

## **Episode 49: Chris Johnson, Working With Executive Recruiters**

Rashmi:

Welcome, Chris. Thank you so much for your time and welcome to Women In Product. Let's get started about the role itself being the chief product officer. When were you first introduced to the so-called chief product officer role per se in your career?

Chris:

It's a great question. The titles-that's head of product, VP products, senior VP of product, the top product person in the company whether that's series A, series B or pre-IPO or public. I just want to call that out quickly. I think the time I most often come across product where it is CPO, it is truly when a company has reached an inflection point that is very different in its lifecycle than the previous handful of years. They've gone from single product to multiproduct. They're starting to do acquisitions.

There's not really a revenue stage per se. I think the way I describe it is the complexity has become broader than just a single product for a single use case. Now, you need more of that conductor and the orchestrator who can hire great leaders, whether they're VPs or whatever it might be to run maybe the cloud product, or run the ecosystem or the platform, or whatever it might be, or product number two.

You start to diverge from being the product person over one small piece or a specific area rather to now it's like, "We have to think about what the market broadly looks like. How do we expand into new geographies, into new verticals?" That's when I see CPO most often. To give it a stage, it's typically later stage 50 to 100 million plus. It just depends.

Again, parody on if they've got a CMO, CTO and CFO, you might see CPO drop in a little bit earlier, but typically it's at that mid to later stage type company.

Rashmi:

Thank you. You very nicely articulated about when the complexity of that problem space really expands. Did this definition change or evolve over the course of time when probably you first interviewed the first candidate for this role to your current time now?

Chris:

It has definitely evolved and I joke with my partners all the time because product is probably the hardest to recruit for because there is no silver bullet. Founders are usually the product individual until a certain point and then they hire the craftsperson or whatever skillset that they're looking for.

Then, the company gets to a point where it's like, "We need a broader executive, but someone who has come up through those ranks." I think that's the part where the thing that has changed the most is CPOs have such a dynamic background. Some of them are technology, some of them carried a bag, some of them were SE or maybe

they spent 10 years at Bain. It's a very different background. It's a very specific track for an engineering leader.

I would say the things that I've noticed that have changed fall into the bucket of what do we need this person to do? Are they just inward focused? Here's what we have partner with engineering. Let's make sure we're building the best possible product. Now, this is the person that's talking to the top 50 customers. This is the person that is the face of it right alongside maybe the founder, CEO or whomever it might be.

They've taken a much more front and center seat at the table because so many of these companies, they live and die by the product. At the end of the day, if you don't have great product, then you don't have a great company. Therefore, if you have a great product leader who can embody that, you have a lot more increased chances of that successful growth stage.

Rashmi:

That's a great insight. During these different CPO hires, did you have to do anything different to attract women candidates as this is our Women In Product and addressing a lot of women out here. I would love to hear your perspective on that.

Chris:

It's a number of areas that I should and will cover there, which is I've had the fortune to place a number of very successful women in these mid to late stage CPO roles from Rubrik and Starburst and Pendo, Iterable. These are the \$50 to \$200 million in revenue. I'll start with the top of the funnel. The idea to every search is figure out who are the companies that matter to the client that they want to go recruit from.

From there, who was at those companies in pivotal moments that are again adjacent to whatever the company that you're recruiting for is trying to fill. Usually, in that case, let's say in the case of Rubrik \$200 million company, the first thing you're doing is you're looking at what are the other domain relevant companies? What are the companies that have seen the growth and have exceeded that by a couple orders of magnitude?

You're not hiring the person who's just going to top out at where they are, but they can take the company, or in this case Rubrik can take it to 5X, 10X beyond it. You start with that bucket and then it becomes, "Who are the companies that matter? Then, it's who are the executives at those companies that matter?" From that perspective, how I always describe it as every pipeline that I have with a client is diversity is always at the top of the list.

How I describe that to folks is there's, again, there's no silver magic bullet here, but it's what is representative of the market? Categories are different. In the case of Rubrik, if you're looking for backup and recovery and deep data cloud infrastructure, that's going to be a specific, maybe it's 4 or 5 at 10 senior scaled women who have done the Rubrik run times five.

Now, if you're looking at MarTech or some SaaS application, you look at that's might be a bigger broader pool because maybe it's not as technical and maybe you've got Salesforce that has created such an amazing wave of diverse CPO type candidates.

That's one thing that I like to call out is my approach to diversity is not sitting there saying, "Here's exactly what you have to have." It really comes down to, "Let's talk about the market and what does it look like and then build the representative set from there."

That's piece one, and that starts with the research top of funnel. Then, as you get into the search, there's a couple pieces that are really important to call out. One is if you don't have a representative slate of the market, A, how do you change that whether you use the board, whether you use VCs and execs in the company to expand or is it, "Maybe there just aren't enough. If a client is asking me, I need a CPO."

Been there, done that, taken the company public on from \$200 to \$500 or \$1 billion, whatever the growth might be, whatever the qualities are, you might have to say, "We know what the market will bear. Here's the landscape. I can show you everyone that's been at these companies. Do we either go down the path and go look for a broad athlete domain?"

Doesn't matter because at the end of the day you've got VPs, SVPs, directors, people that have that domain in the org and maybe you're just looking for an athlete that knows scale, people, process leadership, customers. That's one piece. The other piece is maybe you really need that domain because it is such a nuanced category that you're like, "You know what? I don't need the person that's gone from 200 to 500 as long as they've seen some scale."

They know what \$100, \$200 million looks like and they're just a best in class person, high potential, that's the other way in which we go. What happens in the course of a search is you start to figure out where are the nice to haves, where do the must-haves. Those change as searches go and diversity always stays at the top. The idea being, "We have to change something else, what is that?" Scale and domain expertise are typically the first ones to go.

Rashmi:

Thank you for that, I think you illustrated that really well. To take a step back, how do you start sourcing the candidates in the first place when you've done this market survey research at least to begin with, with respect to what you need? Now, how do I start putting people in the pipeline?

Chris:

There is no secret sauce. Most recruiters it's a ground game is what really what it is.

Typically what happens is we start with the companies. We understand who was there and what roles and what success they've seen. Then it's LinkedIn, phone calls, messages, and really just doing everything we can to not annoy people, but to give them an opportunity to have a meaningful, interesting conversation. I think there's going to be a lot of people that listen to this and I'll say there are distinctly different types of search people.

There are the like, "I will do nothing except get in front of you and show you 15 types of companies, even though you've told me you only want specific one." Then there's, "Let's build the long-term relationship. I don't have anything relevant right now, but

you come highly recommended. How do I get in front of you? How do I build that relationship?"

I would highly recommend if you have the chance to build relationships with great exec search people that work, that specialize in the areas of which you want to spend your career, build them. Really, what it comes down to is us getting in front of people and building those relationships. Again, the candidates that we're going after are in such high demand. How do you separate the noise from signal?

That's not anything I can do that is on everyone that's listening to this, which is you have to have some sort of guardrails. You can't talk to every exec recruiter or you probably won't be able to have a day job. Trying to hone in on who does what within my area. If you just want to stay in private equity and be the CPO of awesome private equity companies, there's great search people for that. If you want to just be series A to series C, rinse and repeat, grow, scale, do that.

If you want to do public companies, there's search firms, there's people that do all sorts of searches. It's a massive market. The question is figuring out who, and the only way you figure out who is by filtering the messages as you get, and understanding if a search person ever reaches out and says, "I can't tell you the name of the company." Well, there might be some confidentiality to that.

Try and get the name of the company so you're not wasting 20 minutes of your time being like, "I wouldn't actually go to that company in the first place." Trying to filter those things out to separate the noise from the signal and then be able to build the relationship once you get in there, that's how you get into the process.

Rashmi:

That's such an amazing insight. Thank you for that. In this process, when you have built that pipeline, I know you talked about at least a few of the top things being the domain and the scale experience based on the stage of the company. Are there any other skills when you have a conversation with the CPOs, any other things that just pop out to say, "This is my ideal candidate that I want to put forth in front of the CEO."

Chris:

Every search is unique and different and it goes with all things in life. As we talked about on the front end, my job is to not show a CEO or whomever is the hiring manager, and let's assume CEO, in this case hiring CPO, I think I fail at a search if I have to present 15 to 20 or 30 people. Not enough work is done on the front end to really identify not just scale and domain, but what are the other things that we're looking for.

Are they technical? What type of background have they grown up with into that product role? Could they ever own engineering? Would you roll it up together? Really understanding the dynamics there. Every search is different and unique, but there are a number of things that I specifically look for when having these conversations. Number one is the conversation itself.

This may be a bit of a somewhat silly point, but if I have to pull teeth to get things out and there's no coherent storytelling nature, and my first question, my general approach to interviewing is because I'm talking to product people whose number

one job, communication, if I just say, "You know what, open-ended, give me just the career narrative. Help me understand what you started at and where you got to."

I dissect that in real time and understand what are they hitting on? Are they hitting on just company went from 10 people to 200 people, \$5 million to \$20 million? Is it, "I came in, there was no product strategy. Founders had all these different thoughts, or we had one product, here's how I took it to five. Here's how we got rid of these features and down on this." Those are the interesting things. Communication and the storytelling nature it is an art.

There are absolutely people, I will caveat it by saying there are amazing interviewers who are wonderful storytellers that all hat and no cattle, and you go back channel references and they're like, "Rising tide floats all boats they were there for a great run, but it was actually these three people that did all the major lift." I think there's the communication piece. I think the other piece is leadership at CPO at the size and stage at which we're discussing this CPO role.

If communication is not there, that's going to be probably a big issue. Again, I'm not going to rule someone out in a process if maybe they were just rushed and they were like, "I didn't know what I should cover here." That's okay, then I dig into the leadership piece. For me, leadership at this CPO, it's bar none. You better absolutely be someone that knows how to build, attract, retain, and push people up and along in their career.

One of the things that I love asking is, and it throws people off because in the middle of your day, you're not thinking about who is the best PM that I ever mentored and groomed, but you've become the CPO of two companies or whatever it might be, or you've become the SVP and you want to be the CPO of said company X. Well, help me understand what the growth of your teams look like?

Has anyone gone out and are they a VP of product at a startup? Maybe you're at Splunk and you're like, "I'm an SVP at Splunk. I want to be the CPO of a \$500 million pre-IPO company. It's like, "Help me understand what your leadership team. Where are they? Who were the people that you plucked out of obscurity and turned into a world-class product manager?" The leadership piece is something that I dig in on a lot and really just try to understand.

Again, not everyone has to have like, "I've created seven VPs of product for benchmark and Sequoia companies. It's looking at the pedigree of which you hire and where they are today is a signal. It's not the only signal, but it's a signal. The other thing on leadership too that I would like to ask is who did you learn from? If you can triangulate there. Again, what we as executive recruiters look for?

We look for signal and themes and patterns that we can bring to a client and be like, "Here's exactly why you need to meet this person." Who you worked for is another big tell. If you were one of the people that CPO talks about of grooming, that's a very powerful thing. Anyway, I think those are the two biggest ones. If there were any other things like checkbox-wise, they're usually table stakes to have the conversation. You've seen success. Success begets success.

No one wants to hire someone [inaudible 00:19:26] for three on growth stage companies. If you've only ever grown something from \$200 million to \$210 million over four years, you're probably not going to go get the high fly in Rubrik 500 type

CPO job. Again, being my advice to all product people is be very self-reflective and understand where your skillsets are today. What you aspire to do?

Say you want to be the CPO of Rubrik or any late stage, awesome Databricks, any type of company like that, looking at where you're at today, and we talked about this and maybe we'll get back into it in a separate question, but I tell people, "This is a chess not checkers game." You are playing career chess. You are thinking about the move I need to make. What career experience I need to gain.

If you want to be the CPO of Rubrik, we'll just keep going down that path, it's a \$500 million business that just announced it. You want to join today, well they're probably going to be \$1 billion in the next two years. You're going to need to find somewhere where you can become maybe the number two on that run where you can learn from the person who's going to groom and mentor you to be that person. Maybe that's not the next job, maybe it's two jobs away.

Rubrik CPO is three jobs away, but being able to be inward looking and understand would a recruiter look at my background and say, "Tomorrow I could be the head of product CPO, VP top product person in the company, or do I need one more role?" That's the conversation I love having with people was the career narrative when I ask is like, "You know what? I was a senior director. I had this kick run. I wanted to take a bet, I wanted to go be the VP product."

It didn't work. Company didn't go the way I thought it was. Now, I'm back to in a senior director role two years later because I want to go have another massive run." Whatever it might be. Having those dialogues and being able to talk very candidly about the decisions you make with the outcome in mind is something that's pretty darn powerful too as a career narrative topic.

Rashmi:

Those are some brilliant insights, amazing. Thank you for that. Our hope with the podcast is exactly to your point to really help women understand what really is needed to get them to that position and self-reflection. Completely agree with that. During this process, have you done anything with the candidates especially that you thought where yes, these are the handful of ones that these are two or three people that are really going to be the next.

Have you done anything specific to help the candidates from your perspective?

Chris:

I think the biggest thing, I would say nothing specific is the very simple answer to that question. My job as an executive recruiter that gets paid to deliver the best talent to the best companies around. Again, I said I failed if I have to introduce 20 or 30 candidates. I also fail if I waste the CEO's time.

I think this is where you have a conversation with a CPO and you're like, "Their background makes zero sense, but they could absolutely step in, they could draw a little bit of parallels from their previous experience, but man, they hit on all of the other amazing characteristics." That's basically how I do that and there are a lot of these which is like I have to sit there and I have to explain. I have to take more time than just sending a resume to a client.



I sent a kick ass CPO's profile and they work in ad tech and I send it to Databricks. I'm like, "That does not make sense. Here's why." Being able to tell that story as an executive recruiter, if you are in a transactional relationship and you just want to get introduced to places, but if you have built a relationship with someone like myself or my peers where I can go and I already have credibility because the other five CPOs that I introduced were right down the fairway, everything they wanted.

I'm like, "This is a flyer, but here's why you have to meet them." That is a very fun and unique scenario to be in. Again, that's how I would say what I do for these top product leaders that I just think the absolute world of is putting my reputation on the line with founders. Here's why you need to meet them. For the most part, it is paid off nicely because again, the people are just phenomenal, world-class.

Rashmi:

That's amazing, thank you. Just going down a bit into the actual recruiting challenges itself, especially from your perspective, what have been some of the challenges you have faced for recruiting for chief product officer in general and would love to hear about recruiting for a female chief product officer, which you've done a lot. You've probably mastered it by now, but would love to hear your thoughts around that.

Chris:

The hardest part of recruiting product execs in the companies is the fact that you just don't know what the fit and finish is going to be. You get to know the individual, their background, you're confident in their ability to be successful because they've done it already or they've shown signs of, "Maybe they're not a CPO yet, but here's why they should be in this next opportunity." That's the easy part of the job.

The hard part is dissecting down to the, "Is this person going to gel with the CEO?" Really dig into the non-obvious, more softer skills. I err on the side of never ruling somebody out because I don't think that there will be a quote, "culture fit" I don't work at the company I have not spent six months in the office every day or dealing with the culture. For me, the way I always put it is it just has to.

You know that someone may or may not be a culture fit or, "This person might have a little bit of an ego or whatever comes across in the first conversation."

That is the trickiest part of recruiting CPOs men, women, every single type of CPO is just, that's the hardest part. All searches have that you have to fit and gel, product especially.

You got to work through a lot of the different nuances and dynamics that myself as an exec recruiter, I can't control any of those. That's the hardest part. Again, just speaking more broadly from a diversity and female perspective, I think it always comes down to two things. One is the easy, probably the number one thing that people always use as the reason why it is so hard, which are there enough of them?

I will be the first to say that is a constant battle that we talk about. Again, it gets back to the earlier point, how do we expand the funnel? That's the hardest. Then, making cases, like I said earlier on, which is how do you as an executive recruiter make a case

for someone who is a non-obvious background, but you've creatively thought about how to dynamically make it work.

It's like, "You know what Mr. and Mrs. CEO, you've never thought about hiring from digital media because you're an enterprise B2B company. This person grew up at IBM for 10 years and then they've only done B2B to C and content things, but they've got the underpinnings of real hardcore enterprise. Here's why they're relevant, because they've seen success now and they've done it across multiple.

The other piece that is obvious to, not obvious to others, and it took me a while to get over this hump. In the diversity conversation, is nobody wants to be the first. I think that's something that comes up constantly. I've had multiple outstanding female CPOs and product leaders. "Chris, why is there not anyone on the management team or maybe it's the CHRO or the CMO or there's one on the whole team or there's nothing."

That is another thing to overcome, which is you have to either have to want that and want to drive that change. Through the process, I would imagine that's probably going to be literally a question that every woman would ask which is, "If I'm hearing different things from different people, there's some flags there." That's the other thing that I've seen as a big issue, which is again, I think over the last few years it has changed and it has become very much standard.

It's like you cannot just operate with a male only team, especially a white male only team. Being able to talk through that. Listen, I now ask CEOs for that talk track if I go into a search and I look at that.

Rashmi:

Just one clarification so that I understand, when you said they don't want them to be the first it, does that mean the first executive C member in the company? Is that what you meant?

Chris:

Yeah, and that's what I mean, which is not them as in the company doesn't want them to be the first, it's the woman who's the CPO is looking around the table.

I've had people back out of searches because they were introduced to the senior director of HR and then regional VP of accounts, neither of which sit at the table and they're like, "Well, did I just meet them because they're the two most senior women or what happened here?" It's actually a thing that comes up in process if it's not addressed right from the start.

Rashmi:

That's an amazing insight, thank you for that. Do you see any differences from your experience to hire a male CPO versus a female CPO? Just from your experience perspective?

Chris:

The short answer is no. I think there are no differences, the process is the same. The outcome for me at least my mental model is have I done what I set out to do? Which



is uncover and get in front of the best CPOs that map to this client need? Whatever it might be, if I can say, "We ran a great process, we had a diverse slate. Whichever way it ends, it ends."

I think the thing that I always come back to is where do we at critical junctures in a search point to do we have our person now versus or do we keep going? If you have not had a diverse slate, it is a never, "Let's just stop." It's, "Let's keep going. Let's get to a point where it's like we've seen a wide swath of candidates in the market." I think the only difference is if you have a client who has this time speed to close mentality.

If you can't run that process, then personally you might not be able to get to a point where you've got conviction that you've ran down every diverse candidate around. I think those are the differences. Some CEOs are just, "Let's run a process. These are the 10 companies I want to recruit from. Give me every product person that has worked there that has been successful."

If there's only two women that have ever worked at those 10 companies at leadership levels, I can't change a CEO's mind. I think that's the part where I always come back and forth with a founder. It's like, "Well, speed versus running a full process. How do we want to evaluate that, and what are the key criteria?"

It's just a tricky part, but there's no differences in how a search is done. It's more so the space in which it's done and how fast we can get of these diverse candidates and females.

Rashmi:

Understood, that totally makes sense. Hence, in this whole process of being able to really understand the need for the CPO from the companies sourcing the candidates, interviewing them, and then finally the offer stage, what do you think seems to be the most hardest phase based on your experience? You are there throughout that phase, you're there.

Chris:

Well, I would say probably the start and the finish. If we break it down across a search continuum, everything in the middle, you're making sure that everyone in the process is in the loop. Here's the backgrounds and you do everything you need to. You put flak jackets around candidates. "Here's why they're good. Here's their potential yellow flags. Here's all the feedback that they are questions that are coming up through a process."

The hardest part is getting in front of the right people. Here's what I tell my team all the time, which is, "If I'm running the CPO search for Confluent or Airtable or Notion or whatever, people are going to call me back. There's just literally no reason that anyone would not call me back. These are the market leaders, everyone knows them.

When I did the Figma search, I think that thing was cool. Now if again I placed Yuki there and the thing just had its massive exit and it was one of those, if I was doing Figma last year, I could have talked to the best, anyone that got a note from me would've called me back cause it would've known it's Figma. Figma pretty much speaks for itself. Fortunately, I have the ability to represent companies that speak for themselves.

That's not the case for every series A, B, C company. Then, on the flip side is how do we get the other women in product and men in product and anyone that's like, "I've never heard of this company."

That's the hardest part, which is getting people to engage in a conversation. The people that we're engaging and everyone's majority of the people that are going to listen to this, they are happily employed who maybe like, "I could see myself taking a step at some point in the next few quarters, but maybe not. Maybe not until that perfect thing comes along." You get a lot of rejection, you deal with that very, very easily at this point.

You become hardened to the fact that it's like, "No, it's not interesting to me." Well, that's fine. Getting in front of people and getting in front of the right people, that's the hardest, especially when there's not a massive amount of women in that category which you're hunting. How do you get creative right from the start? Then, the close is tricky because you're dealing with more than just a process. You're dealing with someone's literally life decision.

This is their livelihood. They make X today and you're at a public company or whatever it might be, and they got to go join a private, it's not just them, it's their partner and family, and everyone in their orbit that is saying, "This is the right time." You become the armchair or psychologist at some points and you're like, "Where are you here, and how do we think about this? It's not just, here's the cash base bonus equity."

Again, it's the hardest when they're happily employed. That's how I'd describe it. It's just like you become more of a person to help listen and be a sounding board than some sort of hardcore negotiator to close the deal.

Rashmi:

Very interesting on that run. Thank you. Just taking a step forward, in your experience placing all these amazing women in the past, in the CPO roles, have there been any trends or observations that you've leaned towards? I know you talked about a few of them, but anything else you want to add there?

Chris:

In the world of executives, I don't see every search. My peers don't see every search, searches get filled by boards, they get filled by networks, they get filled by VCs. My advice is find the area that you want to operate in and figure out who's really, really good in that area. For example, if someone says, "I want to be in private equity, I want to be the CPO of Riverbed."

I don't do those searches, but there is someone that is a professional expert at those. That's something that will just take time, but be open. I've had this conversation with a few folks and I was like, "I've been so busy, I don't take any recruiter calls." That's okay, you don't have to take a call. I think what it is just having an ear open and just being like, "What comes across my desk?"

In the last two years, every product leader from director and above probably heard about every VP series A to whatever funded company, that's all going by the wayside. All the companies on the margin are not going to get funded, they're not going to

need VPs of product. Now, in the next 12 to 18 months, there shouldn't be anything but interesting searches around.

I think that's something that I would call up, which is in the last two years, if you were in a specific sector, you got your first, second, and third place companies, they're all there. Unfortunately, the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, 10th, all got funded. Those companies are not going to exist in a little while because they're on the margin. The VCs would rather go find a way to pump all their money into the first three.

I think that's what I tell people is the volume of searches will decrease. You will not get as many phone calls, but the ones that you do get are going to be meaningful. We've got cash to go pay an executive search firm. People don't actually think about that. It is expensive to hire me or anyone else doing executive recruiting.

If you're going to get executive recruiter call, you can be rest assured that there's probably enough capital in the bank. There's a growth story to be had. It probably is worth at least listening to, "You know what? Maybe you make a friend or two in the exec recruiting business too. That might be useful."

Rashmi:

That's an excellent tip, thank you. How do you think recruiting for this chief product officer might change in the future? Do you actually think it might change?

Chris:

That's a great question. I don't know that it will change all that much. I think the role of product will continue to play a more prominent part in every company. What will happen is you'll see, and you see this, I mean it is literally the name of the number one trend around which is product-led growth. Product people will continue to evolve the function where it is always customer focused, it is always based on what we build. Does it add value? How does it work? How do we use it? How does it get intertwined?

I think you're going to see a lot more visually as stimulated analytical, mathematical types of PMs who it's not just about growth hacking, it's about is the product that we are building adding value? Then also, how do people consume it? Is this a beautiful product? Even the old school companies not that Workday is an old school company, but people soft into Workday.

You're like, "Now, how do I modernize this? How do I make an HR product that people want to use?" That's what I think is going to be the most interesting part to watch as products evolve. It has to be something that people can use day in and day out, even if they only use it for one hour a day, or maybe just check it. It has to be highly usable.

Recruiting for that CPO I think we're going to start to see more visually appealing mental models that people bring to the table.

Rashmi:

Very well said, thank you. Any other advice that you would give to the CEOs actually who are looking to hire the CPOs?

Chris:

I spend time a lot of time, I spend probably four or five hours with CEOs before I even remotely say, "Now, [inaudible 00:45:28]." The reason for that is sometimes they don't need them, sometimes they just need to solve the problem through different mechanisms. My advice to founders is similar to what I said earlier with candidates, do a self-reflection. What's working? What's not?

Do you need this hire or is this just you're frustrated because you've got one too many direct reports, and you want to consolidate it? If that's the case, that's a different reason to hire a CPO than we've got multiple market expansions, new products, we've got this one is the cash cow, this one's this new innovation hub. We got to spin up a bunch of new things.

Figuring out why you're hiring this person and working back. Figuring out what success looks like. Again, I start with the end goal and work backwards. If you know what success looks like in a year, we penetrated this many new accounts with this new product. We launched it last year in Q4.

So many CEOs, they are product thinkers. They built the thing maybe they've come with it from scratch. Being able to identify, "Here's where I do stepping in." I had a public company, CEO who started the thing was on his third company and he said, "Chris, I need someone that's okay as the president of technology CPO, they have to be okay that I'm going to just go around them."

What does success look like? What's the operating cadence? What are the gaps? Then, it's cross-functionally too. Sometimes is this product? Do you need a culture shift? Sales is just driving it because we've never had a strong product person in the seat, and now we have to mentally change the dynamic in the company. Those are all things that I look at and dig in with founders on.

Rashmi:

That's amazing, thank you. Maybe one last question. Since the series is all about women and product and path to the CPO rank, what advice would you give for some of a female leaders who are, let's say one level down the chief product officer or path? What kind of preparation would you recommend them to do?

I know you talked about self-reflection and being able to really do the storytelling. Anything else you want to add there, Chris?

Chris:

First thing, surround yourself by people who are absolutely at or better, or doing the job already. Surround yourself with a crew that is in the same mental mode as you. Again, the people that I associate big time CPO roles with, they all know each other. You're not really plucking anyone out of obscurity and putting them in this high profile role. Again, they're all coming from the successful companies.

The piece of advice would be network with who's doing the role that you want to do. Find a mentor. I won't get into how to go about that, there's probably plenty of podcasts on that, but it's finding validating ways to add value for someone else that you can then in turn value from them. I think that's something that I talk to people all the time about who do you want to be like? Who's interesting? Who do you think is world-class?

Asking people that question and they're like, "Here's why." If you have not done the job, you do not know what the job entails until you truly are either in the job or you've spent so much time with someone who's done it that you can be like, "Now, I see." I think that's just a unique data point is not just be a part of a group, but be a part of a small group.

Be a part of a very specific group of you want to be a CPO and consumer? Find out who some of the best are, and network your way in. That's one piece. Again, depends on the place in which you want to hunt for that CPO job. Getting to know the people who are outside of just exec circles at these growth stage, all the venture firms. Being known has its pros and cons, but if someone reaches out about advisory or networking or board stuff, have those conversations.

I think those are the things where a lot of high profile companies don't actually have to ever go to search because they just know people. That's the general networking thing. What else would be? I think being realistic is always something that is discussed when I have conversations with people, and it goes with founders too. Are you willing to take the bet? Where are you at in your life?

I think that's something that is also not talked about enough is people want to be the CPO, you want to be the CPO, but you also want your cushy lifestyle, and everything has its place. Those things don't really always line up. I think that is not like work-life balance analogy. I don't want to mistake that. "You've worked at Facebook for 10 years, the operating model, everything is safe, everything is easy." Again, all in quotation, "Nothing's ever easy."

You look at people that operate only at Google or Facebook, or whatever it might be in they're world-class, you get out into the CPO world of some kick ass growth stage company it's a whole new ballgame. Swimming in lanes you've never swam in before, you're dealing with things you've never dealt with. Obviously, you still have your work-life balance and all that stuff, and that's still important, but the cadence is just so different.

Spending a lot of time, I spend a lot of time with people being like, "Do you know what you're getting into?" That's part of the thing why I just mentioned talk to people who have done the job, talk to people who have left the companies that you're at, and taken these CPO jobs. Those are the general themes that the big CPO job might be very appealing, but then you are like, "Well, what are the trade-offs?"

That's something that, again, I spend more time once I get someone into a process, it's like, "Now, you're in, you like the CEO, you like the one or two execs you've met. How now do you evaluate where you're at in your life to make that very, very important leap into a different dimension basically?"

Rashmi:

That's amazing. Thank you so much for that. I think we are almost, at the time, I really didn't think we would probably need an hour, but during the first 15 minutes, I knew we would absolutely need the hour.

Elizabeth:

I think one of the other things that we've heard from women who are at these really high levels is that they have this mindset for those who have families and children, they have this mindset of, if I'm going to be away from my children, it better be for something good. Not just run-of-the-mill stuff. It's really interesting how they think about it. They think about it differently, I think.

Chris:

I think there's just people, people are wired differently. I think if I think of Annika, and then that's why I use Rubrik, but I call her out in that conversation. There are people who just [inaudible 00:55:27] is another. She just come to mind I'm like, "They take no bullshit." They're like, "Fuck off, here's my operating model. Here's how I'm going to do it, and fall in line."

It's a really interesting piece to talk about too, and just how their operating model lines up with the company is that they're like, "I deal with my family, but then I'm back online and I'm doing this, that and the other thing." It's like they are there because they are fully bought in. They'll get the job done no matter, which is always fun and interesting.

Elizabeth:

Chris, can't thank you enough.

Chris:

Well, this has been awesome. Thank you all so much for just including me.