



Episode 47: Heather Gordon Friedland, Chief Product Officer, Ancestry

Rashmi:

We are very thankful for your time and welcome to Women In Product.

And I think to get started, we would all love to hear how you got started with product management and at what point in your career did you actually feel the need to be a product executive or a chief product officer?

Heather:

Oh, two really good questions, maybe we'll start with the beginning of my career and then we can talk about how it evolved from there. I was really lucky that I went to college. I was an undergraduate in the late '90s, as the internet was growing and becoming more and more available through dial up technology to more people around the United States and certainly the world. And so I was watching, as I was studying in my degree, full-time communications and business and all these different topics, I was watching the world change around me and I was really fascinated with that. And my senior year at college, I worked full-time outside of school while finishing my degree full-time for a startup called jump.com. It was located just off-campus. It was a number of students or just recent graduates building a version of what is today known as Outlook, but for the web, Circa 1998.

And it was fascinating and a wonderful experience to learn what it would take to build, hands-on, a product from scratch. And I worked with a team of engineers from my college and I was the only person who had a non-engineering background. And that was my first PROE into product. Though we didn't call it product back then, I think my title officially was marketing manager. But I basically was the one customer-minded person, working with the designers and redesigning the website, working with engineers to define the features, working with businesses that we were trading traffic deals with and managing what today is largely product management as a discipline. And it was an incredible experience. And by the end of my senior year of college, we wound up getting acquired by Microsoft, which catapulted me off to the West Coast.

I grew up on the East Coast and I went to college on the East Coast and really helped me propel my career to work at a very large technology company that knew what it took to build software at scale. So that's the beginning of my product journey. And I would say over the last two decades, I've been incredibly lucky to have found something I love doing and then to have been able to have the opportunity to grow into that. As the career and the discipline has grown, I've been able to grow with it, which has been amazing.

Rashmi:

That's awesome. And when did you feel that you had to be or you would love to be a product executive? At what stage in your career?

Heather:

Inevitably, I would say, I don't think I ever thought when I was little, when I grow up, I'm going to be a chief product officer. That was never on my mind. But inevitably, as all those situations and opportunities showed up in the workplace, I kept just wanting to grow myself. I wanted to try new products. I wanted to try working on different types of business challenges. I wanted to work on the new things that MSN or Microsoft was looking to launch. And so every single time, I was just always there first in line saying, I want to try that thing or I want to go build that thing with you. And I organically started to grow my career because my experiences were so vast and people would just make bets on me or they would know my brand halo within the company and they would approach me with new ideas or things that they wanted to partner on to get built.

And so I wound up growing through those experiences alongside my colleagues overtime. And I would say the things that became clear were, leadership roles kept falling in my lap. People would say, oh, we need somebody to help lead this effort, or oh, there's this team over here that needs a manager, would you be interested in taking on this opportunity? And through my internal network within the company, those types of opportunities kept surfacing. As well though, there were times where I raised my hand and I would say, oh, I hear there's this new project coming up, is this something I can help in partner with you on? And so I would raise my hand at things that seemed interesting to me and that helped me grow.

So I definitely didn't grow up thinking I want to be a chief product officer when I grow up. And in fact, there was no CPO role until maybe the last decade.

Rashmi:

Agree. Yep.

Heather:

So early on in my career, I didn't know CPO was even a path I could be on. I was just always looking to tackle new product problems, new customer problems, and to continue to grow myself, whether that meant taking on management opportunities or working alongside a leader and supporting them as an IC right hand. I took on many different types of responsibilities but I was always interested in challenging and growing myself. And I always wound up falling into, either because I volunteered for it or I was voluntold new types of challenges where I was managing and growing my career and taking on more and more responsibility along the way.

And I would say probably around the time I was at eBay, which was after my time at Microsoft, I started realizing that there was a path to chief product officer because we hired one into eBay, and then all of a sudden, I realized, oh, that's something that I could potentially do one day. And I started getting intrigued by it. But until late in my career, I don't think I even knew this was a path available to me.

Rashmi:

No, that's really interesting. And during this journey, what detours or pivots did you have to undertake or did you make to get to the chief product officer position?

Heather:

I think in terms of detours or pivots, for me, I luckily found my way into product pretty early days. I definitely played around with the idea of working on more of the business side versus the execution side early in my career. And I did take about a one to two year stint as a business planner or a product planner, is what we called that job title at Microsoft at the time, because I was curious to see what it would look like if you didn't have a longer term view on business opportunities for the company.

And what I found was that I enjoyed my day job, but what I enjoyed the most was all the new to PM people coming into my office every day asking for help on the PM problems they were trying to solve. And I realized after doing this so many times with so many people who wanted my mentorship, that I really just missed managing product managers and I should probably go back to my trade. And that was probably the big pivot I did. Along that timeframe, I also debated if I wanted to get a degree, if I wanted to get an MBA. And I even went, I signed up for a prep course, I started practicing on the GMAT exams.

And then I finally decided by looking around, I'm like, everybody who's either at my level or even a level below me at Microsoft, they're just coming out of their MBA, but I'm already there doing those types of jobs. I decided I didn't need to get that in order to propel my career and product, but that was another one I debated along the journey.

Rashmi:

Got it, got it. No, that was very interesting with the way you experimented and you got back into product because others actually wanted you to come back into product more so that way. And let's talk about your Glassdoor experience first to begin with, how did you land in this position? Where you recruited for this or did you actually approach Glassdoor?

Heather:

Yeah, it's a great question. I was recruited in through an executive search recruiter, but it came in through my network. And I would say that's part of the reason why maintaining your network, fostering your relationships with people you've worked with is so important. It's also a great example of how women and product can help build those connections and open the doors to new opportunities, you may not already be aware of as a result of your involvement in groups and networking events.

Rashmi:

No, that's very true. Absolutely true. And I'm entirely enjoying the community effort that goes on with the Women in Product, for sure. And what did you know the second time as a chief product officer that you wished you knew the first time when you became a chief product officer?

Heather:

This is a really good, hard question. I would say what I knew the second time was to be more confident in myself. The first time you're doing anything, it's the first time

and so you're not sure what to expect. You don't know what your strengths are, you don't know necessarily how to do the thing that you're being asked to do. Every bit of it is a first time learning experience. And so the second time around, just like your second time having a child, your second time trying to ride a bicycle, you get to benefit from knowing the scope, the expectations and knowing with confidence that you've done it before, and so you have a leg up on the role. And so I'd say that confidence of having done it before is probably the best part about having my second time as a chief project officer.

Rashmi:

That's amazing. That is so relatable, completely relatable to what you said. And why be a chief product officer for the second time?

Heather:

I mean, why not? I honestly feel like I have the best job in the world right now. And when our CEO approached me and gave me the opportunity to take on the chief product officer role at Ancestry, I immediately said yes. Ancestry's a really unique opportunity. It's a phenomenal business. Our customers absolutely love our products. We have high NPS scores from our customers. We are able to provide them with some of the most powerful and insightful information about their heritage, who they are, where they're from, who they're related to. And for many of our customers are just impossible to know questions without our products.

We have adoptees using our products and finding parents that they never knew, finding relatives that they never knew they had in the world. And so it's an incredibly powerful purpose and mission driven company. And it's part of what we live, eat and breathe in the product organization every single day, is this amazing opportunity to build those experiences and to better connect people with the world around them with their sense of identity and their knowledge of who they are and where they came from. So when the opportunity came up, I absolutely said yes.

Rashmi:

Well, that's awesome. Love the sense of how you really felt close to the mission to even take up that role. Love that. And let's dive into now the preparation that's required to become a chief product officer. What kind of skillsets did you actively seek to acquire during the course of time in order to be a chief product officer?

Heather:

I think it's like any job, to be truly great to lead others means you have to know what it's like to do it yourself. And so for me, it really starts with the basics, becoming great at your craft of product, building great relationships with engineers, building great relationships with designers, sitting in hours and hours of customer user research interviews or conducting them yourself. You need to roll up your sleeves and really know how to do the craft and the discipline of product well. And I think through that experience, others will gravitate towards you and look up to you as someone that they can learn from. And so I think it really starts with the fundamentals of product management.

But there are other things that you can do along the journey to better prepare yourself as well. And for me, I look back now and I'm so thankful that I was always raising my hand at new ideas and new opportunities because it was that diversity of work experience that has really enabled me to be a great product leader, because any kind of problem that I'm going to be working on, I've often seen before at some point in my career, I've worked on a product that had that type of problem before.

Let me give you an example, at Ancestry, we run a subscription business. I've had the chance to also work on advertising based businesses. I've had the chance to work on B2B businesses that have a sales motion and a sales team behind it. Each one of those types of businesses is a very different business to drive the product for and the needs of the product team, the skills, the different kinds of product challenges you're going to have to solve day-to-day look remarkably different. For my marketplace experience at eBay, that really prepared me for the marketplace like experience I was going to have at Glassdoor, where you have a group of consumers coming in to read content that others contributed.

So there's an amazing user generated content flywheel happening there, but alongside it, you've got businesses coming in to try and recruit those job seekers and those curious about what it's like to work at their company, to be interested in to turn into potential employees. And so you had two dynamics you had to solve for. And so those are examples of the diversity of some of the breadth and depth of my career experience that I think has given me the amazing opportunity to be able to tackle a lot of different product problems.

Rashmi:

Got it, got it. No, and a question popped up while you were talking about this. You talked about the diversity of work experience and how you took on the challenges, were you overstretching yourself at some point or how did you balance that?

Heather:

That's a great question. Yes and yes, I've always been one to challenge myself and I find I do my best work when I am challenging myself and trying on something different or hard. I love doing it in partnership with other people, and that's part of what I've so loved about being a product manager throughout my career. I love to solve puzzles and problems, and these are things I did even as a young girl and now as an adult, I feel like it's my job every single day to solve really hard problems. We just get to do it together and brainstorm together, which makes it even more fun because then we get to learn together.

I'll tell you a story, and maybe this is what you were wondering about. I'm a mom, I have two children, I have a 14-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter. And when I went on maternity leave to have my son, it was very difficult to make the decision. This is my first child, about coming back to work. And as I came back to work, I decided I wanted to move from being a manager to an individual contributor role because I wanted to just focus on my own work versus having to supervise and manage others. And I thought that would be a way for me to carve out better work-life balance. What I found after about a year of doing that senior level I see work was I did get a lot of joy from it but I missed that challenge.

I missed feeling like I was growing again. And it was around that time that eBay started calling me about a potential role. And that's eventually how I wound up getting into eBay. And looking back on it, I think what started happening was, I was trading off this time that I would be spending with my newborn at home to go to work. And as he was starting to get older and as he was starting to toddle around, I realized these are precious moments and if I'm going to be spending this time away from work, it needed to be worth something.

The bar went up for my expectations of myself at work, it had to be worth it. And so that was when I started seeking out newer and bigger challenges as well. And so I've yin and yanged a few times like that throughout my career, where I did pivot from a management role into an IC role for various reasons of balance. I did toy with that again when I had my second child a few years later, my daughter who's now 11. But I have always found myself gravitating very soon after, back to these big management leadership roles.

Rashmi:

No, that's a really great call out, I think for all of us to say, with some of the things that you have to leave behind and for the things that you want, are they really worth it and make it happen. So really good call out, out there.

Heather:

Yeah. But it takes help. I think a parent, regardless if you're a female or a male or what your background is, you need help, you need support of some kind from your community, from your family, from your partner or perhaps from childcare that you can hire. And that was a big ingredient in my success of creating balance for myself and my family, was knowing that my children were well cared for and that enabled me to feel confident that I could leave them and that they would be okay and frankly, happy they would have a great day while mom was going to work today.

Rashmi:

Yeah, no, absolutely, absolutely. And let me narrow down my question, specifically to say, if there are folks who are probably a step or two away from being a chief product officer, what kind of skills should they acquire?

Heather:

As you propel in your career, you move from being a director, maybe you're a senior director, even a vice president, a lot of your day-to-day job is still around the execution, the planning of the work, the strategy, the metrics, the data around the planning of the work that your team is going to be working on. But you're probably spending a lot of your time still in the product development life cycle. You're talking to engineers, you're talking to designers, you're working with researchers, you're working with analytics. As you move up to being a chief product officer, a lot of my time is now spent with the senior leadership team because I move from, earlier in my career, focusing in on what's the project or the problem I'm trying to solve that's very finite, to one that's, what's the business set of problems that we need to solve together?

And so having more experience and empathizing with the viewpoints of your marketing team, of your finance team, of member services or customer support, of your engineering leadership and really understanding the bigger picture problems that they're trying to solve, I think can help you unlock a different set of perspectives as to how to approach the impact that your work can have. And that has been a big shift. I definitely spend a lot more time with the senior leadership team on a day-to-day basis than I would've expected when I was earlier stage in my career.

Rashmi:

And how did you prepare for this role beyond just the skillsets? Let's talk in the context of Glassdoor first.

Heather:

One of the best ways to prepare for a role, especially if you are interviewing, you're assessing if a company is the right fit for you, is trying to assess what I would say are four elements of evaluating a company. Number one would be, is the business, the stage of the business a good fit for you? Either because you've done it before and you understand what it takes to go from a tiny startup to starting to scale a startup, or you've worked at a big company and so you think those skills are really applicable to the needs of this company you're talking to. So just trying to understand and assess what is the business dynamic and what are the challenges and the business problems I'm going to need to solve, and can I get excited about that? Do I feel like my skills and my experiences are going to be a great fit for what that business is going to need next?

So I'd say assessing the business and the dynamics of the business is important. I think number two, and maybe I should have numbered this number one, but I'll say, is the product a fit for you? For me personally, if you look at my experiences, you look at eBay, you look at Microsoft, you look at Ancestry, these are products that I've used every single day and I love using them. I was an Ancestry user building out my family tree years before I actually ever started working here.

Rashmi:

Interesting.

Heather:

And so when Ancestry called me, it was a very natural fit for me to be like, sure, I'll talk to Ancestry, I've used your product, I know what you're about. And so I think if you can find that personal sense of fit, is this a product that I can get behind and that I can put my brand name on and then I'm going to feel proud to add, is that next chapter on my story, on my resume, I think is an important part of that equation, especially for a product leader. For me, I do my best work when I love the products that I'm working on and I enjoy using them. So I'd say product is number one on my list, even though I made it number two. I would say people is another big one. Who are the people you're going to work with every day?

Do they inspire you? Are they going to help you grow and learn? And what is it that you can do alongside them? And do you feel proud and excited about those achievements together? And if you're in a C-suite level role, you want to assess what is the experience of that general senior leadership team and is this a team, I believe, can help make this company successful, that we can work together to drive this company forward? And that's another element of the people part that I think is particularly important for the CPO role. And then finally, it's culture and purpose. What is the company about? And does that match to your own sense of identity and purpose as you think about what you're looking to tackle next in your career?

Rashmi:

Got it, got it. Very well said. And were there any other additional preparations required for Ancestry per se?

Heather:

Knowing the product of Ancestry, I think, is critical because so much of what we do, it's a people based product, it really unlocks people's abilities to understand who they are and where they came from. And so I think knowing the product was essential. There were a few other pieces to it as well for me, number one was just having a sense of who the senior leadership team was. And then number two was really having a sense of what the vision for where the company was going to go and really spending time with our CEO to better understand her vision and what she saw as the future, gave me confidence to better understand what I could foresee for myself and my team and if I could see myself being successful, helping to deliver on that vision for the company moving forward. And so those were a few other things that I was trying to assess as I was considering this is a next step opportunity.

Rashmi:

Got it, got it. And any other resources or training materials that you would probably recommend for someone?

Heather:

There are many. I think there's so much document on the internet today about product and I'm just looking up new topics and seeing what I find. But groups like products that count is one, for example. They create networking events, often in-person, sometimes virtual. I think they've gone back to more in-person events. Same thing with Women In Product being another big one. And I think these types of organizations provide phenomenal opportunities to partner up and learn about key topics and maybe even give you opportunities to speak or to manage your own ability to reach out to the community yourself.

And so I think there are opportunities to train and learn in those ways as well. The final one, I would say, is I started reaching out to other chief product officers and friends of mine who are founders or CEOs of companies to try and get a better sense of what it was like to be in their shoes or to try and get a better sense of, from their vantage point, what do great CPOs look like and why?

And how can I learn from those examples? To use that to educate my own North Star, about where I wanted to be as I continue to grow into my role. And some of my most fabulous learnings were from dinners I would have with other CPOs, sometimes small groups, sometimes it would just be a one-on-one, where I could just really discuss, these are the problems we're trying to face right now, have you faced them before? And how can I learn from your learnings? And those have turned into really phenomenal and trusted friendships for me, that have gone long beyond even the career types of experiences we used to just first talk about.

Rashmi:

Oh, amazing. Thank you for that. We'll have probably more questions on that later but yeah. And what was your hardest barrier to break into become a chief product officer? And why was it hard and how did you overcome that?

Heather:

All right, I'm going to share something pretty personal. For me, it was imposter syndrome. And I didn't even know what imposter syndrome was. I'm going to share a funny story for a second. I was being prepared for an interview years ago, and I was sitting with my communications person who was reading for me a list of questions that were sent in advance, and one of the questions was, how do you feel about imposter syndrome and has that been something you've faced in your career? And I said, well, what's imposter syndrome? This is maybe a year after Sheryl Sandberg's book on Lean In, that was published, and I hadn't yet read it, and I said, what's imposter syndrome? And so she's busy typing on her computer and then she takes it and she faces her laptop screen towards me. And I'm sitting there and my jaw's slowly dropping open, and I said to her, I'm like, how is this possible? This is me.

I'm like, this is the strangest thing ever. And never in my life did I know that imposter syndrome was this thing that other people experience. I just thought I was really self-conscious. I had a lot of perfectionism in my work and I thought, I'm never good enough. And I just thought that was Heather. I didn't think that was other people too. And I found that to be a really great unlock because I could give it a label and a name and I could understand it. And that through experience and looking back now, I realize I shouldn't have worried about that so much, but I did. Imposter syndrome was a real thing for me, and it's taken a lot to conquer it.

And it still rears its ugly head up once in a while, and I have to bat it down like a game of whack-a-mole at the arcade, because I've realized now by looking at colleagues and peers and friends of mine in the industry, and I've looked to mentors, I've realized now that I really am deserving of the roles that I'm in, that my experience and my work and the quality of the outcomes I've been able to create with my teams really is deserving of the roles that I have been considered for.

But back then, when I was newer and growing in my career, I definitely was feeling way more self-conscious, like, do I belong here? Do I deserve this? And I asked myself those hard questions a lot. But having that label to put on this problem, this imposter syndrome, I think has helped me identify it and better recognize it. And I feel much better about my achievements now as a result.



Rashmi:

That's amazing. Thank you. And were there any other specific challenges you faced as a female leader during your path to the CPO?

Heather:

Not necessarily in the path to CPO per se, but I would say being female and being one of the only women in the room has been something throughout my career, from my early days, where I was the only non-engineer in the room. And often, that meant I was usually either one of very few women in the room or the only woman in the room. I've had to build my own sense of skillset and confidence in that skillset to help balance out the needs for what my team was needing from me. And I think that has helped me a lot as I've continued to grow in my career because I'm accustomed to being one of very few women in the room. And coming from a more technical discipline, now I can recognize when there are opportunities to promote and recognize other people's achievements, I try and do that to help pay that sentiment forward for them and to help recognize their achievements as well.

Rashmi:

Got it. No, makes sense. And how did you learn to equip yourself a board approval because this is one of the key things with respect to being recruited for a chief product officer? And how did you prepare for those unwritten agendas or experiences?

Heather:

Well, I would say you need to have confidence to just be you. You're in the room and you're in those conversations for a reason, and you need to take pride in that. And I think the preparation part is really about understanding your audience, the same way when you're designing a product, you're trying to think about, who's the customer I'm trying to serve? You want to understand what are the things that the board needs, and in advance of those conversations, I think it's always helpful to prepare yourself by talking to the CEO, other board members, other senior leadership team members to really understand, what are the problems that the board feels that we are facing? So you can be better prepared to speak to your experience in ways that are relevant, that are going to be applicable to what the board is looking to understand about your fit. Now, that's specific to a recruiting context. I don't know if you were also interested in learning more about once you're in the job, what is it like to speak to the board.

Rashmi:

Yeah, absolutely.

Heather:

Because we do quarterly board meetings. I have one-on-one meetings with some of our board members on a fairly regular basis. And I think that same level of preparing yourself as you're heading into a conversation around readiness for a role with the board still applies as you are managing your team and your strategy through that set of responsibilities once you're in the job. And I think it's really critical as you set up your team and you set up your vision and your strategy, is to figure out how am I going to articulate this to the board in a very consistent manner, setting up a framework with clear goals and KPIs and strategies that you're going to use to go execute on a roadmap that you can present to them, and then it becomes your job to then check in on a regular basis.

For us, it's on a quarterly basis, sometimes a little bit more frequent. But I think different companies have different operating rhythms. And what they expect to hear from you is an objective view as to how you're performing based on the plan that you've laid out for them, the product strategy.

And you need to come into the room and acknowledge and own if things are going well and if things are not going as well, then give them a plan for what you're going to do based on those learnings so you can carry with them or carry them with you on your story and on your journey of what you're doing as you're building out that product vision.

Rashmi:

Got it.

Heather:

And that's a really big part of your role as the product leader.

Rashmi:

No, that's really helpful. And you mentioned a bit about the product teams and how you've really loved working with people and the teams, how did you learn to build these right teams because at the end of it, you are your team, so your team is everything there to make or break the strategy. So how did you really learn to build these right teams?

Heather:

I would say, number one, I looked around a lot as I was growing in my career and I tried to learn from the things that seemed to be working, whether that was in my team or a different team I was admiring from afar. And then I would try and understand what is it about the leader, the situation, the people that's creating this really wonderful dynamic of success. And as I've grown in my career and I've had the ability to hire, I am always looking to hire for people from different backgrounds and different backgrounds may mean how we look, may mean genders. It may also be parts of the world and it may be just be life experiences, what colleges people went to and whether or not they went to a formal degree program of some kind. But that version of diversity, I think, enables you to hire people from very different backgrounds that together, if you can push all those ideas together into one shared

brain, you now have the learnings of many more diverse mindsets working together to build great products for customers.

Let me give you an example, at Ancestry, we're looking to have products that work for people no matter where they are anywhere in the world. And so we're looking to build an Ancestry that truly works for all. In order to do that, we need a product team that can think and imagine what that Ancestry for all product needs to be because they understand the needs of different kinds of customer segments themselves. And then I think the key ingredient to building a strong team after you hire diverse perspectives, people who've worked on different kinds of product problems, people who've worked at B2B companies, B2C companies, small companies, big companies, you're looking to really round out the skills of your team.

The critical ingredient is building a culture of psychological safety. It's absolutely critical. And to me, the best teams have that sense of psychological safety, meaning I can bring my whole self to work, I can speak my mind, I can say something without worrying that somebody's going to judge it or think I'm silly or think I'm dumb and is going to judge me, but I can just speak my mind.

And even if the question is silly, let's talk about the question. That's okay. It's your question, let's answer it. And if you can build that dynamic and that culture where people feel comfortable to speak up, then you really have the power of those brains operating together and yin and yanging together to help solve problems. And I think that's when you can really take advantage of having the strongest minds that are working together to build great products. And that's really my North Star of what I'm looking to build when I'm hiring and when I'm grooming my team.

Rashmi:

Oh, that's very well said. And any learnings that you could share your personal learnings from building these product teams?

Heather:

Works more fun when you have lots of different people working on it together, wanting to win together. But I would say I have learned that personality styles matter a lot. You want people who are growth-minded and who have a natural affinity to wanting to work together to achieve greatness. I can't teach you motivation. I can teach you PM skills, I can teach you how to work better with engineers and how to ask better questions. But I think intrinsically, either you are interested in solving problems and you have this internal drive and motivation to wanting to tackle hard things. And if that's the case, we can have a really great time solving problems together. And that is one of my key learnings, is motivation is intrinsic, and I try and find people out there who really want to push themselves to achieve great things together.

Rashmi:

Oh, that's amazing. And do you think you want to change anything regarding your approach if you had a chance to go back in time?

Heather:

No. I try to live life with no regrets, and so I take what I can. Each learning builds upon itself in every moment. I am always trying to grow and learn new skills and new things. But I often try to use the perspective of, if I'm faced with a hard choice and I'm fast forward like a year from now, what is the thing I would tell myself to do right now? And I try to use that outside-in perspective to ensure that all those micro-steps you're making along the way, whether those are product decisions, decisions around your career, your relationships, I try and use that outside-in thinking to ensure that I'm not going to be able to look back and have any massive regrets. So I'm pretty happy with the choices I've made, and I absolutely love and I feel incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to build my network and to work on so many great product problems with amazing people.

Rashmi:

Wow, that's wonderful. And how did you build your successional plan at Glassdoor? Tell us about that.

Heather:

At Glassdoor, we were growing the product organization, and I had a number of leadership roles that I needed to hire for over my time there. And I knew in the back of my mind that one day, to be a great leader, you always need to have a succession plan. And so I knew that one day, I wanted to be able to feel like, for whatever reason, if I had to take a few weeks off from work, if there was a family emergency, that things wouldn't fall off a cliff, that I knew that the team would be okay and that somebody could be there to pick up and continue the great progress we were making. And as I was interviewing for a few of those leadership roles, I was interviewing with that in mind, and I was never blatant about it.

I didn't say, I am hiring for a successor. That wasn't in the job description, it wasn't in the conversation, but I was looking for someone who I felt, in the next two, three, four years, would be ready to take on more and demonstrated the leadership capabilities to get there. And I did. I found some really phenomenal strong product leaders who we did eventually groom into my succession plan. And so I was very excited to see that and to enable others to continue to take on big challenges alongside my career growth.

I think it's really important, every leader's job is to make sure that you are not only setting up your day job for success but you're forward-thinking into the future and enabling the organization to be successful. And that is a really critical part of your role.

Rashmi:

No, that's amazing. Thank you for that. And looking at some of your background and the places that you've been with respect to translating your experiences, I know you gave us a glimpse of how things you built from a marketplace perspective and eBay help with the Glassdoor, while you were making these changes or moving from



Jump to Microsoft, to eBay, to Glassdoor, to Ancestry, were you prioritizing for something while you were making these different leaps in your career?

Heather:

The things I was prioritizing for are the things we talked about before, was the next opportunity to feel like a logical next step at unlocking some growth for me career-wise. When I made the decision to move from Microsoft to eBay, I was very excited to have the chance to work on commerce. I hadn't worked on commerce before, and yet I've been an eBay seller since the very early days of eBay. And so the story you'll see if you hear my career trajectory is a common thread around products that have purpose behind them. eBay's a marketplace where anybody can literally open up a business tomorrow out of their garage. And I heard amazing stories where sellers would creatively grow their business so much on eBay that they started employing their whole town to help them manage their business on eBay. And that, I found really empowering. And because I'd been an eBay seller myself before I'd even worked there, I really had a deep understanding for what the potential that product was and even could be as it continued to grow.

I'd say the other thing that I was always looking for in addition to product fit with my personal interests was size and stage of company. I sometimes made pivots. I was like, well, I worked at a really large company, Microsoft had over 100,000 people globally when I worked there. eBay had maybe 10 to 15,000. And while that still sounds like a really big number to me, it was much smaller than Microsoft. And it showed me that there were differences in how product needed to work and what our jobs look like as product managers when you're working at these different size and stage of companies. And then scaling all the way down to Glassdoor, when I started at Glassdoor, there were roughly 600 employees. We didn't have a single user researcher on my team. And I was looking around one day and I was like, who knows anything about user research?

And then I finally realized I probably knew more than anybody else, and I was a little worried about that because I was like, we need somebody who has expertise in this. I shouldn't be that person. But I realized how being scrappy enables you to unlock the ability to do a lot with very few resources because it forces some focus into what is actually going to be most impactful to the business. And so that decision of moving to a much smaller company was a great learning ground for me to understand how my skills at bigger companies translated down to help smaller companies continue to scale and grow. And it also taught me some new things that I hadn't been exposed to before around scrappy product-based thinking.

And that has really helped me as I've continued to advance in my career, even into Ancestry as well. So those are all examples of some of the learned lessons along the way. But I would say the final thread that really sewed those together were the ability to work with really great people. Many of those opportunities and doors were open because of my network, because somebody either referred me in, I knew a leader at that company was hiring for a role, or somebody had whispered in their ear and said, I heard there's this person, Heather, she may be what you're looking for. And those opportunities have really continued to be big door openers for me career-wise through my network.

Rashmi:

Got it, got it. And what do you think has been Heather's superpowers? I feel you're really close to people bringing them. I don't know if that you consider as a superpower, but would love to hear your take on that.

Heather:

My team will tell you that my superpower is that I can read people very, very well. And I know how to best match people to roles and challenges based on what it is that I hear from them as their interests and their career stories. And so that really has become a strength of mine. It's also helped me on the customer side. So truly, deeply understanding customer needs and then better matching ideas and product thinking to what's going to be the best fit for that customer's need has been another version of how that skill surfaces for me in a somewhat unique way. My kids would tell you that when they were little, I used to mess around with them and I would tell them, I can read what you're thinking. It's written on your forehead. And so my daughter as a toddler would do this, and she would cover her forehead with her hand and she would walk up to me and say something, but she didn't want me to read her mind.

Rashmi:

Oh, cute.

Heather:

Yeah, she was really cute about it. I think still to this day, she's a little freaked out about it.

Rashmi:

That's amazing. If you could read into a teenager's mind, then you definitely have the gift that nobody has.

Heather:

It is a challenge. No doubt.

Rashmi:

Yeah, no. Awesome. And coming to as this chief product officer, could you describe your responsibilities and how this role is actually different from, let's say, a VP of product? I know you touched a little bit upon this in the beginning with respect to how it's more execution oriented versus you're now talking to the leadership team from a day in the art perspective. Anything else you want to add from just your responsibilities as a chief product officer itself?

Heather:

As a chief product officer, again, it's your job to understand the company vision and set the strategy and the business operation that's needed to go execute well on the company's goals, on the objectives that are agreed to between the senior leadership

team, the CEO and the board. It's your job to tell the story of the how and the what and the why your product vision is what it is, and to bring the company along on that journey with you. And so how you story-tell becomes a really critical part of that success. How you think about partnering with your team to bring that vision to life, whether that's through design thinking or great customer insights and research, bringing those assets together in a way that's really going to be compelling to motivate people to be on that journey with you can really help ensure your product and your outcomes that you're looking to drive towards.

And so I think those are critical ingredients of what it takes as a CPO. You might do that on a smaller level, working with an engineering team, a design team day-to-day, but you need to think about all the different stakeholders coming from very different levels of experience with product when you're thinking about how to influence that at a company-wide level and at a board level because now your audience may be less familiar with some of the features, the ideas that you're more accustomed to talking about when you're at a lower level in the product organization. And you still need to make that story and to bring that vision to life in a really compelling way.

Rashmi:

Oh, that's very interesting. Thank you for that. And has there been any difference between being a CPO at Glassdoor versus Ancestry? Any difference that you see?

Heather:

I think every company is different because the business challenges and the product challenges are different and the people are different. And along with that, I'll give you an example, Ancestry's a consumer subscription company. We have an amazing relationship with our customers who are paying us to get value in return. And so every single day, we can hear from those customers how we are doing and executing on their needs. We can see it in our metrics and our data. And I think that becomes a really important part of the product work that we're doing here at Ancestry because our customers will vote with their credit cards. They'll tell us immediately if we're not solving for their needs. And so every business challenge has its own set of product problems behind it. And those are some of the really interesting and unique ones that we have to solve here at Ancestry.

Rashmi:

Very interesting. And did you have to unlearn anything while you're a CPO at Ancestry?

Heather:

No, I think every experience is building upon the one before.

Rashmi:

Got it. Makes sense. And what has been the key to working successfully with your CEO in particular, and of course, the leadership team at large?

Heather:

I think that's where it gets into those senior leadership team partnerships that we talked about earlier. I have regular check-ins with our CEO. I have a very detailed update document that I keep in advance of the one-on-one. I usually, about a day or so beforehand, start filling it in so they can read it in advance. And then we can come into the conversation armed with the very specific key topics that I've highlighted that I say, hey, these are the things I need you to weigh in on. Here's the updates for everything else going on in my world, so you can absorb that. And that helps make the most use of our one-on-one time together. But we do have particular operational rhythms where I share our roadmap, our priorities for the coming quarter. I look to get input on a coming board meeting, so I'm aligned on what the key topics are and the storyline that we need to partner on in order to prepare for the next board discussion.

And so we have ongoing conversations throughout the year, just checking in on our product roadmap. And I try and use all those moments to help bring our CEO along in that journey. The same thing though goes for the senior leadership team because once we're aligned between the CTO, the CEO and myself, I share that out on a quarterly basis with the senior leadership team as well. And then I report out regularly on progress towards our metrics and our goals. And those are some of the levers that we use to illustrate, how are we doing? Are we performing as we expected? If not, what changes do we need to make? And those all become really good conversations to have as a leadership group.

Rashmi:

Got it, got it. Thank you. And I was going to ask any personal or professional sacrifices that you made to become a chief product officer? I know you mentioned that throughout the career, those opportunities have to be really worth it, worth the opportunity to leave something behind, is there anything else you want to add? Do you even consider these as sacrifices per se?

Heather:

No, because they're part of who I am. I get a lot of joy from my work. I love my colleagues. I enjoy the learning and the challenge of the day-to-day job and it fuels me. It gives me energy. And so I really enjoy my work. I don't see this as a trade-off per se. I see it as a way of maximizing the things I'm trying to get out of my life on a day-to-day basis. I have a professional persona and I really enjoy doing great work there. And then I've got my personal persona as a parent, as a partner, as a friend, as a sister and a daughter. And I try to make sure that I am balancing those two to the best of my ability. There's certainly some times where I'm spending more time at work, but if I didn't enjoy doing it, I wouldn't be doing it.

Rashmi:

No, very well said. Thank you. And fast-forward five years down the lane, let's say, how do you think this role will change from a chief product officer perspective?

Heather:

I think more and more companies are looking to chief product officers to be a version of a general manager for the product, for the business, because you have the unique capability of seeing both sides, seeing, what's on the roadmap and what does the product need to serve to deliver on our business needs. But you also have the unique side of being able to better manage and understand the drivers of the business. In many ways, you'll hear people say, oh, the product manager is the CEO of the product. And I think the CPO in many ways has many opportunities to see all ends of the business and to understand how those things come together.

And so I've heard of many CPOs moving forward, either founding their own companies or moving into CEO roles as well. And so I think there's a great opportunity if people are interested to continue to progress in their career towards some of those pursuits if they are interested in doing so. The other thing that I also think is a big opportunity, especially for women coming from a product background, not just CPOs, is looking into board and other leadership positions, to learn more about how companies are run and some of the governance and the interesting ways that you can advise and consult companies from an outside-in perspective.

Rashmi:

Got it, got it. And I was going to ask, what headline would Heather actually make beyond the chief product officer? So what do you want to do beyond the chief product officer?

Heather:

Oh, this is a really hard question, one I'm not prepared for, I'll say. I don't know. I just want to be me. I'm happy being me. So I just like knowing that I'm in a position and a job where my skills are a great match for what's needed and that I can bring my whole self to work and really enjoy the products and the experiences I'm building with my colleagues. I love the role I'm in right now. I think it's a perfect fit for me, and I'm excited to just do more of that.

Rashmi:

Oh, that's amazing. Thank you for that honest answer there. And maybe one last question, any other advice, especially that you could give to women directors of VP of products advancing into the CPO position, apart from the things that we've already covered? Anything else you want to add?

Heather:

I'll just double down on advancing your network, spending time... If you are at a bigger or a middle size company, where you really admire others from across the aisle, spend time with them, invest in those relationships. Some of my very close friends right now are people who either were mentors to me or people I sought out early in my career because I was interested to learn from them and we became really good friends. And so I would say make sure you're spending time nurturing your



partnerships, as well as doing a great job on your day job as you grow into your product leadership roles.

Rashmi:

Thank you so much for your time. This is amazing, just chatting with you and understanding your journey. And I'm sure there's a lot, at least for me to take away from this whole podcast series. And I hope a lot of other women just like me also do the same, so.

Heather:

... thank you so much for your idea on behalf of the community of people who will benefit from the work that you do. It takes a lot to volunteer your spare time to do things like this. And I think that's really... It says a lot about who you are and what motivates you. So thank you for building that.