



Episode 46: Yuying Chen Wynn, Former Chief Product Officer, Barnes & Noble Education

Rashmi:

First of all, thank you so much Yuying for making the time to talk to us. I'm sure a lot of people just like myself, would be really interested to understand your journey and how you got to be where you are currently. Secondly, welcome to Women in Product. Really excited to have you here. Lots of questions, lots of things we're curious about starting with, how did you get started with product management because we are all women in product, would love to know about your journey to product management and any detours or pivots that you took in between to get to where you are today.

Yuying:

I got into product without really knowing what it was. I obviously got my undergraduate and my graduate degree in computer science. But as I was graduating, I realized that I did not want to code for a living. You can imagine me with... I have an MIT double degree in computer science and a master's with a specialization in computer vision, which most people go, okay, of course, you're going into coding. But I figured out through my internships that I didn't want to code. So, I applied for the one position that was recruiting on campus that was not a coding position and I didn't know what it was. At the time, it was called program management. It was from Microsoft.

The only thing I knew was, okay, this one does not require coding and I recognize the company, let's go. It really happened haphazardly very early on with this... The program management focus was a newly created thing at Microsoft where they realized that if you just put devs together and create things, somehow it wasn't really usable at the end and somehow things would get missed in the middle. There had to be somebody in the middle to make sure that you actually built number one, what was asked for and really what was usable.

They created this new position and they were looking for backgrounds in 3D graphics, in more of the design on top of the technology, computer science to fit into this new role because that's what they were looking for. I stumbled into that, which eventually became technical product management. And then full product management in the technical stack and then all the way through more of the business and the marketing side to have a full scope on product management. But I was lucky that I got into it very early, grew with the discipline. But yeah, that's how I got into it.

Rashmi:

I think throughout the different aspects of your career planning the ranks of product management, what do you think have been any detours or pivots even though you started early on with product management? Any things that you found in between while you were rising or you thought you would leave product management and do something else?

Yuying:

I will tell you about a detour that doesn't even show up on my resume because it's so far off. I was a licensed massage therapist for a while. I worked with Microsoft Windows right out of school, which many consider, that's it, you've hit it, that's the success and you're done with the rest of your career. But I was unhappy somehow and I didn't understand why. What it came eventually and why I took that little detour during when the dot com bubble burst, was that I wasn't connected to humans. I didn't feel my impact to be meaningful even though I knew in terms of how many people my features covered because I mean windows was ubiquitous and you get all the customer complaints and you really know that you're impacting people but it didn't feel meaningful [inaudible 00:06:43] outside of making their life harder and they couldn't find the application anymore. I really went off on this little detour on a whim. I took one of those classes on the side just, oh here, come to a massage class and learn.

But I felt a human connection there and I felt a peace in myself that I didn't even know that I was missing at the time. I really took that detour for about a year and a half. I went down the full path. I was fully trained. I was looking at spaces trying to build out the business models before I came back to product management. The thing is, what I realized later on is that entire sidetrack made me a lot more people centric. I understand through the education there how psychology work, how the human body works, how emotions and behaviors really come into it, which helps a lot in management. But also, when you come back to product that actually makes a difference. I'm in EdTech now, which is okay, finally I found my spot. It all came back together, which I feel like is a little bit my relation to Steve Jobs story about him wandering into that calligraphy class and eventually designing fonts. A complete detour at the time.

At the time, I came back because of economics. I'm like, "Wow, you only make this much an hour and I'm tired. This is not going to work." But now there's so much knowledge I draw from having studied really deeply in both a psychology, brain science, cognitive, anatomy across everything. That's my very side detour. Not very many people know about which I think now there'll be more that know about that one.

Rashmi:

Absolutely. Absolutely. That's really interesting from your computer science degree, that too from MIT to massage therapist and to I guess, competitive ballroom dancing, you probably covered all lengths and breadths of ones one could go into.

Yuying:

The dancing I've actually managed to keep throughout the whole thing, so it's like that's parallel. And I constantly draw parallels from it because you are constantly learning and you're constantly competing and sometimes you lose you. There's so many things to draw from it. It also keeps the creative side alive.

Rashmi:

Oh that's very interesting. That was one of my questions which we will dig deeper into with respect to the parallels there. Going back to your product management part of it, were you always interested in EdTech? I know you've always wanted to be close to humans as much as possible. Was this the passion? I think throughout your career, that's probably been a big one I think, right? And a constant one.

Yuying:

EdTech is a discovered passion, I think, especially since becoming a parent. Coming out of the Microsoft stack or working in technology companies, you build things that are one step removed from the end user. You're usually deploying it through some kind of industry and they have to do customization. They put content on top of this. You're a little bit removed. I was in FinTech for three years because it was in a very hot space and there was lots of opportunity. But when you find that you go home and your mind just shuts off. You don't really think about what's going on in the industry. You're not really curious about movements there.

You realize fairly quickly that you probably... wasn't the place for me, I didn't care about it. I could do it and I could still do it well but in here, it wasn't working and I knew enough by then that I had to find that connection. I thought about starting my own company and the children were young at the time and that's really what I was thinking about day in and day out. So, I started exploring it from the perspective of starting my own company, what would I do? And through that conversation, it's one of those where I was trying to learn from people in industry and somebody goes, actually, I happened to have an opening, would you be interested? That's exactly how. And then once I got in, I'm like, "This is it. This is everything. I don't have to go through the pain of having to start my own but, yeah this is the place for me and I found it."

Rashmi:

Oh, that's awesome. The curiosity there and how that led you to... one thing to the other.-In that process, how did you land in this position today? Were you recruited or did you approach Barnes & Noble for a chief product officer position?

Yuying:

I guess both. As I was exiting the previous company, I was getting pinged a lot for different positions for CPO or head of product in various sectors in the education industry. Because of that, I got access to... there's one of these executive job boards that I found where I was browsing around and I saw the opportunity for Barnes & Noble Education, which I didn't know what Barnes and Noble Education did at the time. So, I read it and I was like, "This is interesting." I was not aware of this and I indicated my own interest. Because if you look at my background right before, it's not higher ed.

It was not one of those where the recruiter automatically put me in for that position. But when I said I'm interested, that note went direct the hiring manager who looked at my resume and when they said they did want to talk to me, then I was in the full process. So, it's a little bit of both. Sometimes, others may screen you out because



your background doesn't look like what they thought it should look like. But I thought it was a fascinating space and I have no issues going, I'm interested. Are you interested?

Rashmi:

No, that's awesome. No, that's awesome. How did you, by the first get go that people would not have recognized you for the role? How did you approach that aspect to say that hey I'm interested but I'm also qualified for the role kind of a situation?

Yuying:

I looked at it like this, that at this level if I'm going to approach, I need to bring something of value, some idea. What's my pitch. I can't just be like I'm interested. At this level, that's not enough. Actually, what I did was I thought through the space from my own experience and perspective and I go, "We're going to have deeper conversations." But my first reaction is we need to get in front of mind for the college students. What's an out of the box way, because I'm obviously an out of box candidate, that I can do that. I have the idea that one of their biggest problems, because I watch my 16-year-old not get up in the morning for classes. I'm constantly pounding on his door. That time management is an issue because it is one of the biggest transitional adulting skills.

He's 16, I still have to pound on his door. And I said, "What if you had a quick utility that was either time management that's free for acquisition?" From my background, it makes sense. I've actually done calendaring before. I've done all kinds of different applications, basically saying yes I know I'm an out of the box candidate, I have an out of the box idea for you and I'm actually... That's when I come into it with, which was also fun for the recruiter because they had something to say other than I know it doesn't look like someone that you were looking for but here's someone interesting and this is an idea. It's a little bit of a calling card on the product side I would say.

Rashmi:

That's really interesting, thank you for that tidbit. I think a lot of us can draw a lot of insight from that to say, even though you might not be the box candidate, but how do you think about convincing the person that you are still good for that position to really help the business. Thank you for that. I think that's a really great example there. Coming to talking about, let's, say preparing to become a CPO for example as you're growing through the ranks of product. What skills do you actively seek during the course of time to prepare yourself for this position per se, Yuying?

Yuying:

I went through this exercise of... I think some people call it personal branding. But what do you want to be known for? What do you want other people to say about you when you're not in the room. If you're a product, what's the kind of product? You want people to say I want a product like this. Oh, this is the person. That took a lot of work and I really honed in on what excites me and also where are my successes and try to align the two. That exercise, took me down where you see in my LinkedIn



summary now, in terms of that data driven, AI driven, the international and scale aspect.

But the thing is, once I identified there were pieces of it where it was a passion but there still needed to be more depth. When it comes to data and AI, that all evolved really the whole industry since I graduated. I need to keep up. I have to stay with it. There's no formal education right on there. So, I really put in the work and took projects that got super deep with my role at the time because I identified this while I was still in previous roles. I'm like, "Okay. Well, I want to be close to the data science. I want to be close to the predictive modeling. I want to be close to the AI and get into as much details as I can because this is where I want to be." I spent a lot of time on work that I read some papers that are way over my head but you need to stay up to date. So, it's a part history success but it's also a big part of passion and going forward and that's the part I really put a lot of work into.

Rashmi:

That's awesome. That's very different from with what we've heard in general. In the sense that personal branding, one thing. I think for you the second thing was going deep into the areas which you thought you should be going deep into and just a narrow knowledge is not sufficient enough. And I think for one to spend time to actually identify those aspects, I think that was awesome. Thank you. I narrow down the same question to say there are many folks who are probably a step or two away who are VPs, senior directors, a step or two of eight to become a chief product officer. What skills do you think they should acquire from your experience, if they're just a step or two away from being a CPO?

Yuying:

I actually asked the question of do I want to be CPO or do I want to just have bigger scope as VP or SVP and what is that difference? Is that really what I want. Actually, I would go around asking people. I'm like, "What's the difference? What's the difference a VP and a C-suite?" I asked multiple people until I got an answer that I understood, number one. I agree with and I liked. How I think about it, and it was characterized to me by someone who was a serial CEO. She said, what she liked about being the CEO and the C-suite. She said, "the problem solving stops here. There is no more escalation. There is no more, they should solve it. They should make a decision. He should. It stops here." She says, "When people come to me and get the, they." She looks around, she's like, "They, who? We're it." We solve it or the company doesn't perform it. That's it. And she said, "Because of that you have to work like a team cross-functionally with the tops of each discipline."

That crystallized everything for me. I'm like, "Okay. That's the environment, that's the attitude for my peers that I want." That look, the buck stops with us. We solve it or... there is no higher authority that somehow is going to magically make this all. Okay. That appealed to me tremendously because she said when you're a VP, there's a constant idea of climbing the ladder. There's still more territory politics. There's still a little bit of rungs and that's what you're focused on. But when you hit the C-suite, it's more of the team. And that's what made me, okay, all right. I am set. That's what I actually want to be because I always question, do you really want to be there or just everybody thinks you should be that, you want it.



With that, this idea that I always come with a solution even if it's not going to be the best one, but I'm going to start there with any problem. That shift of, it's not someone else needs to make it better, someone else needs too... I'm like, "If we need the money, then what's the idea?" How do we get it right? We need people, what's the idea, how do we get it? What should we try? That mind shift is the most crucial one. I feel like everything else, the skills, just comes after when you go at it from a different mindset.

Rashmi:

That's amazing. When you talk about the skills, were there any resources for learning or anything that you banked on or any training that you would probably recommend?

Yuying:

I did join chief right at the crux of this journey. I think when I joined it was right before I switched over to C. The thing is, what has been the most helpful is having access to other women either at the transition or the ones that have been C for a while, because I like to ask those weird questions. So, what's the difference? Why do I want to be a C? I'm currently asking questions, do I want to be a CEO? People think is that the next spot? But having access to those women to have the questions answered or debated what you, has been the most valuable for me. Also, seeing how did they come up the ranks. What was their experience? Is there something I can get from that or deal with my own challenges currently, et cetera? I haven't anchored into formal training but that's been the most useful for me.

Rashmi:

In this process, what was the barrier that was probably hardest to break to become a chief product officer and why was it hard?

Yuying:

There was two things. One I knew about, one didn't know. The one I didn't know was about this bias for male versus female candidates. What I found out later was that my current boss was one of those who told the recruiting company, "Why do you keep sending me white male candidates?" I didn't know about that. But that was one that I think some people are more aware of in terms of their shutdown. I think I might just be less aware of these things, but I'm very grateful for the opportunity. The second one, I think is a common perception, common ceiling, where you're trying to break through from level to level.

People like to ask you to consider positions that are at the same title as you have already done, even though the scope might be completely different. You have VPs and directors with very large operating budgets and done huge scopes and what have you. But this perception that, oh well, if you have been VP for this many year, you're not quite... you don't have a C attached somewhere. There's that perception to break, that yes you are at that level. That's actually something I worked very specifically on in terms of both the resume and LinkedIn to... you have to reframe yourself. I would say probably two years ago, if you looked at my LinkedIn or how my



resume was written, you probably would not put me through for consideration or role. That really took professionals who specialize in executive recruiting to point things out and reframe and all of that. Yeah.

Rashmi:

That's amazing. In that, during the time, I'm sure feedback is feedback and sometimes, I wouldn't say criticism, but some of the feedback might be a little harder to digest. Was there anything like that at all when you were working with executive recruitment to understand your own gaps or how you should curate yourself so that you are positioned in the way that you want to be seen versus other person's perspective? Was there any feedback particularly?

Yuying:

Unfortunately, when you're not doing well, they don't tell you, they just go... I haven't quite experienced one where the recruiter goes, look you really need to do this. I did have a mentor who said, "Look, get a professional executive resume writer because yours suck." I had a very good mentor who told me that and that was very helpful. But for the recruiters, there was a few that just ghosted me and I'm just like...

Rashmi:

Why?

Yuying:

Yeah, what happened during that call? I'm at the point where I can like, oh that's right. A few rules I violated and I didn't do this, that and the other. I didn't engage, I came off in a different... So, I can walk myself back. But it took a few of those, why are they all ghosting me? They're obviously reach out for a reason, but why am I just striking out?

Rashmi:

Yeah, yeah. No, understood. Yeah. One big part of being the C-suite is also equipping yourself for board approvals. How did you prepare for that and how did you prepare for any of the unwritten agendas per se, which just comes up?

Yuying:

My approach, I think, luckily right now I have avenues to find out that information. I always try to find out as much personal background information, their past preferences either for style or for particular things. If certain people are very sensitive to financials, certain people really prefer numbers versus visuals and all of those. What I usually try to do is have a one-on-one, personal conversation before it ever goes into anything formal. [inaudible 00:28:34] come in, can I do just a chat with a board member? Nothing specific, introduce myself, because you get a sense of their personality, why are they here, what do they care about? Hopefully, you find some common ground that is non-professional. That's really a larger thing I'm looking for. If you go and you're presenting to what I call a warm floor versus a cold floor, it's very different.



You can have better reads on when they're making faces or they're shutting down or did they not pay attention? Do they just not like this particular area? They don't want to get into the technology? You'll have a better read and not overreact. That's really the best thing. Whatever I'm presenting, I'm really trying to take all their reactions and not react wrongly and understand where they're leaning. And if I need to shut it down because it's really not the right time, then I need to do that.

Rashmi:

That's very interesting. Got it. Got it.

Yuying:

You don't always get that chance.

Rashmi:

Right. Right. But yes, of course, when you do, I think you put it very well. One of the big things about being in the leadership role and especially at your level, is also about building the right product teams. I'm guessing your team is not just product, you probably have other functions as well as a part of your team. How did you really learn to build those right product teams? Any examples that you can give us with respect to doing it or probably doing it wrong and learning from there?

Yuying:

Yes. I think it is definitely one of those trial and error and hopefully you don't have as many errors. A couple of things I live by in terms of building teams, number one, what I have discovered over the time is that I hire for really strong strength and not an even keel. I want my team to be individually very distinct. I think one of the analogies that we use is if you were building a basketball team, you don't hire all forwards. Hopefully, I'm not mixing my sports analogies because I have no idea about sports analogies.

I believe that the best product managers are really good at particular types of things. Have ones who are really user design centric. They're your user experience craftsman because that's what they care about. I have guys which are more similar to my background, comes out of technology. They're very deep into tech. They're very quick to understand what can scale, what can't scale. And they specialize in those things. Depending on what I have to address, I want to make sure that somebody is super strong on my team in each of the aspects. Right now, I have a very strong data focus and IA focus, so I want to hire also a product manager with a data background.

That's one of the things I learned over time, that if you have all just generalists, it goes even keel. But if you have your players who are super strong in one, even if they have a very gaping weakness in others, that's my preference. I put them into where I really need that area to shine. Similarly, for the other functions. Now, I have both the product team, I have design, user research and data. In the past, I've had content teams, I've had tech teams, game design, it all depends on the type of product. I really anchor on that team lead not so much for hard skills, some of them they have to have the hard skills. But I'm looking for also a personality and a soft skill that really keeps that team cohesive.



I think the tech one is usually the hardest to find because usually you have somebody who is super, super good in their architecture, in all their hard skills, but they don't like to have one-on-ones. If it's a very senior team of two or three, that guy will be great. If you're trying to build a larger dev team that's going to go into pods and you're trying to get to 50, that guy is not going to be your engineering lead. So, depending on the need, that piece of it, I really look for. My current head of design, his soft skills are very different than what I need from my head of data. He says so. He's like, "I manage artists, they're temperamental. I am not going to be successful." I'll be like, "Nope, you must do it this way." You're not going to get your best artists and designers on your team that way. That's hard to figure out though.

Rashmi:

Yep. That's amazing. When you're recruiting, you mentioned it, it's hard to figure that out. But when you are recruiting, how do you figure that out or how do you get that out from the person that this is a skill from this person?

Yuying:

I learned the hard way that some of the soft skills, I am not the best person to assess. I think all in our career, we've had to deal with some misfires and firings. One of the fastest ones I had to do was a director of mobile way back, a couple of companies back, were great on paper. Started his own company, sold it not to Google but somebody significant, really driven, really well spoken. I'm like, "Okay. This is my guy to head up mobile." He comes in, he ramps up within two weeks, he's off everybody he's ever talked to. They literally would walk away. I had some of my nicest people would just... I'm like, "Okay."

Rashmi:

I see.

Yuying:

I had to have our global head of HR walk me through that one. After which, I really made long term friends with her because she goes, "Okay. When it comes to stuff like this, if you had me in the interview loop, I would've been able to tell you from just..." I'm like, "Really, you can tell?" There's that aspect of it. I'm always looking to see who do I trust their evaluation on this side that I'm going to put into the interview loop. Yeah, I learned that one the hard way. But she's been one of my best friend's since and I just go, okay, what do you think of this person?

Rashmi:

I see that's amazing. That's awesome. Moving down to translating your experience. You mentioned about you were in FinTech and then EdTech and then higher EdTech. Walk us through how you were able to translate your experiences from that perspective across these various different companies and also our domain per se?

Yuying:

I think from my perspective, I was very lucky that I had the computer science education. The tech helps me anchor because that's usually where I can start and really anchor myself because I've worked across enough technologies and platforms that I can't really go wrong when I start there, even in a new sector.

It's still fairly rare on the product side for someone to be able to go toe to toe on architecture. That's my leverage. I do learn things pretty fast and just mostly because I love anything new, but that gives you the time to ramp up. I went into insurtech, I had no idea what life insurance was all about. But the thing is that you have to basically have an anchor where you can give value while you ramp up and go, oh I understand enough now and I can tell you if you leverage technology this way, our product can do this. That's my anchor to buy myself time as I ramp up.

Rashmi:

Got it. Got it. Would you add any other superpowers per se for Yuying, apart from the tech that you just described?

Yuying:

I call it pattern matching or in... I think I learned the learning science term, called transference. Transference is essentially a skill that you learned in the context of one and apply it in a completely different context. In language learning, let's say you learn the word dog and then you actually learn to write it and then you learn to spell it. That's a skills transference. Most of us can do something in similar background skills. I remember, my experience learning from here, I can apply it here in nearby subjects, but I have the ability to pattern match across wildly different domains.

If we come back to the ballroom dancing, actually I get quite a bits of inspirations about how to build learning applications from my coaching experience and my competition experience and how I react to winning or losing and all of that. It seems very, very far but if I can draw the parallel and go, aha, now I have a feature idea over here in higher ed, I can pattern match through my days working on the Windows start menu, the insurance tech CRM, I built and the tools that I'm building now in higher ed.

Rashmi:

Very interesting. Got it. Got it. Yeah, very interesting. As a chief product officer coming to today, or since you've been in the position, could you describe your responsibilities? I know we talked a little bit from mindset perspective with respect to how different it is from a VP of product for example. Could you just describe your responsibilities with respect to that and any other differences that you could spot?

Yuying:

Yeah. Chief product officer, you're definitely on the hook for the overall product strategy, but it can't be in isolation. So, a big part of it's trying to figure out how does that work with the content strategy? How does that work with the marketing and acquisition strategy? How does that work with the financial five year plan that they put in place before I ever got here? One of the bigger difference, because at VP level



you still build strategies and roadmaps but you get to spend more of your time actually on that piece. Whereas, the CPO you spend a lot more time trying to understand how it fits with everything else. That team aspect. The organization design, in terms of how product works is a big part.

One of the reorgs I did was to pull out the design and user research discipline. And the other one I reorganized the product management org to be outcome focused versus product. Every org structure has its own strength and weaknesses. But a big part of that is also looking at how does the rest of the org work and how do we structure ourselves. We work well within the larger [inaudible 00:41:15]. When you're a VP, you focus on your team, you build it, but you rarely, at least I didn't do much what I would call organization design.

Rashmi:

Got it. Got it. In this process, what has been the key to really working successfully with your CEO in particular and of course, the entire leadership team at large?

Yuying:

You got to find the right team. No. I will say that the main reason I took this particular CPO opportunity as opposed to other ones was because of both the CEO and my peers that I was interviewing with and the chemistry that I had with them. You are coming into a team and if that culture or the vibe really fits and works for you. For me, this was already just a very direct, very fun, there's a lot of humor going on, which is very central for me. There was already a very deep technology investment in place, which were all things I was looking for to keep it going because you have that first impression.

In terms of the working, it really comes back to just trying to be as transparent and straightforward as possible at this level of... When someone tells me, I think that's really not working. I'm like, "I don't disagree with you. It is ugly. It might take a lot longer than we thought because I discovered something else that was worse." But that's really where I am following and I have a preference for the more one-to-one, back and forth discussion versus a larger one. We have a small exec team, which does make that easier but that's my approach.

Rashmi:

That's interesting. In this course that you're here now, when you look back, is there anything else you want to change with the way you've approached coming to the position you are in today?

Yuying:

I wish I knew them, what I know now. There's definitely pain points looking back of once you got better at hiring, once you got better at building a team, once you got better at building a roadmap that you're like, oh I wish I knew I didn't have to go through that pain first time.



Rashmi:

Any other advice, Yuying, that you might give the other women who are directors, VPs of product when they're thinking about advancing into the CPO spot? Any other advice?

Yuying:

My main advice is find your passion for it. Don't worry about what your experience might or might not say about whether or not you have already done it. I see a lot of... not just women, I have other product leaders who hold themselves back because they're like, well, I don't really have that experience. I'm like, "But first tell me what do you want? Do you really want to have that impact? Do you really want that kind of a role where you take responsibility for the ups and downs of the business. That's it, it stops with you? Is that what you want? Figure out if you want it first, don't limit yourself because if I looked at my resume the way my recruiter did, I wouldn't have reached out for this one."

Rashmi:

That's an amazing advice.

Rashmi:

It was very insightful. For me, I think speaking to different personalities, different chief product officers, there's always something unique and different. Just like you mentioned, while you're hiring, you see that. I think that's what amazes me

Rashmi:

Thank you so much for your time, Yuying. It was a pleasure talking to you.