sort of demand what they deserve and it's quite lopsided, in terms of confidence. And so, you truly are the driver of your own career, and so as uncomfortable as it is, it's really important to ask, and it's important to dream big as well.

There's many women are like, "Oh, I can't do that. Or, I'm not going to ask for that." It's like, why? Why wouldn't you ask for that? I mean, the worst case is someone may say no, or the best case is, someone will see you in a different light, because you're hungry to have more impact, and potentially help you create a path to get there. So, the biggest thing I'll say is, find the confidence to just claim that that's what you deserve, and that's what you want, and say it out loud to somebody, and then say it out loud to your manager. Just ask the things that you deserve.

It's just very lopsided, what I see with the teams that I run, where in general, if I give someone increased scope, most of the time women will just thank me for it, but not ask for a raise or a promotion, and again, you miss all the shots you don't take it. It is important to be the driver of your own career, and it is important to make the asks. I understand that it's hard, it's



uncomfortable. It's perhaps sometimes against our nature, but really, really important to advocate for yourself.

Elizabeth

One of the things that I found so interesting about these interviews is that I can get something new every time I've listened to them. I thought after sitting through the interviews, and then listening to the recordings, that I got it, but what I found upon listening to them again is that there is just so much there to learn from. Rashmi, what are your top three takeaways from these?

Rashmi

Yeah, I agree with you. Every time I listened to them, there was something new I realized. My top three takeaways where my first one is about career experimentation that both Aneka and Jen talked about. We experiment across various areas of our personal lives, such as cooking, fashion, vacations, restaurants, et cetera. As product leaders, we experiment throughout the life cycle of product development, so why not with our career? Personally, experimentation and trying out new experiences, whether at different stages of the company or at different domains, has provided me with a better clarity regarding my strengths and enabled me to make the right choices for growth.

My second is the outside-in perspective and the range of experiences that Alex talked about. Retrospection, when performed well, is so powerful. When you detach yourself from a particular position or a company, and analyze what new skills of yours could actually help the business, it provides a great opportunity for that outside-in perspective. I personally believe in cross-pollinating ideas and experiences, which not only drives curiosity, but also challenges you to explore and be more versatile, especially when the company faces unexpected challenges.

My third has been the way you think about balance in your life that Nupur describes. There have been many times where my career to precedence, and times where my family and personal life have been the most important. Hence, there has been some sort of balancing act, which I would say was more driven based on the situation, but Nupur brought attention to this idea of purposeful balance.

Elizabeth

Those are three great takeaways from this, and really, really valuable. Mine are, be realistic about what you need. Do you need more scope and range? Does your past experience really prepare you for where you want to go? Do you



have the skills that you need when you're in the job. Can you learn those in advance? I think it speaks to what you mentioned above, in terms of really looking hard at what you know and where your challenges are.

The other thing for me was on work life balance. Be creative. Don't always assume that you stepping back or you struggling is the answer. There are all kinds of unconventional approaches, and I'd love to see women bring those to the table more and more. I would say, lastly, it would be ask, ask, ask. Ask for the job, ask for advice, ask for connection. Build that diverse network. Don't be shy. Those connections become so important in terms of providing you with feedback, but also providing you with support, and also helping you address all sorts of questions that won't necessarily all be in your wheelhouse as you move forward and take a higher-level position.

Rashmi

Those are such great ones, Elizabeth. So, what is next?

Elizabeth

Well, next is our interview with Annie Pearl, CPO at Calendly, so that will be our next podcast. We're looking forward to it. I hope all of you will join us then and keep listening.