

Episode 44: Annie Pearl, previously the CPO at Calendly

Rashmi

First of all, thanks so much Annie and welcome to Women In Product. We are very, very happy to have you here and learn about everything you've done so far that could not just help people like me, but a lot of other people just like me. So, I really appreciate your time.

Annie

Thank you so much for having me. I'm very excited to be here.

Rashmi

Absolutely. So yeah, let's get started. To begin with, would love to get your thoughts on how did you get started in product management, especially when you had a law degree. So, how did this happen and did you always want to be a chief product officer?

Annie

Yeah, it's a great question. A bit of a non-traditional path to product management and then ultimately to the role I have today. But while I was in law school, I actually had the opportunity to work for a management consulting firm. So I was in law school expecting to become a lawyer. I had all intents and purposes of becoming a lawyer, but I got involved with this management consulting firm and we specialized in working with startups. So I found myself spending a lot of my time with tech companies, with founders, with early stage, sometimes pre-product market fit, sometimes post-market market fit companies. And so I could tell I was getting much more interested in technology and the idea of building companies and products than I was law. So after law school, I graduated law school, I did pass the California bar just to make sure that I always had that ability to go practice law if I wanted to.

And then I actually went kind of the unconventional route at the time, I didn't join a law firm, I joined the founding team of a startup. This was back in 2009. We were called Xpert Financial and we were trying to create a stock market for private companies, so trying to create an actual kind of liquid exchange of pre IPO shares. And so we raised capital, we hired some engineers, and I took the role of leading product management. So that's really how I got my career started, was really just kind of doing things at an early stage startup where you're going from zero to one. And from there I had various roles in product management at Box and then Glassdoor where I eventually became the CPO, and then most recently joined Calendly as the CPO back in 2021.

Rashmi

That's awesome. And while you moved into product management as the first of your companies, do you always think that you wanted to be a chief product officer, continue with the product focus?

Annie

Yeah. I don't think I knew much about product management when I joined the early stage startup. And in fact, product management as a discipline, I think really has evolved a lot and become so much more dominant since even back in 2009 when I started. So I didn't necessarily know I wanted to go into product management, but once I did, I really fell in love with it and lots of different aspects of it, but really, really deeply understanding users, understanding the problems of users, the opportunities that exist to make their lives better and easier, and then building great solutions to those problems. So I fell in love with the sort of user value and problem solving that came along with product management.

One of the things that I've tried to do a lot of in my career, and I don't know if it has been totally intentional, but looking backwards, which is always easier, I really have tried at various points in my career to identify opportunities that may not have made sense at the time, or if you were to look at it from the outside, you might have maybe scratched your head or it wasn't necessarily the most logical next step but for me it was an opportunity to round out my skillset in areas where I didn't have experience before. So I'm just a really big believer in kind of going out for opportunities that give you experiences and skill development that may not look like a very clear ladder.

For example, going from law school to being part of the founding team of a startup, it was not the safe bet, but I knew the learnings would be unparalleled. When I left our startup, I went to Box, a B2B SaaS company, cloud storage, enterprise product management. I knew nothing about that, but I knew that I would learn a lot around how to scale a product team and a product given where Box was and its growth. And then when I went from Box to Glassdoor, I went from B2B SaaS to consumer and a kind of consumer marketplace.

I really wanted to round out that skill set around not just understanding the B2B buyer but also the consumer. And then from Glassdoor to Calendly, a product led growth business. So I've really tried in my career to look at where do I not have experience today that I think would benefit me in terms of being a better product leader and going after opportunities that may not have seemed like the most logical next step at the time, but now you look backwards and you can see how it all added up together to help provide me with hopefully a pretty broad set of skills.

Rashmi

That's amazing. I think there's a lot to unpack in just what you said, and I'm sure that we have a lot more questions around that. But to begin with, I know you mentioned

you, the product management taste was from the consulting firm that you were a part of. Apart from that, were there any other detours or pivots that you thought was kind of crucial for your next steps, even though it could be some of the unconventional paths? Are there any other pivots or detours that you think was important?

Annie

The one that comes to mind to me, actually when I was at Glassdoor originally I was brought on as a VP of B2B product, and one of the products that was in our portfolio was a self-service product. And at the time, Glassdoor was very much, the business model was more around selling into SMB, mid-market and enterprise customers with a direct selling motion. And this was the first time that we were creating more of a self-service business and motion. And so the product was in my portfolio, and so in many ways I was responsible for the success or the failure of it. And one of the first things that I sort of identified was in order to really make this product successful, we actually are going to need dedicated folks and teammates from marketing so that we can actually talk to the self-service buyer.

We need dedicated product marketing to talk to the self-service buyer. We need dedicated support team who can really help these online customers who don't have any sort of customer success manager. We may need to think about an online sales team for kind of a low touch sales model. So pretty quickly, I sort of said, I think this actually needs to look a little bit more like a business unit and be run a little bit more like a business unit because at the end of the day, it's a very clear revenue line where users come in through the funnel and they convert and then they're paying customers.

And so I felt responsible for the actual revenue, but I didn't necessarily feel like we had the right structure in place. And so maybe less of a pivot as more, I worked with our CEO at the time and to ultimately structure so that I could really run it and lead it through more of that kind of what you might call general management lens, and that I think was a really, really great learning experience for me just to have that kind of accountability and ownership over the number that benefited me when I then moved into the CPO role and also when I came over to Calendly.

Rashmi

That's awesome. So one thing that you just touched upon was, if you take a step back, how did you really think about choosing all these opportunities? As you nicely mentioned, you started from the finance startup and then into a B2B and then a consumer B2C. How do you think about these opportunities and what kind of self reflections or things that you did on your end to figure out, "Hey, I want to go here," or that you nicely put as it seemed unconventional then, but makes a lot of sense now?

Annie

I think there's probably two aspects to this. One is the skill set angle, which I already touched on, which is ... And that doesn't necessarily have to be moving from company to company. It can be even within your own company and the opportunities that you seek out within your role where you might take on a project or an initiative that may not be directly within your sphere of ownership, but you know it's going to enable you to acquire skills that you may not have or experiences that you may not have. And so I think it doesn't always have to come from hopping to go find those experiences, I think you can absolutely get them. So I think that's one angle which is just really getting clear and crisp with yourself on what do I want to learn with this next role or if I'm in this role with these experiences I'm trying to take on.

And I think the second is once you've sort of identified that and you're talking to potentially different companies, I think for me at least, the lens I've always thought through is the product itself. Is this a product that I want to work on? I really, really am fascinated by this problem space. I want to live and breathe it. So there has to be an element of connection to the product, as sort of first and foremost. The second for me at least in the evaluations I've done, is the stage of the company. And so what you're doing as an early stage product manager, a company at an early stage startup is very different than the product management you're doing at hyper growth, which is very different than late stage growth, which is very different than a scaled big tech.

And so I think getting really crisp and clear on what type of product management work do I want to be doing, and identifying where a company is in its growth curve to align with the type of work you want to do. And so for me, both Glassdoor and Calendly, they were kind of what you might call late stage growth companies. What got you here won't get you there across lots of different facets and the problems and the challenges that come when you're a late stage growth company, everything gets more complex. You oftentimes have to go from single product to multi-product, you're thinking about international expansion, you're growing and scaling a team, your processes have to change.

So for me personally, I was kind of looking for late stage growth companies that would offer a set of challenges and opportunities based on the stage of the company. And then the last for me, as for most people is people and the people that you work alongside of, and particularly in the CPO role, the CPO and the founder CEO relationship is really critical. And so finding a CEO may or may not be the founder who you feel like you can have a really strong partnership, I think is another piece that I've looked for when I've been pursuing various opportunities.

Rashmi

That's awesome. So in that statement that you just mentioned, was there anything you wished you knew the second time as being a CPO for Calendly that you know the first time?

Annie

Great question. I think probably the lessons that I learned as a CPO of Glassdoor that have now sort of evolved in terms of how I've approached it the second time, they go across a couple different areas. I think the first one is on the people side, just how critical it is to get a strong product leadership team in place and how much of an unlock it is to be able to do that, to do your role most effectively. So when you go join an organization as a CPO, you've got lots of different challenges and opportunities that you're navigating between, you've got product challenges, you might have people challenges, you might have process challenges, and hiring is one of those that I think takes a lot of time, but it's one of those items that going into the world a second time, having a laser focus on if I get a strong leadership team in place, it will unlock the ability for me to be most effective in my role.

And then you hire a great leadership team and then they hire great people and it's sort of this continual benefit type of investment. So on the people side that's probably one thing I approached differently the second time. I think the second is on the process side, we talked a little bit about different phases of a company's growth and I think you have to consistently be monitoring your sort of "processes" and making tweaks as the company evolves. What worked when you were just one product isn't going to work when you have multiple.

What worked when you were just serving the United States isn't going to work when you're serving customers across the globe. And so I think you have to be comfortable changing things up pretty frequently and adapting to the new reality so that your processes can actually be in service of you delivering better products and not something that slows you down or we're just checking boxes because this is the process that we've always used in order to build a product. So I think that's the second.

And then maybe the last for me is in terms of the actual product itself, the reality of how long it takes for bet to pay off, learned that the first time of you say you want something to be successful in driving revenue in three years, you probably want to start working on it in year one, at least laying the foundation to test your way into whatever the solution might be to the area you're going after. And so just knowing how long it takes for new product bets to play off, laying that foundation sooner rather than may appear to be needed, is probably the last area of lessons learned from time one to time two.

Rashmi

That's awesome. Why be a CPO for a second time? What really attracted you from a Calendly perspective?

Annie

At the end of the day, I love building great products and building great teams. And so it's pretty much a dream job to have the opportunity to work on great products that serve customers and solve for their problems. And then the opportunity to build and scale and grow great teams. So it was hard for me to imagine another role that would be as professionally satisfying after having gone through the CPO role once. And so I sort of said, let's do this again. Let's go back to a bit of an earlier stage company and kind of do it all over again. So the really why do it for me was I love the job, I love the role, and I couldn't imagine doing anything else at the time. And I still feel like I have more to give in the role.

Rashmi

That's really inspiring actually. Double clicking a little bit more on that now, talking about the preparation to actually become a chief product officer. I know you touched upon a little bit as you're moving across the different companies and the different kind of skill sets, but over the course of the years, what were some of the critical skills that you actively looked to seek during the course of the time to prepare for a CPO position?

Annie

Great question. To me there's really maybe call it three different areas of what the change is when you go from whether it's a VP of product or a couple clicks down from the CPO and the CPO role. I think the first is you go from being a functional leader to an executive. And what that means is you're not just responsible for your function any longer, you need to have a deep understanding of the business, the ins and outs of how the business works. You need to be able to form an opinion and weigh in on a diverse set of topics across the company. You're now making decisions on behalf of the company, not just the function. And I think you have to level up and think about the greater good of the company as the most important criteria for how you make decisions.

So I think that's the first is it's this shift from I own product and I lead product and I lead my product team to, I'm an executive at the company and I need to be well versed in how the other departments operate, the numbers, the mechanics of the business and actually sit at that executive table and be able to weigh in on a diverse set of topics, so I think that's the first. I think the second is hiring. You go from a lot of IC PM hiring, maybe if you're in the VP role, depending on the company size, you also have managers of managers, so maybe you've done some managing of managers but I think when you become a CPO, your ability to hire great product leaders becomes critical. And oftentimes, and this has been the case for me at both

Glassdoor and at Calendly, you might also lead other functions like design and research.

And so a big part of the role is now hiring functional leaders in a function that you don't necessarily have as much experience in. I've never been an IC designer or a researcher and so I think hiring and the way you hire and build out with a focus on the product leadership team is a pretty big shift from just hiring IC PM's. And then maybe the last one is just this evolution from really being held accountable to execution to your main job is vision and strategy. You go from primarily being responsible for ... Of course, you have influence on vision, you have influence on strategy, you may even have a strategy for your own product area.

But at the end of the day your job is execution and making sure that we're shipping the features and the functionality that we said we're going to ship, that actually makes the impact we said we were going to make to hit some goal and service the company to, I'm now responsible for where are we going? What is this product going to evolve to in the next three to five years? And what's our product strategy? The teams can then use to really do their roadmap planning. So I think all of those are pretty big shifts in terms of how you think about your role. And so it's various levels of training. There's on the job training, there's certainly lots you can read around how to do it, but there's also a lot of things you just have to kind of do by doing them and learning on the job as well.

Rashmi

And that's awesome. You hit upon on a great point there to being able to build not just a PM function, but even the UX and the design and those auxiliary functions as well. So how did you learn to build those teams as well as the chief product officer?

Annie

Yeah. I think that it really starts with hiring great functional leaders for those disciplines. And then once you've found your head of design or your head of research and you've found the best in class leader for that area, then I think it's really important to empower those leaders. Sometimes we have a tendency to, when we've never done the function before or we don't have as much context, you can kind of go either way. You can either go really deep in the details because you don't necessarily know enough to know enough what's going on, or you can hire the right people and empower them and then hold them accountable ultimately to whatever results you need them to drive. And so I tend to lean more towards hire great people, functional leaders who are best in class and experts at their discipline and then really empower them and create some milestones to check in around are they being successful in the way I need them to be without being involved in a lot of the day to day decision making.

And I think the last thing is really, your job then as the CPO, if you do have different functional leaders is all about connecting the dots and it's all about that glue between, if we have some sort of product area that we want to go invest in, in a couple different quarters, well, we better start doing the research and discovery on that this quarter, in which case we need to make sure that there's design resources and there's research resources and there's a product manager. And so from where I sit, a lot of the work is connecting the dots between these various functions to make sure we're all kind of one well-oiled machine.

Rashmi

And in that, especially while staying on the topic of building these teams, getting the right people in the teams, any learnings from there? Anything, I wouldn't say failures per se, but any learnings from there that you took through every role pretty much as you were reaching the CPO?

Annie

Yeah. I think a lot about hiring teams is no different than kind of a sports team, where everyone can't be the pitcher or everyone can't be on offense. You need a balance of offense and defense and depending on who you're playing, you're going to rotate in the right players to match the competition. And so I think that hiring product teams to me is pretty similar in that you want a very diverse set of skills and backgrounds and experiences that you can draw on depending on the type of product problem that you're trying to solve. And then I think it really also evolves as the company goes through those different phases of growth that we talked about. When you're an early stage company, pre-product market fit, the role of product manager is a lot of times is to just execute. And so that profile of a product manager is very different than maybe when you have product market fit and now you're kind of moving into hyper growth and a lot of the product development work is, how do I make this thing that's working continue to work?

How do I create predictability around our roadmap? How do I make sure that we're well integrated into the plans of the rest of the company? And then you move into late stage growth and now it's all about multi-product portfolios and international expansion and product market fit expansion. And so, depending on where you are in that journey, I think you will need various different skill sets of product managers. And so I would say to close out on your question, maybe lessons learned is if you have a bias for a certain archetype of product manager, I think be really clear and crisp on where you are in your product and your company's growth curve to make sure that you have a good balance of skill sets based on the competition in terms of what you're going up against, around what you need to be building and why.

Rashmi

That's great. That's really great. And if you are, let's say a step or two away from being a CPO, maybe senior director or VP of that sort or what kind of skill sets should

someone acquire in that position? I mean, you're just a step or two away from being a CPO.

Annie

Yeah. A little bit of what I touched on earlier of, if you think about going from this functional leader to the executive seat at the table, a lot of the skills there are around just business acumen, understanding the business, what are the drivers of the business and what role does product play, but also how do the other functions play within the business. And so I think trying to make sure even if you're not in that role, there's certainly still a lot you can do to learn around how the business works and what role you might need to play if you were to get the seat at the table. I think on the hiring side you've gone from maybe just IC hiring to now you're starting to do, if you're in that two clicks away, you're starting to do the manager of manager hiring.

And so I think doing it through the lens of what would this look like if I was hiring my product leadership team and thinking of it through the lens of it's, managers of managers now, but this would be my product leadership team when I get to the next level and what is the difference between the types of managers that I would want to hire in this role versus when I get to the CPO role. And then lastly, the execution to product vision and product strategy change, and you can do that in your role. As I mentioned, every function or product area can have their own product vision and their own product strategy that kind of layers up into something that's very cohesive.

And so my point is you can really practice those skills even without the title in ways that will set you up very well to be able to then when you get the role, you've already kind of done it at a maybe smaller scale as part of your function. But I think a lot of it is a bit of a mind shift's change from my only job as a functional leader, it's delivering product to really thinking much more broadly around how can product and the decisions we're making within my product area be in service of the larger company vision, the larger company strategy and our overall needs of the business.

Rashmi

That's very well said. Thank you for that. And in that sense, any resources for learning or training that you would recommend that maybe you went through?

Annie

There's so much formal training out there, which is amazing to see. There's Reforge, Silicon Valley Product Group, there's Product Talk, there's Women In Product, podcasts, newsletters, there's so much, it's almost overwhelming, but it goes back to identifying what are those skills that you're specifically looking to develop and really finding what are the courses or the podcasts or the name your publication for that, I think it can get very overwhelming to look at all the resources out there and not know where to start. But if you get really crisp and clear of like, okay, I've done a lot of

consumer but I've never done B2B, I want to really go learn about those business models, or I've been more of a feature PM and I'm looking to build out my growth skill sets, maybe I'll go take a Reforge course. So I think really important to chart your own journey based on what are the skills.

And then the second thing is on the job learning of course, but I think some of the best things you can do for your career is work for a manager who is going to focus on giving you growth opportunities that are beyond what you think you can do. And when I look back, the kind of step functions in my career have really come from when a manager pushed me to take on a project or expand my role in an area that felt kind of outside my comfort zone, but ultimately that helped me to develop new skills and experiences.

So I think so much more important than even picking what company you go to or what the actual role is, is who am I working for and is this something you're going to create on the job learning opportunities for me to grow my career? Because you can read a lot and listen to a lot and that's all great and important and you can't really beat on the job learning. So I'd say really focus on trying to find a manager who can help create those growth paths for you.

Rashmi

That's awesome. And any examples or any situations of how you found such folks who would really push you and push you to the next level to really get that done? Any tips there?

Annie

Yeah. I think there's luck and then there's being proactive. So I was fortunate in one of my roles to have a manager who did this for me at Box and sort of identified an opportunity for me to expand my skill outside of the world that I had been living in and pushed me during times when I sort of had self-doubt or we talk a lot about imposter syndrome, maybe where I had imposter syndrome. And then I think as you're thinking about finding new roles, so some of it is luck and who the manager is that you have today.

I think then as you go find new roles, I think you can push a lot during the interview process on the hiring manager to help request that they give you really specific examples of how they've invested it and created on the job learning opportunities for folks that they manage and make it a really clear and important part of your job seeking process. It's not just about the company or the product or the role or the salary, but actually the manager themselves.

Rashmi

That's a really great tip, thank you for that. And in this whole process, what was the hardest barrier to break in order to become a chief product officer in your experience? And why was it hard?

Annie

Yeah. This is the classic, once you haven't done it yet, it's hard to get and then once you've done it, you get all the calls. And so also similar to board work, when you haven't done board work, that's always the limiting factor to getting a board seat and then you get a board seat and then the world opens up to other board seats. And so I was really fortunate in my career up to the CPO role where I was promoted internally for my first CPO gig. So I joined Glassdoor as the VP of B2B product and then we got acquired and as part of that acquisition our CPO left and I got the opportunity to take over and lead the product team. And so mine was really an internal promotion. And so I think what that does for you is that you already have the relationships and the credibility that usually take months and years to develop and so that starts you off on a really good foot.

You also don't have to learn a new business or a new product or a new market so you ramp much more quickly in the role. And then I think you also have more of a realistic expectation of what's needed for you in the role so there's no right path, but I think oftentimes the internal promotion path, and you have to get lucky, but I think it's often overlooked because folks tend to move to new companies as the way to get promoted and do so quickly. But I think if you're in a position where you think there's a path towards upward mobility into a product leadership role, that can often be potentially not just a more successful path in the sense of potentially getting that role, but I think you actually are set up to be more successful in the role than coming in from the outside as potentially your first gig.

Rashmi

That's an awesome point there. And how were you recruited for Calendly? Is this something you approached or how did this happen for you?

Annie

Yeah. I had been at Glassdoor for about four years, had an incredible time in that role and was really looking to go back to a bit of an earlier stage company and do it all over again. So I was working with an executive recruiter and one of the roles that they were hiring for was the Calendly role. So an executive recruiter reached out to me and that's how I had the introduction into Calendly.

Rashmi

That's awesome. And I think definitely you mentioned about how it's important from a CEO standpoint, how the relationship you build and the kind of relationship that

you had with them. Anything around that for folks, how do you really work with the CEO? How do you make this as a team?

Annie

I think what tends to happen is CEOs will get to a place where the company's scaled really fast and they try to hire other executive team and so they go to hire a CPO. And I think one of the challenges that tends to happen is CEOs either aren't clear on what they're trying to hire for or they are clear on what they're trying to hire for, but it's not actually in line with what the product leader wants to do. So I'll give you examples. I think oftentimes founder CEOs will think they have a gap in execution and really it's a gap in sort of vision and strategy. And so they go hire an operator when really they just needed a visionary or vice versa, they go hire the visionary when really they just needed a great operator, because the role that the CEO wants to continue to play and should continue to play is to be that visionary.

And so I think getting really crisp and clear from the CEO who you might go work with on what are the skill sets that they're really looking for, what is the archetype of the type of product leader that they're trying to bring in and what gaps are they trying to close? That's the first step. And I think the second is you as the potential CPO, making sure that you have an honest assessment of what do you want in the role. There's some CPOs who really love operations and the execution and they're very happy to have a partner who's their CEO, who's really driving vision and strategy and vice versa. Others really want to own that vision.

And so be honest with yourself around where do you spike from a skill set perspective but also in interest because the worst mismatch is when that's not clear and then you get into the roles and the product leader thinks they signed up for one role and the CEO thinks they hired the product leader to do something else and then no one's happy and that just trickles down into the product team and you can feel it everywhere. So I think it's just making sure you're really crisp upfront around what are the skills that the company's hiring for and do those match with where you want to be as a product leader.

Rashmi

That's an awesome wisdom I would say. Thank you. Thank you so much for that. And in this process, how did you learn yourself for the board approvals? Because that's one of the huge part with respect to hiring the CPO or any leadership position in the company, I would think, right?

Annie

Do you mean board in terms of me presenting to the company board or joining boards?

Rashmi

To the company, basically with Calendly, for example. I think one of the rounds of discussions would be with the board for you to come on board. So let's start with that for now.

Annie

Yeah. Anytime you're preparing for a board meeting or any meeting where you don't necessarily know what the questions are going to be, a couple different thoughts. I think the first is going through an exercise beforehand, oftentimes it's called a pre-mortem versus a post-mortem where you're sort of like, what are all the things that could have gone wrong in this board meeting? What are all the questions that they might ask that I don't necessarily know the answer to? And really going through a pretty detailed outline of what are all the areas that I feel less confident in that if I were asked on the spot I'd be able to answer well? And so I think that's the first piece is, go through that exercise of, if the board meeting was a total failure, why? What are the things that could have gone wrong?

Was my presentation skills? Was it the content on my presentation? Was it the delivery or was it this set of questions that they asked me that I don't currently know the right answers to and let me go get those before the board meeting. So I think that's the first, is really kind of going through that process of what's the worst case scenario and how do I then de-risk each of those? And how do I make sure that my delivery's great, presentation's great, I have the set of questions that I don't feel confident answering and I know how to answer.

So I think that's one. And I think the second is learning what your answer is to the questions you don't know. Because you know can't know everything and so board members will ask you questions and I think if you have a really confident kind of canned answer to how to respond to something that you don't have the answer to, with how you're going to follow up and get that answer, then I think it relieves some of that pressure too where in the moment you may feel like, I don't know how to say I don't know this, but I don't actually fully know the answer.

And so you give some sort of me mediocre response that sounds like you don't really know what you're talking about, but you're too afraid to say you don't know what you're talking about. And so I think the more you can get that phrase, whatever that phrase is for you, that feels really comfortable, you shouldn't be expected to know everything on the spot, but you should be able to have a follow up and the board have confidence you're going to come back with an answer.

Rashmi

That's awesome, thank you. And from a CPO perspective once you are a CPO, what are the responsibilities? I know you talked about being able to think about the products not just as a product function but more at the company level. Describe the

responsibilities as a chief product officer. And I know we touched a little bit upon how it's different from a VP of product, but really describe the responsibilities as you see and how has it been different from being the CPO at Calendly versus Glassdoor?

Annie

Certainly. In terms of overall responsibilities, I think I've used this bucketing already in this conversation, but I like to think about people, process and product. And so on the people side, your job is to create the best product team that you can on this planet. And so I think the responsibility there, again, it's both getting that strong product leadership team in place, but it's also creating a culture of a couple of different things. I think one culture is of finding ways to make sure that the talent that you have and the high caliber talent you have is engaged. So oftentimes that can come through making sure that you have a really empowered product team, that everyone's super clear on what their roles are and what they're being asked to deliver to the business and that you really let product managers own a problem space and sort of hold them accountable to a metric.

And so, one part of the culture is ensuring that your high caliber talent that exists already wants to stay. And then I think the second is how do you really attract new talent? And a big part of I think attraction and also retention is how you create a culture where you can say, come work with me on this team and the opportunity that you go to take after this will be so far superior to anything you would've gotten without having the opportunity to work here. And so I like to think through the lens of how do I help create career accelerating opportunities for folks who come on the team? And then I think that brings in the best talent and then that helps retain the talent because they know that they're growing and they're sort of step functioning up levels in their career by spending time on your team. So I think that's the first is a lot around people and building the talent but also creating a really, really great product culture.

I think the second piece is on the process side, you go from being part of the process or at the mercy of the process to you're responsible for deciding are these the right processes? And you're now the one to say, I think we should iterate on this process, or I think we should develop this new process because I'm seeing challenges that are happening in this part of our product development life cycle. And so I think you go from being kind of part of the process to being in charge of ... in partnership with the whole product team, but being responsible for making sure that all your processes are the right ones and that they're not slowing people down and that they're actually impactful. So I think that's one bucket.

And then the last one on the product side itself is mostly just that transition of you're not just responsible for execution, it's really all about that product vision and strategy. And your number one job is to create that north star, make it really clear where we're

going and how are we going to get there. And then help build the team to help get you there and support the team to execute, to deliver the outcome, so that's kind of the three ... And ultimately to close out on the product side, your job is to deliver impact. And so you're not held accountable for releasing features, you're held accountable for what's the actual impact that you're able to drive through your product efforts? I think that's on the responsibility side.

The differences between, for me, Glassdoor and Calendly is really more around business model. And so Glassdoor is a consumer marketplace and so most of the revenue for Glassdoor comes through advertising. The more traffic you get to the platform, the more you can get those consumers in front of employers. And if they apply to jobs, that advertising model is the business model for Glassdoor. For Calendly, we're more of a product led growth SaaS company. And so, it's a subscription business, so very different than an advertising business. And so the reason I call this distinction is there's a very different product challenges that come from those business models. At Glassdoor traffic and getting jobs seeker traffic to the site was incredibly important.

And so we are really constantly trying to help attract and acquire traffic to the platform because ultimately, we can then serve them up potential jobs they might want to apply to and if they apply to those jobs, we're able to monetize the traffic in that way. And so that's a very different problem set than Calendly where traffic actually comes to us for free. It's a viral product. When people use the product, they introduce the product to new people who then use the product and so consumer acquisition is not where a lot of the product challenges come from because we have this sort of beautiful viral loop instead it's a lot more around, this is a retention product.

We need to retain users and we need to convert them from going from our free plan to our paid subscription either monthly or annually. So the product problems between the two business models in many ways are different, there's also a lot of similarities. You got to create a great product experience that's engaging, whether you're a consumer advertising business or you're a B2B SaaS product, but the levers I guess, that grow the business are different. And so the emphasis on the type of product work that most of the team works on, I think changes depending on the business model.

Rashmi

Got it. In that sense then, I think you touched upon, I really loved your career accelerating movements and how do you create them, just love that phrase that you put out there. You touched upon this, about translating your experiences across all your different career points. How were you able to translate your experience per se when you moved across these companies in the sense were there something that

you had to learn afresh or what has been the common theme across these experiences as well on the other side?

Annie

I think at the end of the day, really strong product managers or product people prioritize the right problems to solve and then they identify the best solution to solve those problems. So regardless of what industry you're in, regardless of the business model, you have to deeply understand the target market that you're going after and the needs and the behaviors of that market. And then you have to figure out, how do I solve problems for these users based on their needs and do it better than anyone else can? And so what that means is at the very core, it's a couple different skills. One, it's strategic thinking, right? It's prioritization of the right problems to solve for your target customers that are going to allow you to win. So there's a component of strategic thinking, which is really a lot around prioritization and what's going to help you win within the target market you're going after.

There's a whole bucket around what is referred to as product sense, that sort of ability to partner with design and engineering to create a winning product solution to whatever the prioritized problem is that you've decided on. And then leadership skills to which essentially says how do you inspire people? How do you get people excited? How do you get them to want to work on your winning solution? And then lastly is analytical thinking, which is how do we make sure that we're constantly testing and iterating and learning and testing and iterating and learning.

And so I think it doesn't really matter what industry you're in, the core components of great product management, which ultimately I think leads up to great product leadership stays the same. I think there are certainly industry specific nuances that you have to learn on the job. In my case, going from financial services to enterprise software, to a consumer marketplace and now a PLG kind of SaaS company there's nuances, but I think regardless, those same skill sets are required to be successful.

Rashmi

Awesome. And in some of the things that you mentioned, were there anything else you want to add from what's your superpowers been across all of these?

Annie

Yeah. The number one job I think for any product leader is to create the clarity around product vision and strategy and then ensure that everyone is executing in service of that vision and strategy. And for the times I'd say when my teams have been most successful are when that's incredibly clear and I've done my job and they're empowered to own all the day to day decisions around how we're going to execute against this strategy and service of vision. And the times when my teams have been less successful have been when I haven't created that clarity around vision

and strategy. And so what happens is people either don't know, how does my work layer up into something bigger? Why am I working on this thing over here and that person's working on this thing over there? And the dots are not connected and so then no one really knows who they're supposed to be partnering with.

If there's dependencies, no one really knows what are the trade offs that we need to make on a day to day basis and so you can feel it in the way that teams operate. They feel very siloed in nature and so I think the times that I have not done that successfully, you can really feel it in the team dynamic and ultimately in the products that we're delivering to market. So the common theme is just how important it is to create that clarity around vision and strategy and then to really get the teams to be executing successfully in service of this really clear and articulated vision and strategy, I think is the unlock to high performing product teams that ultimately deliver impact.

Rashmi

That's amazing. Thank you for that. And in this process, did you think you have to make any personal or professional sacrifices in order to become a CPO? How do you view that?

Annie

Yeah. I was fortunate, I had children late in life, so I was already the CPO at Glassdoor when I had my first child. And then I was about a year into my role at Calendly when I had my second child. And so pros and cons around when you have children in your career, but I think for me what that meant was all the years leading up to getting the CPO role, I could be really selfish with my time and I could work on nights and weekends when I needed to, and I didn't have to ruthlessly prioritize like you do when you're a parent. And so I think there's also a lot of cons for having children when you're later in life, but at least in terms of getting to CPO, I didn't have a lot of trade offs to make because at least as it relates to having children, because I didn't have children yet.

I think now that I have children, I think on some levels it actually makes me a better leader. You have to ruthlessly prioritize, you have to figure out how to get the same amount done in less time. And I think for me personally, it makes me appreciate my job a lot, maybe more because children are incredible and amazing and also exhausting and so you spend a weekend with them and you loved every minute of it and you're also very happy to get back to work on Monday morning and have a bit of a mental break. And so, I think in some ways it's made me a better leader. But I think at the end of the day, this whole notion of balance in my mind, it's impossible to achieve, I think you're always doing one better than the other. And there are times when I'm a better mother and there are times when I'm a better CPO.

And I've just tried to give myself grace of there's a season for everything and I won't have young children forever and I won't have this job forever. And so I think just being at peace with the fact that you're never going to have this perfect balance and harmony, you're going to be always leaning into being better at one or the other. And trying to give myself grace is the that I've tried to approach motherhood and in this role.

Rashmi

That's very well said, thank you. Thank you for that. And fast forward, let's say five years down the lane, how do you think this chief product officer role might change, if it does?

Annie

It's a good question. The best companies are product led companies, and that's not product led growth as a business model, for companies where product is at the forefront and really leading the charge in terms of how the business evolves. And so I think if anything, this role is going to become only more and more important over time as that sort of continues to play out. And I think CPOs and product leaders and product managers are all going to continue to be in high demand.

And if anything, I think because many companies are moving to this product led model, the responsibilities of a product manager and product leaders has evolved to not just be about the product, but to really have to think about the product as a function of the business. And so I think it will become a really great starting ground for future CEOs because many of the types of decision making that has to be done when you're in a product leadership role resemble that of what you would do in a CEO role. So I think if anything, it's just going to continue to be more important and CPOs and product leaders and product managers will continue to be in high demand.

Rashmi

That's awesome. And maybe one last question, what headline would Annie Pearl make beyond a chief product officer? Where do you want to go beyond this?

Annie

Yeah. I love giving back in the form of coaching, mentoring, advising, all of that fun stuff. And I get just so much joy when helping someone get through a hard problem where I go, "Hey, I've seen that before. I experienced that back at my startup or I experienced that back when I was a CPO at Glassdoor." And so I could imagine a world, I would love a world where I get to continue that work in a more formal capacity one day in the future.

Rashmi

Elizabeth, you heard that, right? So we just can't let go of Annie anymore. And maybe just to wrap this up, one last thing. Any other advice, Annie, to the women and directors who are directors or VPs, anything else you want to add?

Annie

I think the common theme across my career that I touched on at the beginning is just identify what are those things in your skill set, in your experiences where there's gaps and not gaps in the sense of, it's a resume and I need to fill it, but where you really truly believe if you acquired those skills, you'd be able to be a better future CPO or future VP of product, and I think getting really clear with yourself on, how am I going to go acquire these skills or acquire these experiences? And it may be in non-traditional ways and it may not feel like the right corporate ladder. I think Cheryl Sandberg has the great quote around careers being a jungle gym. And I intentionally or not, I think I've followed that as part of my career going from opportunity to opportunity through that lens. And so yeah, I just encourage folks to get clear on what those pieces are and then create a path that gets you there.

Rashmi

That's awesome. Thank you so much again for your time. Really, really appreciate it.