

HOW TO PRODUCT

SEFUNMI OSINAIKE



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www.howtoproduct.io

For Titi, the phenomenal force of positivity and support in my life. For Lanre, who drives me towards excellence in anything I do. For Toyosi, whose very existence inspires me to go after my dreams. And Tunwase, the creative genius that encourages me to believe in myself.

prod.uct

/'prädəkt/

verb

The act of combining resources to create the most value to the end-user.

Table of Contents

About

- Why does this book exist?

Part 1 - A crash course in Product	1
• Who is a Product Manager?	1
• Pillars of Product Management in Tech	3
• The Why	4
• The What	4
• The How	5
• The When	5

Part 2 - The different paths to Product	
• Build your own start-up, venture or business	8
• Find a Niche, and Play into it	8
• Seek out Different Perspectives,	11
Make a Connection To Form Your Own	17
• Capture Everything Needed to get	22
the Business Off the Ground	
• Join a start-up, the smaller the better	29
• Wear Many Hats	31
• Don't Be Afraid to Ask Questions	37
• Make Your Own Way	43
• Leverage your domain knowledge	49
• Demonstrate Your Grit	51
• Adopt a Better Style to Accelerate Learning	56
• Seek Opportunities, Simplify Solutions	61
• Join a company with the intention to transition	67
• Create a Blueprint and head to Success	69

• Be The Influence Needed to Improve a Product	73
• Explore Better Ways of Tackling Problems	79
● Transition internally within your current company	83
• Have An End-Goal in Mind Before Starting Out	85
• Always Approach a Problem With a Beginner's Mindset	91
• Position Yourself to Welcome New Challenges	96

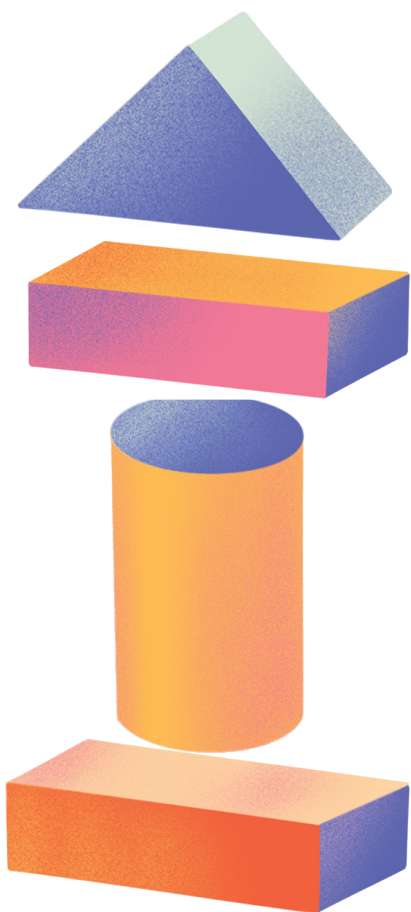
Part 3 - Product Skill Sets 103

● Curiosity and Empathy	105
● Persistence	106
● Comprehensiveness	108
● Initiative and the Desire to Learn	110
● Communication	112
● Being a Team Player	114
● Detail Orientedness	116
● Resourcefulness	118
● Adaptability	120
● Continuous Improvement	122
● Presentation	124

Next steps 143

● Tips for job hunting	143
• Learning About Product Management	144
• Acquiring the Skills of a Product Manager	146
• Applying for a Product Management Role	149
● What's next?	151

Acknowledgements 152



About

How to Product reintroduces the title of *Product Manager* by focusing on traits that best characterize those in the role. This book shares stories of individuals with unique academic backgrounds (ex. Philosophy, Cinema Studies, Photography, and others) who have broken into the tech industry for the first time.

Through a variety of interviews conducted with present-day Product Managers, this book highlights the variety of challenges these individuals faced in securing their first product role. It draws out helpful themes from the interviews and presents similar ideas to those looking to transition into a product role.

How to Product aims to simulate the experience of sitting across Product Managers from Google, Shopify, Coursera and others to learn about the crucial steps they took that led to their current roles. Starting with their educational background and going through different roles held across their careers before gaining the confidence to pursue a product-related role.

This book dives into the effective ways of gaining knowledge about product development and shares tips to inspire candidates to form their strategies since there is no linear path to becoming a Product Manager.

Why Does This Book Exist?

I got into product management accidentally. I was working on my start-up, Pave, while studying at the University of Waterloo. I enjoyed the process of bringing my idea to life while working with the talented people on my team. After the start-up failed, I wanted to recreate similar experiences. That was when I first learned about the role of a Product Manager. I did everything I could to get PM experiences through internships at Microsoft and Apple, and once I graduated, it was still challenging to get a job. Building any product is expensive for a company, and PMs are put in the driver's seat to ensure that the execution of a solution is successful and can potentially make the business money. That's why product management roles are difficult for individuals straight out of university, or without formal experience. Since PMs are expected to lead projects costing hundreds of thousands of dollars or more, the business needs to pick people they can trust to get the job done.

Getting a product management job requires experience, but you cannot get the experience in the first place without having been in a product job. This is one of the many challenges people face when they tell me they want to be Product Managers. Starting out in my first full-time product management role at ecobee, I had over 30 people reach out to me to ask about how I got the role. I didn't overthink these conversations. I reiterated my path to product in more detail, sharing pivotal moments and learnings about the role. I also

shared an overview of what my days typically looked like. At some point, I felt like I had a well-prepared script for the next person who came around.

I decided to look into the typical journey of someone who wanted to become a Product Manager. In preparation for this book, I surveyed those who had previously reached out to me about my journey. I wanted to learn more about the different steps they had taken to understand what they found valuable. Some were fortunate to be in their first product role, while others were still on their journey to secure their first product role. Through these conversations, I was able to observe the pain points from the common activities they did and the emotions they felt. I broke down the stages of the journey into consideration; The moments leading up to what prompted them to search for a different career, which resulted in the discovery of product management. The Decision phase; They learn about the reality of the role and the ways of possibly breaking into product without any formal experience. And lastly, preparation; the final phase, once they have decided to do whatever it takes to get a job as a Product Manager. By understanding all these steps, you can identify where you are and figure out the best way to proceed to achieve your goal of becoming a PM.

CONSIDERATION			
Activities	Self reflection	Research of career options	Discovery of product management
Emotions	Uncertain	Hopeful	Positive
Observation & Pain Points	People become unfulfilled with their current career and hope to find purpose in what they do for a living.	Extensive research, combing through articles and job descriptions to find a match to what they might enjoy doing.	The duties of the job seem to match their interests, which motivates them to inquire more.

Before the discovery of product management, people start by questioning what else they can do to have a meaningful career that best fits them. They proceed by searching for alternatives, and it is common to read through job descriptions to provide clues on what could appeal to them. Once they learn about product management, they are excited about a potential fit since the job summary fascinates them, which prompts them to learn more.

A: Already in tech or a related field					
B: Outside of tech					
DECISION					
Activities	Research job responsibilities	Identify essential skills for the job	Networking	Reach out to PMs	Conversation with PMs
Emotions	Very pleased	A: Relieved	A: Interested	A: Tasking	Inspired
		B: Anxious	B: Discouraged	B: Frustrated	
Observation & Pain Points	The activities described appeal to them.	A: They feel they have the most important skills required to do the job.	A: With an existing network, they reach out to learn the best ways to proceed.	A: It takes time to schedule and have long chats with everyone they wish to connect with.	They learn about the ways PMs broke into their role and about their challenges, tips and tricks. They also learn more about the day to day, which excites them more about their goal.
		B: There are several skills required that they don't have but still feel the drive to learn more.	B: With the lack of a network in the tech industry, it is challenging to meet PMs.	B: Finding someone might take some time, so they try to maximize their time with whoever they meet.	

During the decision stage, people outside of tech (Shown as B in the table) had a more demanding journey than others already in tech (Shown as A in the table). The major burden was at the point where they all began to network and reach out to Product Managers. It was one of the most extended steps in the process, which commonly had the most influence on whether they were going to move forward with their search. Mainly because it was a way to learn about the reality of the job. Some were familiar with Product Managers and decided to reach out, but they also wanted diverse opinions, which meant reaching out to others they didn't know. It was especially difficult for those outside the tech industry who had very few people in their network to assist them in finding a PM to meet.

PREPARATION			
Activities	Job search	Interview preparation	Job interviews
Emotions	Vexed	Neutral	Determined
Observation & Pain Points	Hard to get the job without experience and hard to get experience without the job.	Overwhelming amounts of resources online to look through.	Learning as much as possible and doing all the things necessary to get a chance to become a PM.

At the preparation stage, my findings revealed that most of the steps for best product management practices had sufficient documentation available. The main pain point in this phase is finding that opportunity to get a foot in the door as a Product Manager.

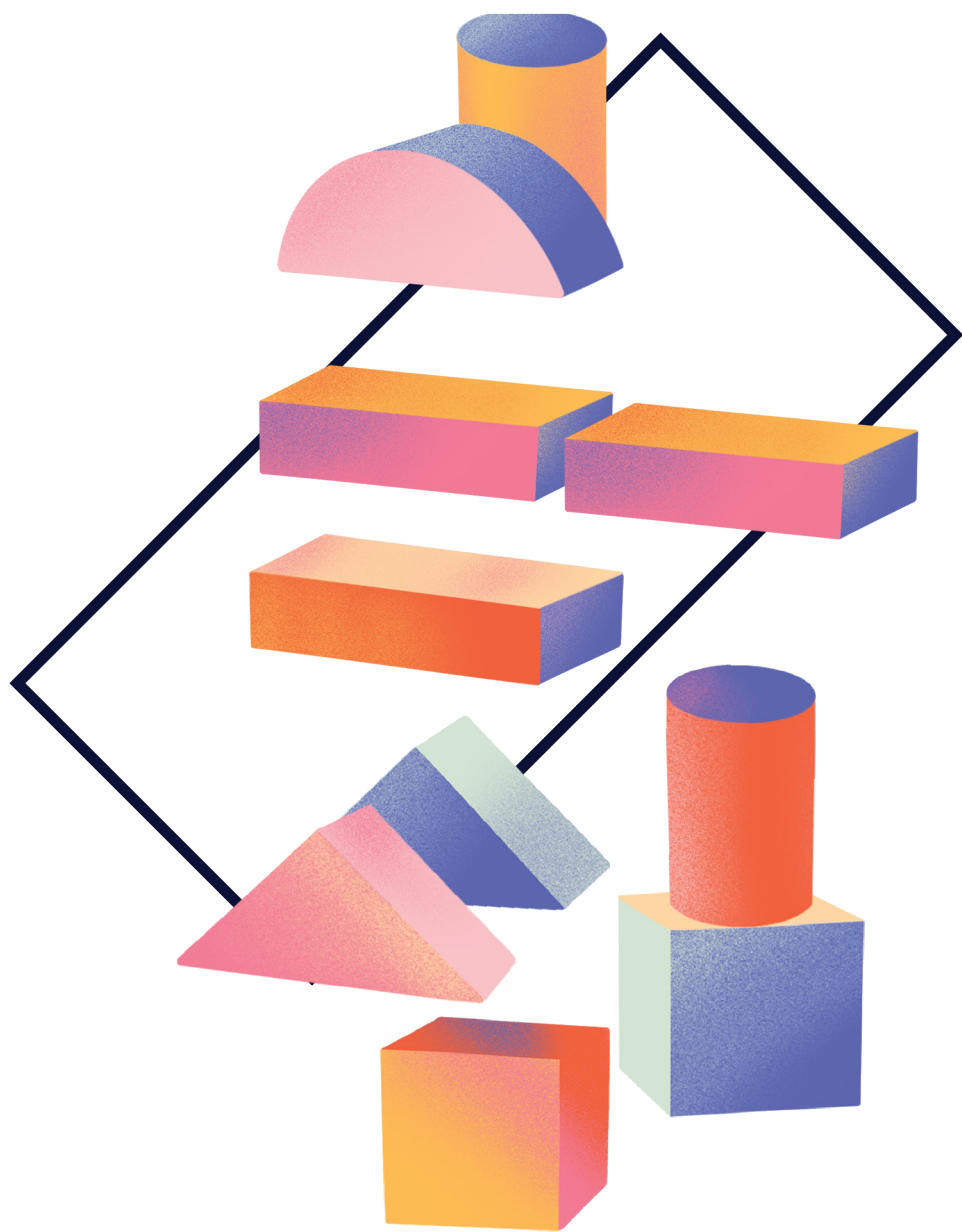
So I decided to embark on this project, to replicate the feeling of what it would be like if you could sit across 25 Product

Managers to learn about what they do and how they got into their role. I interviewed candidates with diverse educational backgrounds to break up the myth about the mandatory requirement of having a technical background to succeed in the role. This book aims to draw parallels to where you might currently be in your journey and provides stories that you can easily follow to help motivate you through your process. I made sure to highlight defining moments in their careers, including challenges and breakthroughs that gave them the clues they needed to proceed in their journey into product.

CONSIDERATION			
Activities	Self reflection	Research of career options	Discovery of product management
Emotions	Uncertain	Hopeful	Positive
Observation & Pain Points	People become unfulfilled with their current career and hope to find purpose in what they do for a living.	Extensive research, combing through articles and job descriptions to find a match to what they might enjoy doing.	The duties of the job seem to match their interests, which motivates them to inquire more.

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Part 1

A Crash Course in Product

Who is a Product Manager?

A Product Manager performs a complex role that does not have a standard definition, as one would not do justice to those in the role. The practice varies between organizations and industries, which presents new challenges for Product Managers to overcome. To compile this book, I interviewed 40 Product Managers, the majority of whom were previously not in the tech industry before transitioning into their first product role. My discussions focused heavily on the decision-making processes of these individuals during various phases in their lives. From what influenced their choice for a post-secondary degree, to the various factors that appealed to them from each role they applied to. I was also interested in understanding the underlying trait that made Product Managers similar. I did this by paying attention to how they solved problems before and after they had their job title.

A commonality I found in Product Managers was the strong

presence of an active imagination, the understanding of the foundational building blocks needed to construct it and the perseverance to bring it to life. PMs are observant of their environment and seek the necessary tools to navigate through any problem that stimulates them. By being able to break down a problem, visualize it and leverage their strengths, PMs unify different groups of people to solve a particular problem.

It turns out that most people become Product Managers before understanding what the title encompasses. Some have the natural characteristics that make it easier for them, while others acquire the traits over time. Long before product management was a definitive field in technology, it existed throughout society in different forms. Sports coaches, chefs and composers are all examples of Product Managers in their own ways. While they may service different fields, the majority of their problem-solving skills are similar. A coach knows how to combine the strengths of the players on the team to defeat an opponent. A chef mixes different ingredients to create delicious meals that bring nutritional value to the consumer. A music composer creates sounds from different groups of musical instruments that mix in perfect harmony in an orchestra. Other examples include movie directors, marching band choreographers, architects, restaurant owners, construction supervisors. You get the idea. . .

Product Managers don't have to understand *how* to necessarily accomplish a goal, rather they must have an understanding of the work that needs to be done, and access to the appropriate resources to execute on the deliverables. It is their inquisitive nature that enables them to uncover how to leverage their skills to create value.

After one year of interviews, it became apparent that product management is for those who have the natural knack for forming a vision, then finding all the components required to make it possible. Therefore, applying that way of thinking to solve various degrees of problems.

Pillars of Product Management in Tech

Despite the many challenges that candidates face when trying to break into their first product management job, I believe the descriptions highlighted in the previous section make it less daunting for the average person. When traditionally defining the role of a Product Manager, the job description typically contains the words “strategy, roadmap, Agile and cross-functional teams,” all of which may be difficult to grasp if you’re not in tech. Much of this terminology is irrelevant without genuinely understanding the core of why the role exists in any organization, regardless of the field.

Companies are formed with missions to continually provide value to their users by removing specific pain points. They hire Product Managers to uncover ways to solve those problems for customers. This concept applies for all industries. However, the way the PMs go about solving said issues differ depending on the types of projects or teams involved. It is most common for Product Managers to be the voice of the customer and work alongside the technical and design teams on implementing different solutions. Lastly, PMs collect feedback from users to ensure the original pain point identified serves the wider business goals. We can break this classic cycle down into the “Why, What, How and When” of product development and can be visualized by four pillars of strategy, execution, user-facing and technical development.

The Why - Strategy and User-Facing

In this stage of product development, Product Managers focus on understanding critical user problems. The exploratory form of research helps identify crucial areas of difficulty from customers' and clients' needs. PMs understand the key motivators that push customers to find a solution to the issue they are facing, helping to discern the root of the problem that causes the most friction. Lastly, they tie the value of adequately solving the problem to a business opportunity, which can improve a company's metrics such as sales, revenue or the number of new customers.

The What - User-Facing and Execution

After identifying a significant problem, the next stage of product development involves defining a clear vision of success. Product Managers then begin working with designers. They start by listing out possible solutions and validating them with users to learn which is most effective. Through rapid prototyping, the team tests out the usability of their solutions and evaluates them amongst alternatives in cost-effective ways. The end of this stage sets a unified direction on a suitable first version of the product to deliver to customers within a realistic timeline.

The How - Execution and Technical Development

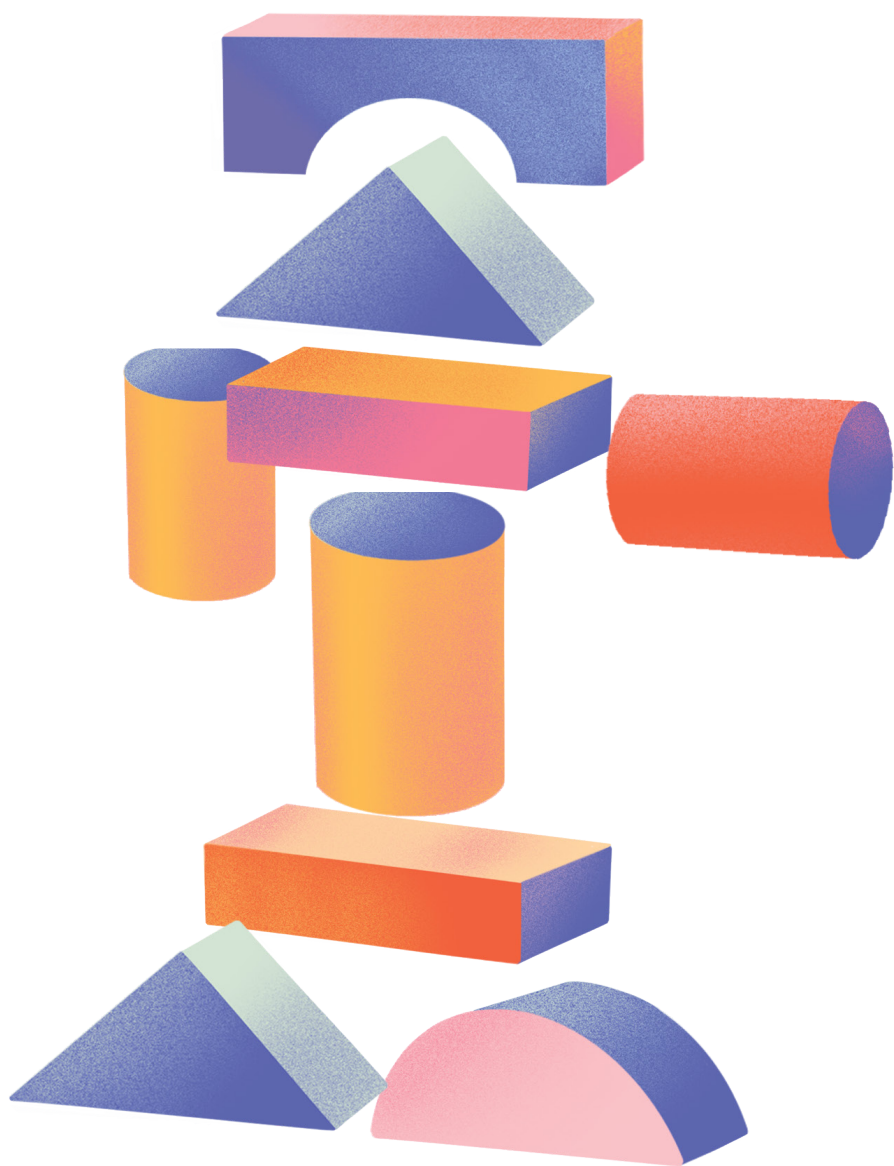
This stage is the building phase of product development, which consumes the most amount of time. Product Managers collaborate closely with technical teams to scope out the development effort required to deliver the product. Collaboration is the central theme of this phase. A strong relationship between both parties helps build out a backlog of tasks for the developers to carry out. The PM prioritizes the order of execution to iteratively develop smaller testable chunks of the product through an Agile approach. The PM is also responsible for keeping the team productive and on track with the agreed-upon timeline for completion. At the end of this stage, the team delivers a tangible product to test their hypothesis on, which delivers measurable value to end-users.

The When - Technical Development and Strategy

This stage isn't always present in all companies but deals with making early decisions that maximize the efforts of the technical team. Product Managers work backwards and prepare for future incidents that might occur as a result of their solution being implemented. They set the requirements on the kind of data they want to receive. It helps them understand the return-on-investment on the decisions they make and the product their customers want to use. PMs are often involved in early conversations on the technical "stack" that is most effective for the experience they hope to deliver. As the product matures, the PM prepares for appropriate scaling to ensure the stability of services and the productivity of the team.



Through the course of defining a problem, developing a solution and releasing it to end-users, Product Managers continuously go through the stages in the diagram above. Each step contributes key insights that carefully build on one another to get to the end goal through an iterative approach. Organizations use different techniques on how they choose to carry out product development. These techniques have an impact on the type of skills product managers get to develop. Therefore, being prepared with a diverse skill set makes it easy to add value in every area of the Product management role.



Part 2

The Different Paths to Product

Build your own Start-Up, Venture or Buisness

Solving a significant problem, creating generational wealth or pursuing the freedom of having control of one's time are sought after goals in the tech industry. With many of the traditional barriers of starting a business removed, many young entrepreneurs seek out to achieve these goals by starting a small side-project with friends (often a tech product), and watch the business grow to a comfortable size, often times large enough to make "an exit". There are other possible benefits of bringing an idea to life, one of which is becoming a product manager at a notable organization.

Anyone who takes on the path of entrepreneurship has the ultimate goal of succeeding in the vision they hope to deliver to the world. For this reason, I don't think you should go through the process of starting something and not seeing it through, just to become a PM. Coming up with a good idea is hard. Executing on it is even more challenging, and with so much fierce competition,

it seems like others before you have tried and succeeded at every idea conceivable. It is for this reason that the current wave of start-up entrepreneurs are tackling niche problems that cater to a small subset of people.

The majority of people who started companies and ended up in PM roles landed there accidentally. They put everything they had into their companies only to find themselves at a point where taking on a more structured and secure role seemed necessary. Most of them will tell you that, given a second chance, they would rather build a start-up from the ground up all over again. It is the pursuit of an inexplicable feeling of bringing an idea to life and motivating a team of people to work on inventing the future with you. In a large company, this feeling can be best captured through a PM role. While not the same as starting your own business, a PM role provides you with a similar thrill. If your goal is to get into product, you can replicate the process of creating a start-up, venture or business by getting started on a project.

We've all heard stories of people scribbling ideas on napkins and months later their idea blows up and takes the world by storm. Well, grab a napkin and begin to brainstorm your next project. Pursuing this route can help you acquire the essential skills needed to succeed as a PM in any environment. It doesn't matter what idea or methodology you choose to bring it to life, as long as you justify your motivation for the idea and how the process worked for you. In reality, you learn by simply creating ideas and validating them.

With consumers' infinite needs, the trick to creating value is to find a viable and seamless solution that consumers are willing to pay for. Taking the extra steps to build the product out and have it

used by customers provides enormous feedback that can not only help improve the product itself but also add to your knowledge of product development. It is a continuous cycle that arms you with more experience each time you go through an iteration, pivot to something different, or create something entirely new. The same applies to physical goods and services as they share similar challenges: making difficult decisions that can make or break the idea.

This chapter shares stories of entrepreneurs who forged their path by solving problems they cared about to create a solid direction for their careers. It highlights their motivations, and backgrounds in detail to help explain what led to their decisions, which had an impact on their journey into product.

Find a Niche, and Play into it

Robleh's story

Robleh would be the first person to tell you that you don't need a degree to dictate what you choose to do with your career. Especially when it comes to product! He started off in a college Computer Science program but left after the first semester when classes didn't meet his expectations of technology. He eventually ended up at York University to study Kinesiology, and later Psychology.

While at York University, he found a couple friends importing LED belt buckles from Alibaba and reselling them at 30x the original price. Robleh got involved and expanded his market demographic to highschools and recruited a sales team that would help him grow his business to make money on the side. Using money saved up, he decided to pursue a venture of his own called Stylic. With the rise of the iPod, he saw an opportunity to provide people with different colour options for earphones, to add some personality to their device. Robleh found a supplier, designed packaging, and wrote out a business plan before approaching electronic retail stores to start selling. The business ultimately didn't work out, as the high manufacturing costs and low retail margins proved too costly to maintain a hardware company, so Robleh decided to pursue another idea. Robleh and his friends were sneaker enthusiasts who stayed up-to-date with various brands. He wondered whether there was any room for innovation by taking his sneaker interest online.




Wouldn't it be cool if we made a social network for sneakers? There was all this stuff happening around Flickr and Myspace. There were blogs coming up like Hypebeast, and forums like NikeTalk. Content was blowing up! So I was keeping an eye on opportunities and trends and tried to align those with things that I liked.




Robleh found a niche that he could serve, and armed with this new idea, Sneaker Play was born. Robleh decided to recruit his close friends to work on it. They started with the basics: profiles, sneaker battles and forums to enable conversations in the community. The experience was gamified and was made exclusive with an invite-only signup process, simply because they couldn't afford the SoftLayer hosting costs. They decided to let people in slowly while building the product. A landing page was put up to collect the emails of warm leads, people who were interested in joining the community, and it was only after three months that they introduced basic functionality. At that time, they already had five thousand people on the waiting list. Once they launched, the Sneaker Play community quickly built a reputation online and got a lot of attention from notable blogs like Mashable, Techcrunch and even The New York Times. After running the company for three years, the idea lost some of its initial excitement and Robleh eventually sold the business and began looking for his next adventure.

Only after selling Sneaker Play, Robleh graduated from York University and took a marketing job selling out-of-the box software.




They hired me before I finished school because of my Sneaker Play experience. That's why you don't really need a degree.




He learned about the corporate world, but his mindset was always that of an entrepreneur. With the increasing popularity of the iPhone, Robleh was excited about the direction of mobile technology and what it would unlock for the industry. He immediately wanted to dive deeper into learning about mobile apps.



Being at a new stage in his life, Robleh just got married and was expecting a daughter when he had a great idea for a kids education app that he wanted to explore. He reached out to the same friends who he collaborated on Sneaker Play with and brought them on as contractors to help bring his vision to life.



I picked up books on Objective-C, just to understand it, not to program it. So I was able to, at least, have conversations and understand what developers were saying... I looked at the ingredients of an app: you need code, a development environment like X-Code, there is a user interface and that is what communicates with this OS. And then you have this glass screen, a human on the other side, who touches it and has a feeling, and gets some value. That's like the stack.



Robleh always broke problems down to their First Principles to understand how they worked in relation to each other, which helped him build out the freelance team needed to execute the idea. He studied the best apps on the app store, read various experiences shared by developers and began to understand how Apple selected the top apps to feature and showcase their work. At that time, the most-downloaded app was a live-streaming app for zoo animals. Understanding people loved animals and knowing he wanted to make an app for kids, Robleh was inspired to create the best visual educational animal app on the app store. He called it Pocket Zoo. He worked with illustrators and motion graphic designers through freelance websites that matched the visual idea he had in his head. Robleh was confident the product would be successful without testing the app before its release.



I saw this becoming very useful. As a parent, I wanted to make this app for her and then this live animal app... that was validation. It was number one in the App Store, what other validation did I need?

Pocket Zoo was successful, becoming the number one educational app and was among the top 50 apps of its time. Robleh recognized mobile apps as his forte, and since then, he began his own studio, Tiny Hearts. He followed the same blueprint of studying the app store to make sure all his products looked and felt like other great apps. The studio released apps like *Wake* alarm, which got to top 30 on the app store and *Quick Fit*, which was featured in an Apple commercial. At its peak, one Tiny Hearts

app, *Next Keyboard*, was making \$20k a day as a paid app and reached number two on the app store worldwide. The work of Tiny Hearts was also featured in The Verge, the New York Times, and Wired magazine.

Mobile apps, however, were not sustainable due to their volatility. *Next Keyboard*, for example, had bad days where it earned as little as \$2-per-day. The studio moved onto consulting, creating products for clients while working on their own app ideas on the side. Tiny Hearts worked with Shopify, Wealthsimple, Philips and various others.

As more time passed, the studio focused mostly on the services side of their business, as they desired to find a suitable exit. While doing some service work with Shopify, the company brought up the idea for the studio to join them. Robleh embraced the idea since he had a great working relationship with Shopify through client work and also through the customer service interactions from running his own online store. In 2016, the Tiny Hearts team joined the Shopify garage team to focus on building out consumer products. It was through this acquisition that Robleh's title changed from Founder to Product Lead.

Takeaway:

Robleh was always aware of his surroundings and remained curious to learn about the things that interested him. These traits helped him figure out the right opportunities to chase and understand the needs required to bring his ideas to life. It was challenging at first to work in a new domain, but Robleh tried his best to understand the basics, which enabled him to work well with the core members of his team who could execute. His experiences bringing many ideas to life gave him all the tools he needed to

succeed at an organization since he had always embodied what it meant to be a Product Manager long before he had the title at Shopify.

Robleh has helped Shopify ship apps like Frenzy and Arrive, both the top 100 apps in their categories. Now, he leads his own team and uses this autonomy to build products that align with the mission of the company, similar to when he ran his own studio. The only difference now is the size of the company. Otherwise, Robleh gets to do what he loves, which is building products for consumers.

While Robleh might seem like an anomaly, since he was able to turn his company exit into a senior product role, there are many with similar experiences who fail to achieve the same results. Whether that is to get their idea off the ground, or to scaling it to a point where it reaches thousands. Instead, these individuals take their lessons learned and transfer the skills elsewhere in organizations that require Product Managers.

Seek out Different Perspectives, Make a Connection To Form Your Own

Belinda's story

Belinda was a frequent writer for her high school newspaper and saw journalism as a way to bring information driven by facts to the world. She studied International Development and Political Economy at University of Guelph with the intention to kick off her career in the non-profit sector. But, at the height of the global economic recession in 2008, there wasn't much work available for new graduates in the non-profit space, so Belinda decided to instead work on getting another degree. She took a one-year accelerated program to pursue her dream of becoming a Journalist.

The competitive world of journalism made it challenging for newcomers to land jobs, so Belinda took a couple of unpaid internships to gain the valuable experience necessary to become hired. The internships made her feel closer to her goal and helped break her into the industry. The experience brought forward the connections that were crucial to getting her first full-time role as an Associate Editor at J-Source.ca, where she got to report on the Canadian media industry.

As an Associate Editor, she broke stories and worked with freelance journalists and volunteer editors to bring together different pieces and craft different narratives on her reporting. It enabled her to help others start their own journalism careers, and she preferred working behind the scenes editing rather than reporting stories of her own. Watching industry trends closely,

Belinda sought to use technology to support her storytelling. She found different tools to help her curate information and edit content, which made her job more exciting. One particular product stood out for her, ScribbleLive, which helped her manage the process of creating and delivering her content. It was a standout tech start-up in Toronto that was serving the journalism industry, and she loved the product so much that she decided to apply for a job posting as a Client Success and Training Manager.

Belinda's job at ScribbleLive involved training reporters and editors on how to use the product, working with them on how to accomplish their goals and generally enabling them to be efficient in their work. Having a close relationship with clients made it easy for her to relay feedback about the product to the development team. She sat beside developers, learned how they worked and understood how best to communicate feature improvements. Belinda was able to suggest better user experiences from the various workarounds clients were undertaking with their products. After two years, Belinda moved to a product marketing role where she helped validate the market, assisted other Product Managers prioritize features and communicated changes to customers and internal stakeholders. Gathering requirements to help deliver customer value was what she enjoyed most about her job and she looked for opportunities to do more of the same, which was when she discovered more about product management.

After almost 3 years at ScribbleLive, and unable to make an internal transition within the company, Belinda went on her own for the next year. Freelancing as a copywriter, a social media manager, a website builder and an email marketing manager Belinda helped different small businesses drive results through her

services. While freelancing, she searched for a Product Manager job but was often rejected due to her lack of a Computer Science background.


Finally, Belinda decided to build something of her own. She loved the idea of fusing news with technology, which led her and her partner to form a newsletter that curated news around the Toronto tech community. Printed on a single sheet of paper, *The Sheet* was born.




I was going to a lot of meetups and always noticed people on their phones. My partner and I wondered if there was an opportunity to create a physical product that would engage, entertain and inform people while they were at in-person events



Belinda recognized people were interested in taking a break from their phones and saw a physical newspaper as a perfect medium to deliver short stories. She distributed the newsletters at different start-up meetup groups across the city and found a way to monetize it by serving ads in the newsletters. Following each event, she would count how many flyers were left behind and in the trash to figure out what her take-home rate was. This became her metric for success, to see how many people were genuinely engaging with the newsletter.



At this point in my career, I had only worked on digital products, where every last interaction a user makes with your product can be tracked. With a physical product, we had to figure out a way to track interactions. Our 'take-home rate' wasn't especially scalable, but it helped us quantify our readership to communicate that to our advertisers.



The Sheet grew to be a small business that kept Belinda afloat while she worked on other projects and continued her job search. She met a lot of people in the tech community by coming out to events and would regularly mention she was looking to get into product management. Belinda was later introduced to the director of product at Checkout 51. A coffee chat led to an interview, which she then used to land her first job as a Product Manager. Belinda is currently a Lead Product manager at theScore, where she works with other PMs to build out sports experiences to connect fans to what they love.

Takeaway:

Belinda always took the initiative to find a way for herself to get to her end goal. Typically a non-linear path, she understood the possible challenges ahead and found creative ways to go around them. Throughout her journey, she always had the desire to help others through empowering young journalists, solving client problems or helping others with services for their small

businesses. Focusing on the user helped Belinda find ways to solve their problems, which also guided her toward a path to product.

Belinda knew she wanted to become a Product Manager before starting a business, but while searching for a role, she pursued the opportunity to fill a gap she had previously identified. The Sheet wasn't a typical tech product, but she found a way to add value to her customers with her unique offering. Belinda also figured out how to determine the success of her product, which she could use to communicate to advertisers to gain some revenue. It is the combination of her experiences that made her stand out to take the necessary steps to make progress. A key trait needed to be successful as a Product Manager.

Capture Everything Needed to get the Business Off the Ground

David's story

David tried studying computer science at the University of Toronto but later left the program because of the onerous math classes required. He wanted to do something that spoke to his artistic side and enrolled for the New Media program that had recently started up at a different campus. The program focused on how humans interacted with the technology around them and the practice of making design useful to the average person. David also took on an additional major in art while at UofT. While working towards his degrees, he learned how to code on the side and enjoyed spending time programming. After graduating from the program, his professors encouraged him to become a teacher's assistant for the course, which he did for two years while freelancing, making websites for small businesses. As David started taking on more significant projects, he launched into his freelancing full time. He worked with clients for the next three years, building out and delivering different web solutions.


As more projects became available, David leveraged his New Media training on accessibility, usability and best UX practices to make his work stand out and succeed for clients. While freelancing for a particular start-up, *Endless Europe*, he was asked to join the team as a full-time developer because they loved his approach on how he made the product more user-friendly. While the start-up ultimately failed to gain traction, David was in the role for two years before choosing to pursue different opportunities.

“


I was a little burned out from like, computer stuff.. I was like, I need to get out of this and do something else. So I left the whole tech field behind and I had that art degree in the background, which had just been laying there. So I started doing photography.

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A friend of his was shooting weddings at the time, and David asked if he could join in to help out with the business. His friend trained him on how to shoot weddings professionally and how to handle the business side of things. The job became demanding due to its nature, taking all weekend to attend the events as well as enduring hours to finally edit and deliver the pictures with narrow timeframes. It was also seasonal as winter months, he wouldn't get as many jobs as the summer months. So after weighing the number of hours spent and the amount of money he was making, David branched out into building his own commercial photography business. It focused more on licensing work and stock photography to make more passive revenue. After four years, He got tired of doing the same thing, it didn't pay him very well and began to feel the need to create something once more.



At the same time I was ramping down the photography business. I figured, hey, what the hell? Let's do a start-up again... So the question of how can I be more impactful? How can I reach more people? How can I become more valuable to the world?



David felt he was good at tech work and needed to find something interesting to work on. He loved food, and with the growing popularity of the sharing economy, David came up with the idea for an Airbnb for food. The platform would enable users to sell extra portions of food they couldn't eat to others nearby. He reached out to his best friend, who was in car sales back then, to help him with outreach, community and evangelism while he worked on the technical and design challenges to bring the idea to life.

Together, they raised a small amount of funding from angel investors and set out to execute on the vision. Once users signed up for the product, they were delighted and remained engaged. The team made a sticky product that solved a particular problem, which users loved. As time passed, however, they had trouble scaling. Finding new users proved difficult, and no one on the team had expertise in customer acquisition.

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“It’s the stuff that you don’t know that’s going to get you! The problem is, how do you get the person in through your door in the first place? So while we were able to sell, we were really struggling with how to create that funnel to get people on board and how to get people talking about us to other people. So it ended up being less about sales and more about marketing/advertising/brand awareness.”


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Growth became stagnant, and David discovered a whole new expertise for marketing that was required to help the start-up succeed. As a final attempt to save the company, David set a new goal for the team and while they failed to meet their metrics, David realized a large gap in the team. After two years of trying to get the idea off the ground, David and his co-founder decided to ramp the company down and settle things nicely with their investors.

To figure out his next steps, David decided to go back to freelancing as a developer to make some money. After working on a few projects, he met up with an old client, Tim, who was working on a new hardware idea for connecting devices and transmitting data called Nano Magnetics. They exchanged start-up stories, and challenges they had both gone through, and Tim was impressed with how far David was able to go with his company. He proceeded to invite David to join his company in a managerial role, stating he needed someone who had been through it all before to guide his development team.

David felt like he didn't have the right experience as a manager (especially in hardware) and hesitated to accept the role. Tim convinced him to give it a try and gave him the option to quit at any time if the role wasn't working out. Tim defined the role as, **"anything and everything needed to get the business off the ground."** While David felt the job description was really broad, it did provide him an opportunity to expand his skillsets, take on a new challenge, and learn a new skill. In the end, David took the job as a Product Manager at Nano Magnetics.

In that role, David was able to bridge the gap between the business and the engineering teams. He spent a lot of his time getting context and awareness with what was happening and had different sessions with all stakeholders to ensure there was cohesion with the work everyone was doing. He brought the balance the company needed and made sure to make a business case for whatever the engineers required to work towards.



I think a lot of my job was creating clarity in trying to figure out what to do and what not to do.

Takeaway:

David has a unique combination of skills that he used to his advantage whenever he needed a change in careers. With his solid foundation as a self-taught programmer, he was able to have something that he could always go back to if things didn't work out. It helped him take more risks and pursue opportunities that interested him. None of the businesses or ideas he worked on ever grew to sustain him, as it was always a constant grind to keep moving forward. David learned from each experience and built on top of his skills to make the next one better. It was that same reason why someone saw the potential in him to lead a team through difficulties.

David's desire for learning and continuous improvement coupled with his start up experiences made him fit to become a Product Manager even though he didn't know what that meant at the time Tim offered him the role. Once he entered the role, David understood what needed to be done and executed with the resources he had to deliver an output. David has since moved on from product management and is now a UX engineer at Google.

Conclusion:

Seeing what you thought was the next big thing crumble down isn't a great feeling, especially if you've invested time and money into it. It can take a toll on your confidence, but it is best to be retrospective on what went wrong to understand what could have been done better. What some see as failures, others see incredible experiences filled with lessons and learning. If things didn't work out the first time, chances are they will be more improved the next time around. Product development is iterative and while working on a project on your own, even if that fails, it gives you the first iteration you need to go through the cycle again. You'll know what not to do, and if you're reflective enough, it will help you identify the gaps in your knowledge and how to fill them.

The skills gained through working on your own business are invaluable and starting a project also creates similar learnings. It would be best if you considered picking a project that solves a problem for real users and generates revenue, no matter how small to bring to the market. It will reveal the things you are great at and others that you need to improve. If getting into product is your end goal, then it will also give you enough to talk about during your interviews, which has a likelihood of impressing employers.

Join a Start-Up: The Smaller, The Better

There are many reasons why people choose to join small companies or early-stage start-ups. The thrill of working on something new or innovative is often accentuated by the company's small size, and its many challenges entice a peculiar group of people who love solving difficult problems. Start-ups are also fast-paced, releasing features or products frequently to meet customer needs, all done with limited resources. These companies are also known to hire people who prove the willingness to go the extra mile to get the job done despite lacking all the skills needed to do the job. The environment and culture is enough to push individuals to learn at a high rate. A charismatic leader also continually reminds the team that they are doing big things, disrupting an industry and changing the world with their contribution. The possibility of an exit in the distant future is also something early hires look forward to as they feel their efforts will justify a delayed reward. Perhaps the most common reason people work at early-stage start-ups is the ownership it provides, and the flexibility to test out multiple roles since a well-functioning start-up never runs out of tasks needing attention.

Usually, early-stage start-ups with less than 30 hires don't need Product Managers. At that phase, the founder is likely leading the product vision and working closely with the teams to communicate how best to solve customer problems. Employees rarely enter these small companies and become a PM from the start. However, early-stage start-ups are a great place to gain the skills needed to transition either internally into a product role (as the company grows), or to another organization altogether.

A small team makes it easy to understand each person's role

and knowledge is easily shared throughout departments, meaning that anyone can fill in for another role if the need ever arises. The nature of start-ups also means that not enough people can handle the scale of the work to be done, which allows for others to pick up tasks in other disciplines.

An enormous opportunity to learn all aspects of a business is out there for anyone willing to join an early-stage company. You can gain all the required skills to land a Product Manager role without the risk of taking on the responsibility of building your own company. What matters is getting a foot in the door and staying motivated to do what it takes to solve the problems thrown at you. In such environments, you get to be a generalist with exposure to different issues that help take on the responsibilities of the various tech disciplines. While in your role, finding different tasks to position you closer to product-related decisions will help you gain knowledge on customer needs and how the company goes about tackling these problems. Working closely with the development team also increases the chances of being hired as a Product Manager in another company.


This chapter shares stories about individuals who worked at start-ups or smaller companies and realized their desire to work in a product management role. It highlights the responsibilities they held while at those companies that strengthened them with the skills they needed to transition into product.

Wear Many Hats


Stacey's story

Stacey was a straight-A student in high school, and her interest in the arts led her to the University of Toronto for Cinema Studies. The art of film made Stacey very passionate about building an area of expertise as she looked to the path of becoming a professor of Cinema Studies. In her final year of undergrad, she decided to take courses part-time so she could also work to be able to afford to live in the city. Stacey went on Craigslist to search for roles and applied for a research assistant job posting at a tech start-up for categorizing and organizing content for algorithm training. It sounded like something that she could do and in her interview with the CEO, they bonded over their mutual interests outside of tech. To this day, she thinks that's the reason she was hired.

The tech world was new and out of Stacey's comfort zone as she didn't know anyone who worked in that industry at that time. But she enjoyed working with a small, focused team and got along with everyone at the company. After working for the start-up part-time for a year and graduating from university, Stacey decided to pursue her master's degree since she was still interested in becoming a professor of Cinema Studies. Her reality was met with uncertainty as she didn't feel like she could remain in academia for her whole career. Stacey went back to the CEO of the start-up to ask for advice on what to do next. He convinced her to come back to work for the company as an administrative assistant while she figured out her next steps. She took the job, which meant she had to do anything that was required to keep the company running.



I made calls, and I got the coffee. Then I started to review pitch decks for our investors. I started to go on sales calls with the CEO. I started to get involved with what the developers were working on. And so I started to evolve from the office assistant into something much more as I was integrated into the team and seeing how we're building software.



It was a small company of five people, which meant that Stacey needed to fill in the gaps in many areas that needed attention. She was once handed a book on user research by the CEO and was asked to figure out how to perform usability testing for their product. Once the company landed their first two clients, she became the Business Operations Manager to help them get the most out of the product. Stacey found it extremely rewarding to work with people who helped her understand good design and the limitations and possibilities of the technologies they were building. Curiosity led to asking many questions, which helped to get a sense of how to effectively contribute to the team in different disciplines at a micro-level. Sticking with the company through multiple pivots, Stacey persevered through tough financial times with the team for a couple of years until the company ultimately went under.

Stacey reflected on her responsibilities at the start-up to figure out her next step. After researching, she found the closest thing to her combination of duties was most similar to the role of a Project Manager, and that is what she marketed herself as.

The CEO referred Stacey to an agency that delivered projects for clients. Over the 8 months that she was at the company, she supervised 19 projects for several clients doing Project Management work. Her experience felt nothing like what she did back at the start-up and ended up leaving the company due to burnout from working unsustainable long hours. She took a short break and decided to search for something new, this time, more interested in larger companies that had some security and structure in the responsibilities that were expected of her. Still led by what she labeled herself to be, Stacey got a new job at Postmedia as a Project Manager.


After a few years at Postmedia, she still didn't feel that project management was a satisfying career for her since it didn't feel like the job activities she enjoyed the most, so Stacey thought about switching. She considered other options such as technical writing, going back to school for library studies or even leaving tech entirely. Revisiting her first start-up experience finally led to the conclusion she had been looking for all this while.

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I realized what made me happy there was working on the product. You know, working with the designer ideating on how we would build something, doing user research, working with the developers thinking about the business in relation to how we built and promoted the product. And then I realized product management was what I actually wanted to do, and that was a term I now understood because Postmedia had Product Managers.

”

Stacey wanted to make a shift in her career and started talking to internal employees who were in senior product management roles, to ask their advice on how she could make a transition. She looked for as much information she could find in online blogs about product management to prepare for the journey ahead. Stacey kept voicing her interest in transitioning internally and was approached by the VP of Product to help with a small project. She gladly obliged and executed her deliverables, which got her a good rapport with the VP. Eventually, an opening finally came up internally, and she was first in line to be considered.



“The VP of product came by my desk and said, ‘You want this? It’s yours. Run with it, make of it what you will, I’ll give you the opportunity.’ And that’s how I got into product.”

While her title officially changed to Product Manager, the role wasn’t exactly what she had imagined. It was more of a Business Analyst role as she leaned heavily on data and analytics to solve problems. At this time, Stacey realized the difference in Product Manager roles at traditional companies versus tech companies. She attended meetups and took a boot camp course to increase her depth of knowledge to learn everything from scratch. Remaining curious and asking a lot of questions allowed her to learn quickly, as she figured how to keep moving forward and solving problems.

Stacey gave herself a year in her current role to learn as much as possible so she could join a tech company as a Product Manager for her next move. After every interview, she asked for feedback to see if there were gaps or areas where she wouldn't be a good fit. It made her reflect and learn how she could be better, and Stacey did this until she got an offer to join The Working Group (TWG) as a Product Manager. Stacey is now a Senior Product Manager at Loblaw Digital and the Chapter Lead for Women in Product in the Toronto community.

Takeaway:

Ever since her start-up experience, Stacey took on tasks as an opportunity to learn. At some point, while working for the start-up, she took on every possible role that existed at a medium sized tech company. She wanted the company to succeed and felt part of a team, which meant playing her part and going the extra mile to ensure that things ran smoothly. As different needs came up, she made sure to address them in the absence of anyone else to take over those responsibilities. Titles didn't matter to her; after all, Stacey came in as an administrative assistant but didn't let that determine how she spent her days. Even though she joined the start-up as a way to figure out what to do next, she took advantage of the opportunity to try out different things to figure out what she liked. That process also continued when she left the start-up and didn't stop until she got into a position that she felt was most comfortable and enjoyable.

Her success in getting into product was in her willingness to understand what people struggled with and helping them overcome it by offering her assistance. That drive is what makes Stacey a great Product Manager because she is all about solving problems. Whether it was for customers or her team, she found

a way around it by doing whatever it took to overcome it. While Stacey's path to product might seem accidental, many intentionally take the step to go work at a start-up as a way to find their place in tech.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask Questions

Deepika's story

Deepika enjoyed mathematics. She felt it was straightforward and easy to understand. Initially thinking she'd take on the engineering route, Deepika ended up choosing to study economics with a specialization in mathematics. While fascinated by what she was learning, Deepika wasn't quite sure how she could apply her degree.

While working a retail job at Apple, an internal job posting came up for a User Researcher role for the summer. She was attracted to the job description, which explained she would be working with users to gather feedback on apps and hardware products that Apple created. Deepika applied in the summer of her first year of university and kept on returning every summer since. Through understanding the internal testing of new software products, Deepika had the opportunity to learn more about how products were used and adopted by users.

Once Deepika graduated, she received a full-time offer to join Apple's User Research team, but after 2 months in the role, she quit the job to look for something new. She was surrounded by friends who started tech companies or joined early-stage tech start-ups and felt that was the place to be since it was all about "failing fast" to fuel learning and growth. Full of hopes and dreams as a new graduate, Deepika decided to search for a role through AngelList to find the ideal fast-paced environment for her.

“

I was laser-focused on it being a 30 person company where I would be close to the leadership team, but also be close to the ground, be in the trenches. And understand the strategy, vision, and what actually makes a company.

”

Deepika knew she wanted to be in tech but wasn't sure what job was right for her, so she applied to customer support, account executive, business development and sales roles to try and get her foot in the door. After three different job offers, Deepika chose to go with Joist as she was confident in the co-founders' passion, which was visible in their product. Deepika joined Joist as an account executive to help understand where demand came from and to manage relationships with contractors.

Once she started, Deepika shadowed multiple individuals at the company to understand her knowledge gaps. She asked questions and remained curious about how the business functioned in order to learn as much as possible to understand how best to serve the team. She mapped out the entire funnel from direct sales to product and helped optimize ways to work with different teams, which reduced churn. Deepika took on the responsibility of a scrum master as she guided the engineering team towards their metrics that needed to be delivered. Deepika engaged with contractors, serving as the liaison between customer support, design and engineering to funnel product feedback. Deepika pushed the team to tackle problems with immediate impact, which

she was able to understand due to her close relationship with end users. As a result, she would always advocate for the customers and for the good of the business.

“

I think the thrill of identifying a problem as a result of a direct interaction, understanding how much of that experience impacts them and then being able to influence your organization to solve that problem for them. Having that individual end-user be delighted as a result of you, without having any tangible technical skills, was super rewarding.

”

Once a seasoned Product Leader joined the company, Deepika sought his mentorship and looked for opportunities to follow in his footsteps. After a couple months, she knew she wanted to become a Product Manager but was worried she lacked the technical background. An advisor to the CEO, Farhan came to give a talk at the company, and, intrigued by his presentation Deepika reached out to see what personal advice he could give. Deepika talked about how much she wanted to be a Product Manager as she knew she'd be great at it. Farhan advised getting a job at an agency and working on as many platforms as possible to ship products for clients as a way to learn. He opened up his network for Deepika and asked her to pick a company she was interested in, so that he could make an introduction.

Farhan introduced Deepika to the co-founder of TribalScale, Mitch, who initially didn't respond to her for a month, but she kept following up with both of them once a week until she got a meeting which led to an interview. Deepika passed all the technical and non-technical stages and met with all the founders. However, since the company was early in its start-up phase, Mitch didn't have a budget for a Product Manager at the time. Deepika offered to work for free.

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My suggestion to him was that I'll come to work for free. I'm not looking for money right now. What I'm looking for is to break into product and that was the most important thing for me. And I said, 'Tell me what's keeping you up at night, tell me what you really want to do, but you just don't have time for, and I'll help you do it, and then we could figure it out.

”

Mitch agreed and gave her an assignment to work on and Deepika showed up at the TribalScale office the next day. She continued to camp at the office for a month and finally presented the challenge that she was given, which landed her the Product Manager job.

“

Officially on my contract, it said...[Product Manager] and I can't explain the thrill of reading my job description. This is it, this is what I've been waiting for. Yes, I will do all those things!

”

The first project Deepika ended up working on was for Farhan's company, who tried to hire her after the project was delivered, but Mitch refused, feeling a need to protect his newest product hire. After a little over two years at TribalScale, Deepika moved on to Entercom where she later became the Director of Product Management, leading other PMs. She is now a Senior Product Manager at Shopify.

Takeaway:

Deepika was laser-focused on joining an early-stage start-up immediately after she graduated from university. She was searching for those opportunities to be in situations that could help her learn about the inner workings of a business. Deepika wasn't scared to ask questions that could help her learn how to add more value to the company. Actively looking to solve problems outside her own department, Deepika figured out what she enjoyed best. Again, not limiting herself to the title she was given but ensuring that things which needed to get done would be taken care of.

While not having a computer science background initially scared her, Deepika still felt there was a way to contribute

to the technical teams with her insights. Maintaining a close relationship with the team helped improve her understanding of any architectural challenges the team was facing. An entry point acting as the team's scrum master enabled her to understand the team's workflows and help them achieve their goals.

Deepika's persistence in finding what she wanted helped her go a long way. It showed when reaching out to a possible lead and while working on the assessment by showing up to work every day. It sent a clear message to her employer on how determined she was at getting what she wanted. The drive to solve problems coupled with the ability to convince others to do something is essential as a Product Manager, which Deepika exhibited throughout her journey into product.

Make Your Own Way

Kyle's Story

Kyle grew up playing sports, which helped him understand teamwork. Outside of school and team sports, he found himself tinkering in computer labs and ended up falling in love with video editing, wanting to become a cinematographer. As he continued to explore computers, he learned web development, was exposed to the internet and was fascinated by how people could leverage software to impact others at scale. Kyle went to Western University for Media, Information and Technology to study the impact technology had on society. His end goal was to ultimately get into videography and create his own film studio or advertising agency. Getting into the prestigious Ivey Business School of Western, was also something he felt could help him reach his goal.

Throughout his time at school, Kyle kept track of his entrepreneurial ideas on a spreadsheet and started exploring the entrepreneurship path. Since he was young, he felt he could take on early risk with little to lose. While taking an entrepreneurship class, Kyle came up with an idea after working on a project with friends and took it to Start-Up Weekend, an event where individuals come together to share ideas, test their feasibility and form connections to build the foundations for their start-ups. He attended the event with the goal to find more technical people to work with. After building more knowledge about the industry he intended to tackle, he felt like he needed more expertise and decided to shut down his start-up idea.

Kyle managed to do some networking over that weekend and met the founders of Innovation Factory, an incubator funded

by the government to enable people to start businesses. The connection landed him a summer internship to support individuals with new ideas or ones who wished to commercialize their long-term projects.

“

That's probably where a lot of my insight into product actually came from. Because it was a lot about understanding the problem space, ideating solutions, iterating on them and transitioning them into something that was tangible and made sense.

”

Coming out of school, Kyle revisited his dream of owning his own studio and understood the challenges of cost and time, so he decided to look for a job instead. An opportunity as an Information Technology consultant came up, and he felt it was a good opportunity to learn more about the technical side of product development. Kyle worked in consulting and focused on application development. He took this role to be exposed to the problems companies faced on a broader scale and to give him time to really think about what he wanted to do with his career long term.

Kyle got to write and develop research for various markets to help understand customer needs. Assisting companies through digital transformation and introducing Agile product development to clients as a more productive approach of working

through discovery and development. The role gave him the right perspective on how to gather valuable information on specific trends and how to synthesize it effectively.

“

Being someone who was very entrepreneurial and wanted to take ownership of things, I found consulting to be difficult... All these ideas or “best practices” were great in theory and in presentations, but I wanted to be a part of the actual decision making. I wanted to be in the arena, actually working on these tough challenges and problems.

”

Observing the clients he worked with, Kyle saw a gap that existed in a lot of organizations in centralizing information, synthesizing insights, and making the tough decisions across product development teams. Other than the CEOs of these companies, there was no other person who could adequately fill the gaps for the groups. As he started doing more research, reading books, and listening to podcasts, Kyle learned more about product management. He thought it could be an exciting career path for him to help organize groups and align teams towards a shared vision.

Kyle wanted to reach out to others to get more information on what the role could potentially look like for him. The product community in Toronto was small at that time, so he reached out

to writers of one of his favourite blogs, Mind The Product, to kick off ProductTank Toronto. An event that brings out product leaders to share best practices, frameworks, and how to overcome the challenges they were facing.

“

That was my way to meet more people from the PM space and learn more about how I could potentially move into a job that would be related to that line of work.

”

So Kyle met up with others who had a similar interest and started hosting these monthly meetups where he got to meet a lot of people in tech. He got to learn more about the different responsibilities of Product Managers and how they differed depending on the organization, business model, and market. Individuals from other disciplines also attended the event, which gave Kyle a broader look at product development as he had more conversations.

Kyle started reaching out to the founders of small companies across the city to convince them that he could be their Product Manager. While interviewing at an advertising technology start-up, he left his consulting job to show how dedicated he was to learn the skill of what it took to become a Product Manager. They took a chance on him and hired him as their first Associate Product Manager, working directly under the CEO. Kyle is currently a Senior Product Manager at Coursera.

Takeaway:

Kyle didn't directly work at a start-up as his way into product but was exposed to them early on, which gave him a good sense of product thinking. While at the business incubator as a student, Kyle saw the different struggles founders faced, and realized the skills he needed to adopt despite being entrepreneurial. Taking a job gave him more knowledge on the technical side of building products, which he knew he needed to learn. Kyle still observed problems while working for a large corporation, and his search for a solution made him learn about product management.

To solve his newfound problem on how to transition to product, he reached out to the established blog Mind the Product, which gave him the environment he needed to meet people. The experience of organizing the meetup is similar to working at a start-up and solving specific problems for them — convincing leaders to share their knowledge and build up a reputation in a new city for others like him looking to learn more about product. Mind the Product still functions in Toronto today.

Conclusion:

Working at any start-up has its challenges but also comes with immense benefits for those who want to take advantage of the opportunity. It allows you to upgrade your skills and learn about the number of things that can possibly go wrong while running a business. The start-up environment is also a good place to see creative ways to solve problems. It is an experience for those that love being surrounded by astounding learning potential and drive.

The skills gained from working at a start-up will significantly improve your work ethic and leave you with valuable experiences. Especially if you get to witness the company go through a series of changes that are crucial for its survival. Many of what you'll go through will be transferable to product management as long as you ensure you contributed to the product development cycle in any capacity.

Leverage your Domain Knowledge

Working in a particular industry for a long time can lead to mastery, therefore becoming an expert, which makes it easy to solve problems and help others who might be new to the field. Technology has grown beyond physical devices built to solve specific problems. All industries have been impacted by the power of software to make things easy for people to do their jobs. It starts with someone realizing optimal ways of carrying out a task, which stems from understanding how that task came about and what else is impacted by its execution. Technologists have started partnering with individuals with domain expertise of a particular industry to introduce products that improve workflows and solve significant problems. This results in disrupting industries as new opportunities become available with more areas to explore and refine.

Finding a place in technology can be a difficult task at first, but leveraging your strengths with the years of experience working in a particular field can help you get into a company solving a problem for that industry. The many years spent working at a bank can possibly lead to a job in a financial technology company as you bring with you a crucial understanding of the business and its customers. For example, by assisting customers who invest through difficult-to-use traditional trading platforms, you recognize the pain points and the opportunity available for companies like Robinhood and Wealthsimple. Depending on the role you're looking for, companies might be more lenient when it comes to all the skills required to carry out the job. They might take you on, even if you don't demonstrate all the experience at the time you apply. The understanding of the product offering can give you

more time to learn about the other skills you need for the job. It creates an easier path since you won't have to spend as much time learning about the industry.

Having a background in whatever the company does also helps to be passionate during the interviews. It is an easy ace to the *“Why do you want to work here?”* question. It is also easier to sell yourself on what attracted you to the company in the first place, making it easier for them to take a chance on you with the understanding that you'll fill in all the other gaps needed to help you succeed in the role. The individuals who chose this approach used their domain knowledge to get into an environment where they could work on the functional skills needed to succeed at what they needed to achieve.

This chapter shares stories of individuals who took what they were good at and turned it into a strength that they used to get into product. It highlights their desire to get to their goal by learning and pushing themselves to gain the knowledge and skills required for their role. Despite having a fear of switching industries, their approach was able to impress employers who were happy to take them on because of their unique backgrounds.

Demonstrate Your Grit

Jyoti's Story

Jyoti had many interests ranging from being an astronaut to a journalist as possible career paths. She ended up choosing to major in Business Administration at Brock University as a safe option that she could leverage to transition elsewhere if needed. Marketing courses were her favourite as they spoke to her creative, strategic and analytical sides. While studying, she did a 16-month internship at Blackberry as an Operations Associate. At this time, the iPhone began becoming a significant competitor for smartphone devices, and Jyoti was interested to learn how Blackberry would respond with their new product launch for the Z10.

Jyoti managed the distribution of pre-released devices to internal and external stakeholders to collect product feedback. She enjoyed working with the data to generate meaningful insights for the business and the product. Looking at the marketing approach for the Z10 release, Jyoti felt the Z10 was functionally superior to its competitors, a fact the commercials could have explored deeper. At that point, Jyoti decided she wanted to work in marketing to do justice to the products she was working on by adequately educating customers about their offering. She was particularly interested in advertising as a way to change perspectives on products, causes or concepts to drive the desired impact.

After her internship, she moved to BC and switched to Simon Fraser University to focus on her new interest in Marketing and Communications. Her goal was to graduate, relocate back to Toronto and work at one of the big five advertising agencies. While working towards completing her degree, she worked part-

time at a financial company in a marketing role. She helped the company develop their digital presence, revamp their website and through Salesforce, she streamlined their lead management and account management processes. It was the first time she was able to use software to solve business problems where she could see the impact immediately. Jyoti was able to apply the things she learned at school to drive results at the company and broaden her skills beyond marketing.

Jyoti still wanted to pursue her advertising dream to change customer perspectives using psychological principles and combine all her creative and analytical skills to come up with great marketing campaigns. She took a post-graduation internship at an advertising agency, Cundari, which made her realize that she would rather be in the strategy department to apply her business skills to solve client problems. After her internship, she got a full-time Strategic Planner role in Toronto at GTB, the primary marketing/communication/advertising agency for Ford and Lincoln. Jyoti's duties involved using business data, market data and client input to understand goals to form a strategy to solve problems. She performed user research, market research and used perception and product data to find ways for their customers to engage and buy their product.

While working on a project to redesign the Ford Owner digital experience, she worked with a development agency to build their website and an app to control their cars. She collaborated with clients to define requirements and gave the agency feedback on mockups to ensure they were solving the right problems. Jyoti enjoyed the process of defining and delivering the requirements, but also being able to clearly measure how those initiatives directly impacted Ford's bottom line. Continuing to work on more

campaign focused projects didn't give her the fulfilment that she desired.

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“That wasn't enough for me, because I really wanted to see how it impacted the business, not just the perception. I realized that I liked doing strategy. I just didn't know if I liked doing it for marketing only... And I have all these skills, where can I go and apply them where I can easily see the impact that it's having on the key business metrics like sales, revenue, retention. Those were the metrics that were meaningful for me to drive.”

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Jyoti started going to meetups because she was interested in the software-related work she did and wanted to find out if there was a role that is a blend of technology and strategy with a hint of marketing. She also did personal research to find her place in the tech industry. Combing through job descriptions, she found Product Management, which she felt was right for her, but the consistent requirements she saw were for 5 years of experience minimum, with a preference for candidates with a technical background.

She started meeting with people who could broaden her horizons and met someone willing to mentor her, Matt, a VP of Product at Kijiji, who helped her understand how the PM role worked across the industry. Understanding the challenge ahead of her, Jyoti started interviewing for product marketing roles since

she would get to work closely with product managers and possibly eventually become one herself.



I'm trying to switch careers and industries; trying to go from marketing to product, and I'm trying to go from advertising to technology. So I was also being strategic in terms of what were my best chances of success for me moving into technology and learning about product management and in a quicker way.



Jyoti also connected with a recruiter who met with her frequently to provide feedback on her resume. She treated it like an experiment tailoring the resume for product management and revising it according to what was effective every time she'd apply. Jyoti leveraged her experience with advertising to get a Product Marketing Manager job at an advertising technology company, Ad Parlor. She mentioned to the hiring manager that she was interested in product management, and her role was optimized to ensure she would work closely with existing product managers to learn from them.

When one of the Product Managers at the company left temporarily, Jyoti was able to step in for three months and was responsible for feature enhancements and bug fixes. It was a safe way for her to practice product management, which she enjoyed. Once he returned, she had to go back to product marketing, and so she started looking externally for opportunities.

Jyoti was more confident this time around, having done some of the work and knowing what it took. Leveraging the network she had built, Jyoti reached out, and used her advantage to apply for an Advertising Product Manager role at Wattpad via their Associate PM program and got the job. She has been at Wattpad for over two years having worked on scaling their Ads and subscription product offering.

Takeaway:

Jyoti looked for ways to fulfil her desire to broaden her knowledge despite being on a defined marketing path. She was set on advertising as her career destination, since that was a way to influence a consumer's choice for a product. Through her determination towards her goals, Jyoti focused on overall metrics that were important to the business, such as sales and revenue, to experiment on what was most impactful. Always searching to find the best use of her combination of skills to solve the problems she finds.

What remained consistent in Jyoti's journey was her work in the advertising industry, which she leveraged to move to different roles across different companies. She opened herself to various challenges and rose to deliver results when the time came. Her *aha* moment occurred when using Salesforce for the first time to solve a business problem and immediately seeing the impact, which stayed with her throughout her journey. The search for more impactful experiences led her to product management, and despite the challenges faced to secure that role, she used her creativity to allow her to try it out in a safe environment. It ultimately helped her build the required skills she needed to combine with her vast advertising knowledge to get a product management job.

Adopt a Better Style to Accelerate Learning

Elyse's Story

Elyse grew up understanding her family's fashion business in Quebec city and enjoyed those topics of conversations at the dinner table. She was interested in growing her knowledge in the fashion industry as a natural progression to contribute back to the business, helping with things such as their eCommerce launch. For her undergrad, Elyse majored in Business Administration and Management with a minor in Marketing at Université Laval. Determined to enter the job market as quickly as possible, she took a full course load to accelerate her degree, completing it in 2.5 years.



During a couple study abroad terms in Australia, Elyse worked part-time for a Canadian fashion brand that was expanding internationally. Helping to manage retail stores while supporting sales and forecast planning. She saw how companies tackled their inventory problem by leveraging inverted seasons to come up with a model to reduce marking down items. The experience piqued her interest in the global market and sought after an intersection of international focus and digital commerce.

After graduation, she briefly worked full time on the family business, focusing on anything that could impact profitability. For example, Managing the eCommerce website, improving operational efficiency, fulfillment and automation for time-saving. Elyse still wanted to continue her international focus of eCommerce and decided to go for graduate school at Florida International University for International Business. Accelerating her way through the master's program, completing it in one year.

After graduation, Elyse wanted to remain in the country to explore the US market. She had trouble getting a job since she would require a visa sponsorship, so she found an unpaid internship and decided to move to California for the role. She got a job as an International eCommerce Business Analyst Intern at BCBGMAXAZRIA group, a fashion brand she had always dreamed of working for. While other interns didn't get many responsibilities, she was given meaningful work to do as soon as she started. She was tasked with financial analysis, ROI calculations and managing relationships with vendors. Elyse worked hard to prove herself, which got her a full-time offer a few weeks after the internship started.

In time, she was given more responsibilities, working with a developer vendor to launch new features from small enhancements to regulatory requirements. In addition, she was doing competitive analysis, market research and proposing different ways of improving the business. Elyse's manager had a lot of faith in her, letting her manage a multi-million dollar P&L (Profit and Loss) with him, empowering her to make crucial decisions for the business.

As a way to understand the learnings from previous international launches, Elyse reviewed the business requirement documents to figure out the best way to break it apart to share it with vendors they were partnering with. While working with a digital development agency that was more agile in their practice, she learned how to structure information into user stories. Being exposed to the different product management tools they used, Elyse learned more ways to improve working with vendors as it transformed their working relationship.



I really liked it because we had the ability to have direct conversations with the developers themselves and understand what was complex and what was not. And honestly, it was really fun to have live conversations and not just status calls and updates after X amount of time.

The engaging experience was her first introduction to product development, which led the way she wanted to work with development teams moving forward. She gained a better understanding of the complexity of the platform, scoping features appropriately, making quick fixes and generally creating a delightful experience to achieve their common goals.

Elyse had decided that it was time to move back to Canada, and while searching for a job, she decided to go for agencies since she was interested in growing her client-facing skills to push her to be a little more extroverted. She was also familiar with working closely with agencies while managing launches at BCBG. While searching for a new role, she saw a job description for a Product Manager at TribalScale.



To be very frank, I was interested in the duties. I had no clue that product was a thing... Titles never mattered in my entire life. For me, I was really focused on the duties I was going to have, and it really aligned closely with what I was doing at BCBG.



Elyse met with the founders to learn about the role and the practice they were looking to build and decided to begin the interview process. She had the opportunity to be one of the first Product Managers at the company, which allowed her more flexibility in her growth versus a more established agency. Still caring about the continuity of the growth of her projects at BCBG, she stayed on as a consultant for the first nine months while she took the job as a Product Manager at TribalScale. Elyse worked on over eight different products at the company over three years and rose to be the Director of Product Management, leading other PMs before leaving. She is currently the Director of Product Management at Rakuten Kobo.

Takeaway:

Elyse used her love for fashion and commerce to build up her career to the point where she had the opportunity to work with other departments. Working with different developer vendors allowed her to compare pros and cons of their approaches, and ultimately decide which was right for her. The influence of a particular development agency allowed her to gain more interest

in product development in a fashion environment where she could seamlessly solve problems.

She knew the requirements and had an idea of what the final product should look like; she just needed to learn the ways to work with the team to execute, which built up the functional knowledge on product execution. Building up her understanding of the technical limitations of the platform helped to get her more comfortable as she continued to work on enhancements on different products. It is the reason why Elyse was interested in the job description that was described as product management when she decided it was time to move on. Having the previous experience working with agencies led her search for similar companies. She leveraged past knowledge to ensure she could succeed at such a role.

Seek Opportunities, Simplify Solutions

Hirsch's Story

Hirsch grew up with entrepreneurial parents who started their own business to pull their extended family out of poverty. It influenced his decision to pursue a degree in commerce at the University of British Columbia, focusing on accounting to understand the fundamentals of the numbers behind running a business. After graduation, Hirsch found it challenging to get an accounting job at a big firm in Vancouver, so instead, he joined a three-person tissue paper distribution company where he got to try out different roles. He took part in various responsibilities from setting up their accounting books, working with partners, making sales, business development to occasionally driving a forklift. He found it rewarding to help out wherever he could and enjoyed the aspect of talking to people and making valuable connections for the company.

Hirsch still wanted to work at a larger company to get more experience and was advised by his mentors to focus on accounting roles compared to his other duties at the smaller company in order to leverage that experience for later. Through networking, Hirsch got a job as an Audit Associate for PwC in Toronto. He was excited about the opportunity to work for large clients and to work alongside a cohort of other accountants recently entering the workforce. Talking to clients and seeing the trust they placed in him gave him a lot of purpose and meaning in the job, but as time went on, Hirsch wanted to apply his entrepreneurial skills to add value in other areas of the corporation.

Others also shared a similar feeling, so Hirsch and a couple

friends formed an internal volunteer-based innovation team called INNOV8. The members consisted of cross disciplines across Design, Consulting, Data Science and Internal Firm Services. Leveraging their diverse skill sets, they convinced Consulting Partners to add them to the capacity of their teams.

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So we said, ‘Hey, we’ll work on your projects if you give us the opportunity to do so. And we’ll do it on a volunteer basis where it doesn’t add anything to your staff cost. We think given our diversity in skillset and our different ways of working, we can actually deliver some really great results for you.

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The fun part for Hirsch was communicating the value of their combined skills set while noticing and sourcing opportunities for the group to deliver. His team initially worked on a few small projects to gain credibility and build a brand within the company, and in doing so, introduced design thinking as a consumer-centric methodology for teams to use to approach client problems. Their biggest win was when they worked with a technology business transformation team to help close a deal with a Big-Five banking client. Using the concept of an escape room, placing executives in different locations, they illustrated the value of collaboration offered in G Suite, which convinced them to adopt the product in their organization. At the annual Partners’ conference, Hirsch and his team got to present the idea they executed (now used as a

Global Services template) and was nominated for the CEO award in the company.

Leaving auditing was challenging as PwC required auditors to remain focused on their roles. Hirsch only got temporary short placements at strategy teams, which weren't enough as he would have to return to being an auditor during busy seasons. He started having conversations internally within the firm to see if he could get a permanent role on a technology consulting team since that was what he was most interested in. Still not getting the opportunities he desired, Hirsch started looking externally.

He set up coffee chats and informational interviews with different people in tech, attended various events to understand what it meant to work in the technology industry and learned about roles that were available. Initially, he was only considering the consulting side of tech, but he learned a lot more from his interactions with people from different disciplines.

Hirsch intentionally attended a developer-only job fair so that he would stand out, as a way to source opportunities. With this advantage, he connected well with recruiting staff and talked about his INNOV8 experiences at PWC. A recruiter at CaseWare thought he'd be perfect for an entry-level product role at the company and encouraged him to apply. Hirsch was excited about the opportunity and followed up with the recruiter five times until he got an interview with the company. He was enthusiastic about joining the company since they were creating a product that served Accountants and Auditors. Despite no formal product experience, Hirsch still felt confident in adding value because of his understanding of their products and its customers. He researched the fundamental and theoretical aspects of product management

as well as watched videos to prepare for the interviews.

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I put a lot of time into prep. I went through their job posting, highlighted the different skills and attributes they're looking for in a candidate. And then, I colour-coded and matched those same things I had in my cover letter and my resume. And then, when I went to the interview, I presented them side by side so they could see.

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They found his presentation very powerful, stating the main reason for hiring Hirsch was the passion he showed towards solving problems. Leveraging his domain expertise in the interviews to showcase empathy towards customers, he demonstrated how much he knew about their market and business model. Putting that value prop front and center allowed Hirsch to convince them that he would be successful on the job and hence, he was hired as a Product Owner at CaseWare. Hirsch is now a Product Management Consultant at Guestlogix and a Product Manager Coach at 36paths.

Takeaway:

Hirsch, who was inherently entrepreneurial, was curious to try new things and find better ways of solving problems. Still, on his path to becoming an Accountant, he used his spare time to solve problems for other teams because he enjoyed it. He wanted to replicate similar feelings of problem-solving in his day-to-day

life, and his search led him to the technology industry. Hirsch was creatively positioning himself to learn about other opportunities available for him to make an impact with his skills.

What set Hirsch apart was his constant reminder to his interviewers that he understood their users, and was their target user and so it made an easy case for them to give him an opportunity. After the job fair, there was still a lot he didn't know about product management. It was through additional research that he figured the responsibilities tightly fit what he loved doing while working with INNOV8. It made him do everything in his power to prove his desire to work with the employer and having that domain knowledge in accounting made his case stronger and made conversations with him easier.

Conclusion:

Leveraging your domain knowledge is one of the best ways to break into tech. There exists a possible tech solution for any industry you can think of. Utilizing this approach is a convenient way to transition into product management, as long as you have the drive to learn the other skills that are required to succeed in the role. It allows you to build your foundational skills as a product manager since you bring with you a wealth of knowledge to benefit the business.

You can start out as a consultant to easily weigh in on conversations to begin adding value from day one. The company can lean on you to form strategies since you have a good understanding of the customer from your previous role. When you ramp up and have all the functional skills, it makes you more of an asset to the company, helping with strategy and execution. It is important to recognize the value you bring to these companies with all the insights you've gained over the years then communicate that to possible employers during interviews. Help them realize that once you are given the chance in product, it will be to great benefit to all the stakeholders involved.

Join a Company with the Intention to Transition

Every company appropriately plans for the number of employees to hire for the departments and roles they need to fill. The standard headcount structure put in place helps companies forecast finances to allocate across the organization and ensures appropriate staffing of each team to meet their key deliverables. When a job posting becomes available, it probably went through a series of approvals to ensure there is a need for the individual in the company. Hiring is also expensive; it costs money to post job descriptions across different platforms, and recruitment agencies charge a percentage of the hired candidates' salary. Even if an in-house recruitment team exists, the time spent vetting candidates up until the right one comes along often takes months. Hiring managers and team members also take time out of their schedule to prepare assessments to interview multiple candidates until they find the right fit.

Considering all this, it might sound crazy to say, *“Please hire me now for role A, but eventually, I’d love to switch into role B.”* It essentially tells the employer that if they hire you, they will have to go through the entire process to backfill the role for the original job you were hired for. The reality is that, if you are skilled enough to deliver on the responsibilities for role A and an excellent fit for the company, there is still a chance they will hire you even if the role isn’t what you want to do long term. Some employers try to understand your timeline and how much you are willing to work towards your end goal. There also needs to be that desire for the company to want to help their employees grow to positions where they can succeed. Another way to view it is that, if the candidate

makes a successful internal transition into role B, the company saves the cost of hiring for that role, which evens out the original backfill cost. In some cases, it can be an advantage, especially moving to a more senior position where it can be more challenging and expensive to recruit external candidates. The company also has the benefit of someone who has been an employee for much longer and can bring a wealth of knowledge into the new role to start contributing immediately.

This chapter discusses individuals who already learned about product management but needed to find where they could get the formal title and training. They all looked for roles where they could excel using skills from previous experiences as a step towards their longer-term plan of becoming a PM. Being very transparent about their desire to move during interviews, even when they felt they didn't have all the skills. Their stories highlight how they communicated to employers about their offering, what agreement both parties made, and how they were able to convince them when the time for the transition came around.

Create a Blueprint and head to Success

Lindsay's Story

Lindsay initially attended Queen's University for their reputable business program, known for cranking out accountants and management consultants at the time. However, she enjoyed other courses and switched to a Bachelor of Arts with a focus in Psychology. The summer after she graduated, Lindsay did an internship at a high growth tech company in Human Resources and followed up with a Master's in HR and Labour Relations. After she graduated, she got a full-time job as an HR specialist at a civil engineering company but missed the vibe of the tech company.

The company had numerous manual HR processes like the annual compensation review, where Lindsay had to update over one thousand rows of an excel spreadsheet and found this process tedious. The organization decided to get an HR system and the VP asked her to work with a consultant, Suki, who suggested the use of software as a better way to scale the process.



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It really opened my eyes to what technology can do for a business. In that context, it was really about streamlining inefficiencies and helping people in the company automate tasks so that they could focus on what really mattered, and that was very powerful.

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Lindsay created a blueprint for herself through inspiration from Suki, who had an impressive career in technology as a Business Analyst. She felt they had similar personalities, which gave Lindsay the confidence that she could go through the same career path. The two collaborated on a new HR tool for the company, and Lindsay observed her own interpersonal skills. She recognized the knowledge gaps to be filled when it came to the technical aspects of the project. Lindsay set the expectation for herself to be a Business Analyst and to fill those gaps, she went back to school to get a diploma in Information Systems Technology.

After her diploma, Lindsay got a job at a healthcare technology company as a Business Analyst to work with clients to deliver the software they were making for hospitals. The VP that hired Lindsay considered her as a great addition to the team because she stood out with her background in psychology. She worked closely with developers and designers to execute client requirements. The job gave her a good foundation on how software was made but felt there was a disconnect because the customers of their product were not the users of their product. This piqued her interest in usability and user research to help enhance her job and inform better decisions on the product. Lindsay also built an interest in creating great user experiences and learned she was doing similar responsibilities of the Product Manager at the company.



"I was like, 'Oh, So I'm not just gathering requirements. I'm actually synthesizing it using my mind and making decisions and being more accountable for things,' and that was what I wanted."

Lindsay ran into a lot of roadblocks in the healthcare industry since it struggled to embrace the things that she felt were essential for product development and desired another challenge. She began her search to join a small tech start-up as a Product Manager that would be more responsive to the trends in technology. Her goal was to find a company that worked in a fast-paced environment and focused on good design practices for the user. Lindsay applied for a QA analyst position at Influitive and pitched herself to the founders during the interviews.

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I was like, here's what I can offer you. As you can see, I don't have QA on my resume, but I know how software is made, and I can help prioritize all these bugs and work with your dev team and achieve the business results that you care about.

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She was assertive and forthcoming about her intention to transition to product and the starting point for her was being able to give her opinion through QA. Lindsay was offered the job and kept on pushing the leadership team on ways to make the product better. She convinced one of the founders to let her run an A/B test to see how to drive engagement on the product, which she did on the side as she maintained her core job responsibilities. A year into the QA role, she was made a Product Manager and was given a team of one developer and one designer to continue to find ways to improve the product. After a year working as a PM, she moved on to FreshBooks where she rose to become the Director of Product Managements, leading other PMs.

Takeaway:

Lindsay never had any formal QA experience, but she leveraged what she learned as a Business Analyst to situate herself where she could provide useful feedback about the product. Her confidence in the knowledge of making software gave Lindsay an outstanding pitch to the founders who couldn't refuse her offering. After all, Lindsay was overqualified for the role she applied for and was an invaluable addition for the company to use her skills to move the product forward.

She still pushed the founders on actually getting the responsibilities of a PM and juggled it with her primary QA role for a while. Lindsay worked hard to understand the things she could do that could be valuable, which ended up being the influence she could have on the development team to execute on ideas. It was only after several months of highlighting her skills and consistently delivering positive results that she got the formal title as a Product Manager.

Be The Influence Needed to Improve a Product

Darlene's Story

Darlene started her career as a Registered Nurse. Her Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing allowed her to explore other opportunities in the healthcare space beyond the typical clinical environments. She acquired certifications in wellness, occupational health, health informatics and a Masters degree in Education. She initially established her career in health promotion and developed disease prevention programs as part of group benefits plans for various insurance carriers, with the intent to help reduce prescription medication claims and other paramedical services. With the launch of the Telehealth Ontario service in 2001, Darlene was excited about the dawn of a new nursing specialty, marrying healthcare delivery and technology.

After four years with Telehealth, Darlene's career moved into the field of healthcare communications and marketing, developing patient education products for pharmaceutical brands. She spent the next 3 years moving from a role as a nurse researcher into becoming an account manager, assisting clients with brand strategy, and leading a creative team to execute on the client vision. She gained experience here in managing a cross-functional team of designers, copywriters, procurement and support staff to execute the brand strategy. She was tasked to create the project plan, manage timelines, abide by the regulatory requirements and prepare the pitches to the clients.

After she was laid off from her role as a Senior Account Manager, she found a contract position as Education Specialist

at The Ontario Association of Community Care Access Centres (OACCAC). At the time, the 36 CCACs in the province were using different legacy software systems that managed the client data. The goal was to build one system to not only standardize the data and allow the systems to ‘talk’ to each other across the province, but to integrate into the rest of the healthcare system. The company had brought in a CTO to build out a technical team to deliver this solution using Agile methodology. Darlene was part of the team that helped migrate data and deploy the system at different offices across the province and educate the case managers (licensed healthcare professionals) on how to transition to the product.

It was an exciting position that gave her another opportunity to be directly involved in leveraging technology to advance healthcare practices and skillsets. The scope of the project continued to grow as new features and more complex modules were added to serve the more complex parts of the healthcare system. What started out as an 18 month contract ended up as a full-time position for 8 years. During that time, Darlene not only became an expert in all areas of the front-end of the product, but she also continually collected user feedback and worked with the business analysts to assist them in turning that feedback into features on the product roadmap. It provided her an opportunity to observe the process of how to build for users. During her time, she became a self-taught eLearning specialist in order to initiate the evolution of the training programs and the organization’s HR modules into E-learning formats to help scale the education and training of product releases and digitize the product ‘user manual’.

During her time with the OACCAC, Darlene wanted to scratch her entrepreneurial itch by acquiring her life insurance license and mutual fund license to create a ‘side hustle’ to learn something


new in a completely different industry. After 10 years of being a licensed insurance advisor part-time, she decided to join full-time a newly formed brokerage (Managing General Agency or MGA) that was in a 'start-up' stage. In a very short time, she learned how to build an agency, assist in its operations and developed relationships with numerous insurance carriers and partners. Her goal was to build up her own agency and client base and move into a leadership role. She was voted onto the company's first Board of Directors and her interest was to explore technology to support the rapid growth of the company, assist with compliance and standardize onboarding and advisor support.

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The thing I loved about it was the parts that didn't pay me. I loved helping them structure the onboarding experience so that when we brought on 100 advisors, everyone had a standardized training and onboarding process. I dug into the FinTech community to find a technology solution and my mind shifted. There was more to our ecosystem than I thought, beyond insurance, and what technology was doing for the financial sector as a whole was really interesting to me.

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Darlene came across the tech start-up Finaeo who was building an insurance tech platform. She tried to broker a relationship between the two organizations, but it didn't end up working out. What she did instead was play with the Finaeo product to understand their offering and how to leverage it to help the sales force.



I tried that product for two months, and I sent the CEO about 15 pages of feedback of what I felt needed to be fixed...This workflow doesn't work, or this is something you should think about, this should integrate etc. Eventually he said, 'Just join us and help us do this.



She saw the value of their product in the insurance space, which motivated her to go the extra mile to provide her insights. Darlene bought into the vision of what Finaeo was trying to achieve and felt she could make a more substantial scale impact with them compared to building her own agency. She took the offer and joined Finaeo as an Advisor Success Manager to help onboard advisors on to the platform and gather information on their usage of the product. She made it super clear to the CEO that when she joined, it was to get into a role where she would be directly working on the product.

Darlene made the best of her Advisor Success role and became the voice of the customer, channeling valuable feedback to the team. With a 360 degree view of the company, she was able to provide the right amount of context to influence the features that were built and could measure the impact based on customer interactions. After 18 months in the role, she was promoted internally to become a Product Manager.

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I got it, I hit the ground running, and it all felt very intuitive. I've never taken a product management course, I've never taken any formal courses. But everything came back to me on how to manage a project, how to manage stakeholders, how to collect feedback, it just kind of came very naturally.

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Takeaways:

Darlene spent 15 years in the health industry before she decided she wanted to go into tech. Making such a switch might be daunting, especially very late in a career, but the transition into product started happening a lot earlier for her. While working as an Account Manager, she worked with individuals from other disciplines to align them on vision and timeline. That aspect built up her knowledge of project management, which continued over the years. While spending years educating different departments about how to use a product, she learned what made sense to the users and found ways to relay that feedback back to the development team. Darlene didn't instantly see her suggestions come to life, but that became the foundation of understanding how to prioritize customer feedback. Over the years, she was able to build the functional experience needed for product management, which came in handy when she finally decided to switch.

When she finally got to use a product that she felt could make her life easier, her combined experience gave her the initiative to go out of her way to provide the feedback she knew would be

useful for other users. Darlene's transition also has a component of leveraging her domain knowledge, which is insurance to find a company that was working in that space. Even though she was not hired as a Product Manager from the start, Darlene made sure to fill those gaps and be that influence that was needed to improve the product. She situated herself in a space where she knew the most about the product and could relay valuable pieces of information to the appropriate team members to ensure the company was collectively working towards delivering a more useful product.

Explore Better Ways of Tackling Problems

Anthony's Story

Anthony loved to interact with people. He chose to pursue a degree in Hospitality at Ryerson University as he deemed it an excellent way for him to excel in a career as a hotel general manager. After his second year of university, he took a year off to work at the Four Seasons hotel in Toronto in the guest department. Anthony saw this as an entry point to work his way through different departments to make him a well-rounded Manager. While he enjoyed his time at the Four Seasons, Anthony didn't see himself there long-term and started to reconsider his career path.

He was always interested in technology and regularly read about breakthroughs in tech blogs and felt there might be a place for him in tech. Anthony returned to school and changed his program to Business Technology Management and took an on-campus job as an IT technician for additional learning. He felt like he needed more experience to succeed in the program and also joined different student groups to help with networking. On his journey toward becoming the Director at the IT management student association, Anthony got to meet various industry leaders who helped him land an internship as an IT Project Analyst.

Anthony wanted to keep learning about technology and got to work with internal and external stakeholders in this role. Gathering requirements, breaking them down and organizing information better for presentations to make it easy for others to digest information. He realized he enjoyed working on projects and in tech, but the business side of things was also important to him. As his internship came to an end, he got to learn about the

role of Business Analysts and made that the next career target to intersect his business and tech knowledge.

Anthony found an opportunity for a part-time BA role at his university while he worked to complete his degree. Based on the business requirements he gathered, Anthony was able to design, architect and work with developers on brand new features. Working on low fidelity sketches to high fidelity wireframes to help communicate ideas to the developers on his team. He enjoyed this experience and joined as a full-time employee after graduation. After working on multiple projects as a BA, he felt the processes were very top-down and repetitive since he had to follow the same procedure every time.

“

And that's when I started looking into Design Thinking and Agile because I thought, you know what, I think there's a better way of doing things. Why can't we work in an Agile capacity? Why do we have to work in Waterfall all the time?

”

He expressed his interest in improving the processes with his manager, but the current team structure would prove too challenging a change to accommodate the transition towards an agile practice. Anthony left his job as he wanted to explore a better way of tackling product development and started researching other career options in tech. He enrolled in a full-time boot camp to learn UX and product design since he enjoyed that aspect while working as a Business Analyst.

A start-up, Intelocate, that recruited graduates from the boot camp was looking for a candidate who had a BA and product design experience, and Anthony best fit that profile. He expressed his desire to focus on the product side of things, and the employer agreed to slowly allow him to transition if he started with the BA responsibilities. When Anthony started in the role, he discovered product management as a mix between business, technology and design and communicated this information back to the founder to pursue that path. After working for a couple months at Intelocate, Anthony fully transitioned to become their first Product Manager in the organization leading both Product Management and Product Design.

Takeaway:

Anthony used every job experience as a way to understand what he wanted to do long term, paying close attention to what he enjoyed. The most significant change happened when he felt there had to be a better way of working, which led to his understanding of design thinking. It gave him the desire to learn more, and while he originally wanted to switch to becoming a UX designer, he learned about product management during the transition phase.

Before Anthony took the job at Interlocate, he knew he wanted to be more active in product development and had agreed to transition out of his Business Analyst role. Starting off the new role, he allocated his time between the BA tasks and the product ones. Since he had no trouble communicating what he wanted, Anthony was able to deliver on his KPIs even though he had transitioned into product.

Conclusion:

Everyone who I spoke to that fell into this category showed a lot of determination and were very assertive in their approach to achieving their goal. They all had opinions on how to make something better and never shied away from voicing it to others. It helped them to form a plan around their current situation and the motivation to go through with it. All the things which helped them get into product.

It takes a lot of courage to tell a possible employer you want to shift your focus once you join a team. But this effort goes a long way in forging a path towards your desired destination. The role you choose to apply for is entirely up to you, but it is crucial to ensure it resembles areas where the product development is happening. It allows you to give your opinions and share ideas that can make you shine. The more you contribute, the better it will be for opportunities to showcase other skills that might be beneficial to be identifiable as a product thinker.

Transition internally within your current company

Before the tech industry became overwhelmingly popular, it was common to stay in the same company for over 25 years and sometimes throughout one's entire career. It could be doing the same job for those who like stability, but it could also be a chance to try out different roles to climb the corporate ladder. Currently, large organizations with thousands of employees make it easy for individuals to switch teams or roles depending on the situation. The process for an internal transition is much smoother than starting a role at a different company. Managers today also want the best for the members of their team, and if that means moving on to another role, they are typically supportive. In some cases, companies provide stipends for training programs to grow the skills of their employees in different disciplines. The defined processes in larger organizations ensure that the candidate showcases all the skills necessary to perform well at the new role and is committed to the transition for some time.

In small organizations, an internal transition happens more gradually where employees take on new responsibilities in a safe environment and display their ability to deliver results confidently. Since each person in the organization accounts for specific duties, a sudden transition would result in a gap in fulfilling the obligations of the previous role. A transition in this scenario might involve juggling both positions for a brief period before making any formal changes. It doesn't mean shifts don't frequently happen at small companies. They are just less common than in larger corporations when the impact of one open position doesn't share the same significant long term impact.

Individuals that fall into this category learn about product management and realize their desire to fill that role while engaged in a different role at a company. They work to prove themselves and showcase how they can add value when given product responsibilities, learning what works well with the product team members, these individuals are constantly asking valuable questions to fill any knowledge gaps. They position themselves very close to customers and the development teams to understand the flow of how new features are determined. In addition to other learnings done outside the work environment, candidates eventually find the confidence to speak up and voice their desire to move within the company. Those who are unable to transition at their current company usually optimize their time to learn as much as possible about product development from the teams who actively contribute to building the product before leaving to secure a role at an external company.

This chapter shares stories of determination of those who knew product management was right for them and did everything they could to have a chance at the role. It highlights their realization to pursue a product role, and showcases discussions held to convince superiors to approve a transition.

Have An End-Goal in Mind Before Starting Out

Tevis's Story

Tevis grew up with entrepreneurial parents who had businesses of their own centered around social good, which influenced his decision to double major in International Development and Social Entrepreneurship at Wilfrid Laurier University. He felt it was imperative to be in a career where he could contribute to something more than just the bottom line. He sought career paths that could match his personality traits.

During the summer of his third year, Tevis joined a program offered by the university to volunteer at a non-governmental organization in Costa Rica. He worked on different projects ranging from tutoring English to supporting senior centers, creating educational materials for orphanages and organizing activities trips for youth programs. After he returned for his final year, Tevis became an ambassador for the program, hosting workshops and seminars to help other students find volunteer opportunities with the organization. Building up that rapport helped him secure a full-time role at the NGO as a Specialist for the Costa Rica program.

Tevis moved to Costa Rica and was responsible for coordinating paperwork and documents for over 300 volunteers that visited the country each year. Managing the intense activity schedules for the volunteers helped him understand the importance of timelines and prioritization when the unexpected happened. He broadened his skills by taking a grant writing course to assist in grant proposals and supported the organization's other locations in Guatemala and Morocco being on the ground to facilitate a better experience for volunteers. After an emotionally taxing period living in three

countries over the course of the year, Tevis decided to take a step back from the NGO and moved back to Canada to find an intermediary role.

Exploring other opportunities to find where he could apply similar skills in a stable environment, Tevis found an Account Management position at a financial company that allowed him to understand the lending process, analyze client credit scores, and manage different relationships with Prime Canadian lending institutions. He was interested in roles that involved interaction with clients, but many account manager roles required more experience, so he decided to figure out a different way to land the job he wanted.



If I don't have the experience, nobody will hire me, but I can't get the experience until I'm hired by somebody. The alternative in my mind was to find a company I wanted to work for, even if it was not the job title I wanted. After that, I could work toward making an internal shift once I'm inside the company.



Fast-growing tech start-ups were his target, as they allowed more opportunities for growth and were more flexible where job experience was concerned. He wanted to transition into the tech space in Toronto, and Tevis felt he could make a positive contribution in helping companies innovate. He secured a proposal writing job at TribalScale, leveraging his grant-writing experience as a way to get his foot in the door. As the company continued to grow, they started to implement an internal CRM,

which Tevis saw as an opportunity to contribute. He taught himself how to use Salesforce and leveraged that knowledge to work alongside the Operations Lead on report-creation, dashboards, KPI tracking, and streamlining sales processes. When the existing Operations Lead left the company, Tevis transitioned into her role. He leveraged what he had learned in Operations to understand other departments of the company, what roles they played, and how they worked together to make the business run smoothly. He used this knowledge to plan his next step.

“

I wanted to be customer-facing. I wanted to maintain a healthy relationship with the customer and to have a direct impact on developing the product. When paired with this idea of being self-taught in different industries, understanding how a business works, being scrappy in execution and never afraid to speak up for something I wanted, Product seemed like the perfect department. Product, I think, is the closest one can get to entrepreneurship without being self-employed.

”

At TribalScale, Tevis had worked with the Product team gathering requirements and streamlining communication to enhance the internal software of the company with his Operations role. The company had a mature product practice, and he found it interesting to build digital experiences for clients. One year after being hired by the company to write proposals, he started having conversations with the VP of Sales on transitioning internally

into an Account Manager role, since it resembled product but was more similar to his business background. Naturally, she had reservations given the role's minimum requirement of five years of experience.

“

I didn't like that answer. I had worked with Account Managers before and I knew I could do it, too. So I went back and put together a business case, a full presentation that explained where our gaps were in the business from a financial standpoint, and quantified those gaps to precise dollar values of the biggest opportunities where the business could be optimizing their spending. I used data gathered from our backend to determine which clients needed more love, which ones had more room for growth, which ones were more trouble than they were worth. I added previous sales numbers to do some forecasting. I presented these numbers, not only to the VP of sales, but also the CEO and CPO.

”

Tevis leveraged his access to the information he was exposed to as a way to showcase his strengths and thought process. The CEO loved his approach, and instead of moving into an Account Manager position, the CPO asked him to transition into the Product department on a three-month probationary learning period. After a month and a half, Tevis was able to work autonomously on his own projects. Three months in, he, along with another PM, were launching a new Over-The-Top (OTT) platform for a top North

American media company with over 120 million users.

In 2018, Tevis partnered with a friend to start Raconteur Magazine, of which he is the Editor-In-Chief. Raconteur began as a side project, as a literary magazine by writers, for writers. By the end of 2019, they had featured work from over 30 authors and over 20 world-renowned illustrators. Their team size grew too, to over 40 members by early 2020. He is managing the Raconteur team in addition to his main product role at HelloFresh.

Takeaway:

Tevis understood how the consideration of candidates happened before hiring in a specific role and was intentional when he joined TribalScale. Seeking account management initially, Tevis knew he had the skills to deliver results but knew it would be challenging to convince a hiring manager to add him to the team hence going for an entry-level role and working to move up. By gradually exposing himself to different departments of the company, he was able to identify the product department as the place where he could best help clients.

He was already organized from his experience at the NGO and understood how other product managers worked from their involvement with the internal tools he managed. Tevis felt that he had all the necessary skills to contribute to the growth of the company. When he encountered roadblocks, he pivoted to his strengths and approached others in the company who could help make his transition happen.

This bold move led Tevis to the opportunity of becoming a Product Manager, gaining the trust of the team around him and bringing a combination of skills to influence how he made decisions

about the product. He already knew what it took to deliver results, so the biggest challenge centered around how to get that first chance to break into product.

Always Approach a Problem With a Beginner's Mindset

Jackie's Story

Jackie was interested in pursuing formal and expressive careers. In high school, she took advanced placement neuroscience and art classes, imagining she'd be a medical doctor who would work on creative hobbies on the side. She attended the University of Southern California as a pre-med biology student with a minor in photography. During a study abroad term in South Africa to receive hands-on experience, Jackie worked on mobile clinics to treat routine cases. She enjoyed problem-solving and the detective type work of diagnosing patients based on knowledge and practice. The experience was more enjoyable to her than the perceived day-to-day norm of being a doctor. After speaking to multiple doctors and attending seminars, Jackie realized she didn't want to go down the medical route. She leaned into photography as a creative outlet to navigate the rest of her degree, working with professionals in the fine arts across Los Angeles.

Upon graduation, Jackie received a digital camera as a gift from her grandparents and taught herself how to use it along with photoshop to start a business. She learned about what kinds of pictures people wanted and went on craigslist to do free photoshoots to build her portfolio. Trying out portraits, editorials and architectural photography, Jackie found her strength in capturing food. A year after she had developed a substantial body of work, a client reached out to her looking for a photographer to shoot restaurant menus in their entirety. After doing a few shoots for them, she learned they were a company that was trying to build a visual search engine for food. They were impressed with

Jackie's work and brought her on as a contractor to build out a team of photographers to develop their brand and style guides. She was excited about this paid opportunity to combine her love for food and visual elements.

As Jackie managed her team, she realized that there were inefficiencies that were preventing the team from scaling. Most significantly, the internal CMS was painfully slow and made it difficult for her team to quickly upload their content. With a good understanding of her team's pain point, Jackie started sketching out ideas to improve the CMS experience. Jackie brought her wireframes to the CTO, stating her case for improving their internal tool. The two worked together, workshoping to build on top of Jackie's existing idea and eventually building out a new upload flow that reduced photographer time from hours to minutes. This enabled the photography operation to scale.

“

That ended up being my first product that I ever worked on and I had yet to be introduced to the formal definition of product management.

”

Jackie enjoyed this experience and began learning more about how she could make similar contributions. She attended Meetups where she gained greater exposure to the diversity of product management roles across the industry. Through these experiences, she realized that this career path provided her with

the opportunity to solve complex and ambiguous problems – the perfect application of both science and art.

“

I was hungry to try different things and it was through spit-balling with our small team and asking, ‘how can we provide more value to customers?’ that I began thinking more broadly about how user value could connect to a business model.

”

She continuously read books and blogs about how to build tech products effectively and also attended a product bootcamp as a way to validate her learning and have an environment where she could consistently get feedback on the work she was doing. Jackie started talking to customers and initially focused on her design strengths. She made suggestions on the core product and the company websites before gradually tackling technical items which eventually aided her internal transition to become a Product Manager.

She worked at the start-up for 10 months as a PM and eventually moved to New York, where she continued to attend Meetups as a way to network with others in the industry. Her experiences in New York fully brought her into the Product Management career path. Through persistent outreach to expand her network, she joined a pre-launch hardware start-up as a Product Marketing Manager to support them through a successful launch date. It was then that she transitioned into Product Management at the company and

more formally became a Product Manager.

“

I always come in with a beginner's mindset, like I always have something more to learn. That really helped me build connections with people in the industry. By coming in with a growth mindset versus a static one, I acquired a lot of second-degree experience and insights that I've been able to carry with me throughout my career.

”

Jackie is currently a Product Manager at Google and a Chapter Lead for Advancing Women in Product in New York.

Takeaway:

Jackie was able to take the essential first step towards product, which was to identify a valuable problem while working as a photographer. She didn't have any formal design training but still felt the design world could be explored by anyone, which gave her the confidence to draw out possible solutions. The initiative to want to improve the workflow of her team ultimately allowed her to learn about product management.

She was fortunate to have a supportive team that allowed her to take on more tasks and contribute to the core product of the company. It allowed her to grow her skills to help the company be better since she became the designated candidate to find fundamental customer problems and come up with ideal solutions. Similar to her initial medical experience, Jackie enjoyed problem-

solving and found a new role that provided an opportunity to do so regularly.

Even after getting the formal title, Jackie still kept learning to make sure she was using the best practices at the company. She treated every opportunity as a way to learn and iterate on the product. It was not until the second tech company she joined that she finally felt she was adequately fulfilling all the responsibilities of a Product Manager.

Position Yourself to Welcome New Challenges

Sorren's Story

Sorren started her career in marketing, working for a varied collection of organizations creating product sell-sheets, managing trade shows, collaborating on advertising campaigns and building relationships with partners. While working as a Marketing Coordinator at a defence contractor, she noticed their website was not intuitive and offered to lead the rebuild of it. To strengthen her skills, she took foundational coding and SEO classes and outlined the key goals and requirements for the project, namely increasing discoverability and navigation resulting aiding the company in securing more contracts. She then paired up with the IT department to complete the project. It wasn't until 8 years later that she realized this was her first taste of product management.

Still interested in marketing, Sorren took a job at Air Miles as a Client Marketing Specialist working with Air Miles partners creating their marketing calendar for different promotional events and facilitating the execution of marketing campaigns for partners. She would then look at the metrics to determine the success of the campaigns, identify possible challenges for clients and share ideas on how their users could better understand their messaging, but clients rarely wanted to put in the effort. Sorren quickly realized the role was more relationship management and less marketing and started looking internally for a shift. Moving on to a Digital Marketing role, she began managing the Air Miles mobile app (in-app ads, push, SMS) and email channels. Acquiring new users, improving their frequency of use and understanding churn were Sorren's primary goals, and she decided that using data, both quantitative (channel metrics) and qualitative (internal

user interviews), to understand the performance of the channels was key.

“

That's when I realized that I really liked digging deep into a topic to understand it. Identifying what the challenges were, what the foundational cause was and then trying to figure out how we could collaborate to make it better energized me.

”

As part of that role, she became the key marketing stakeholder for the mobile app product team. Sorren would attend the mobile team demos, providing feedback and asking questions from a marketing point of view, which helped to build a relationship with the product team. Using her marketing lens, her presence allowed the team to think differently, which they appreciated.

“

I would ask questions about the features and how they delivered on the channel goals as well as just provide feedback as things came up. They found it valuable so, I think that kind of strengthened the relationship because they could see I was engaged, and I was providing a perspective that helped them make a better product.

”

Sorren continued to attend the demos over several months, building a rapport with the team leaders. The marketing department then had a shuffling of the organization, which moved Sorren to a different role that she didn't feel was a fit. She started to look for other opportunities and the product department was inevitably on her radar since she had a good understanding of how they worked and loved their focus on problem-solving. The foundational transparency and the way the team functioned was also a selling point for her, and she felt confident she could strengthen her skills on the technology side of things since she'd had some exposure working previously with the team as a stakeholder.

“

I knew that it was this [product] role, or that I wanted to leave. It was kind of a now or never moment, so I just started talking openly about how I wanted to move. I mentioned it to my new manager, I mentioned it to my friend in product and to her manager, and to his counterpart. All the folks on the product team were people I'd made relationships with so I could trust them. Even though I had a bunch of people talking to me about it and in my corner, it still took time and navigation to make it happen.

”

When a Product Specialist role opened up internally, Sorren was among the first to be considered for the job. She began the interview process and prepared the best way she could for them.

“

I read a bunch of Agile books. I went online and researched everything. I was like, What is a sprint? What is a retro? What is a user story? How do you write one? Why are they important? I just looked up all things product, all things Agile and started just educating myself as much as possible. I also prepared by thinking about a lot of my situational experiences that most likely related to scenarios you'd come across in product.

”

Sorren got the job as a Product Specialist for Mobile, focused on leading Beacon and Geofence pilots, maintaining the Air Miles app while the company was organizing to build a new app. In this role, she worked with an external agency to deliver necessary features and fix bugs. It was lonely at first since she didn't have an in-house team, but she got to see how to run sprint rituals with an external team and was excited to own something and deliver on the high bar her manager had set for her. After six months of working on the project, the company decided to start an in-house team and hired two mobile developers. She built a close relationship with her team, learning more of the technical side and increasing her ability to contribute effectively.

The company was also focused on creating a new app and the PM initially leading the project moved on to another challenge, leaving the need for someone to take on that product. This product came with a fully staffed internal team to carry out the frontend

deliverables, which appealed to Sorren, who was looking for a bigger challenge. The interview process for this role felt much smoother as she had already been working on a similar product. It resulted in her transition as a Product Manager. After two years, Sorren moved into a Senior PM role with Air Miles. She is currently a Group Product Manager at ecobee.

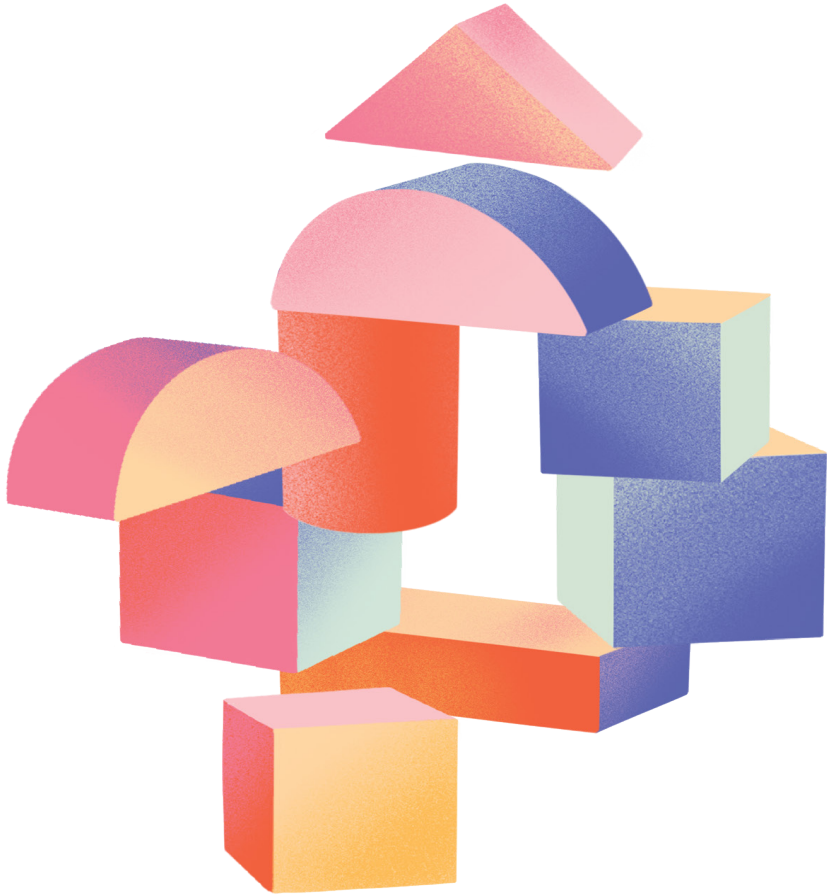
Takeaways:

Sorren moved to different roles multiple times in her career once they weren't challenging her enough or didn't meet the expectations as the job description implied. She consistently voiced her opinion at the right times and made a way for herself to switch into something more favourable. When it came to product, she took her time to build a relationship with the mobile team to understand how they work before seeing where she could fit. Having those initial interactions built up over time until she realized she could see herself working on similar problems.

She gradually took similar roles to Product Management to build up her skills and confidence until she was ready to ask for more. Similarly, positioning herself to welcome new challenges allowed others to consider her when more responsibility came along. It was a continuous cycle of learning and growing until she was able to secure her desired role to become a Product Manager.

Conclusion:

Transitionally internally can be a battle at certain companies but it provides a safe environment where you can try out product management. If things don't work out, you get to go back to your old role at the very worst case. Similar to joining a company with the intention to transition, it is most helpful to situate yourself close to where decisions are made on the product. Preferably jointly working with the development team. In cases where transitioning internally is proving difficult, invest time doing product related tasks to help build up some functional skills of carrying out the job. This way, when applying externally, you have related experiences you can reference that prove your ability to get the job done.



Part 3

Product Skill Sets

During product management interviews, it is quite common to ask candidates about their strengths. The answers to these questions demonstrate the traits that apply to product management and can be backed by prior experiences. Think about the different moments in your career where you felt proud of yourself - maybe you were able to impress colleagues or you were so natural at something it felt like second nature. Those are what make you unique. They will be the most compelling stories to tell during interviews, which makes it easy to picture working with you.

Every Product Manager is unique and uses their combination of skills to solve problems every day for customers, team members and organizations. Everyone has a weakness, but talented PMs concentrate on using their skills sets to help balance other areas where they might need to improve. Accelerating progress in certain stages of product development and asking for assistance

in others, is an important part of being a PM. Leveraging one's most prominent strengths can also help to identify the type of PM you hope to become and the areas of the business where you are likely to add the most value.

Through interviewing several PMs on their journey, I was able to uncover diverse attributes most helpful in their transition into product. This next section of the book shares ten supplementary stories on how they used a specific skill set to achieve their goal and to solve problems continuously.

Curiosity

Curiosity is one of the foundational elements found in many Product Managers because it fuels their desire to learn about any topic of interest. It helps to acquire knowledge about a problem space and provides a lens through which to explore different perspectives - a key component to forming a sound, holistic vision. Curiosity provides individuals with an exploratory mindset that questions the status quo, similar to how children become aware of their environment as they grow and learn. This, in turn, invites the challenge of seeking more information in order to expand one's ability to be analytical. The simple act of remaining curious often drives the urge to come up with potential solutions that improve the current ways of carrying out a particular task or function.

Scientists, inventors and artists all share a collective appetite for curiosity, which informs their work. This work adds tremendous value to society. Breakthroughs throughout history have been

credited to someone being curious enough to ask questions that challenged the existing ways of how things were done. Similarly, Product Managers must always use their curiosity to find significant customer problems to solve, which improves on what currently exists today.

Empathy

Empathy helps to understand how others feel, which is crucial in building relationships with customers and to know the value of a problem they are experiencing. Similar to being compassionate, it allows individuals to provide a helping hand to pull others out of uncomfortable situations that can cause harm or inconvenience. It is the feeling that helps to see other perspectives that exist in the world and how to align them for the better. Empathetic Product Managers use this as a motivation to solve customer problems because they know how much it means to them. They also use empathy as a way to navigate the challenges, processes, workflows and blockers team-members face to make them more productive.

Customer obsession is one of the critical results of being empathetic because it ensures a laser focus on the people the business serves. It provides Product Managers with the necessary skill needed to observe their users and understand them better. It opens up a line of communication to funnel issues, feedback and suggestions that can make a better product to meet their needs.

Persistence

Persistence in this context refers to the act of not compromising on one's vision for themselves or the customer. It is the drive that allows individuals to achieve remarkable results because of the amount of passion and effort placed in fulfilling the desired goal. Persistent Product Managers usually have a high bar of quality attributed to their work and push back on anything that may result in creating an inferior experience for the customer.

Mark started his career working as a mechanical engineer for seven years and then took inspiration from many young people who were creating internet companies to build out his idea. Over the next three years, he created his company, but being inexperienced, he made some mistakes and eventually, it didn't work out. Not wanting to go back to engineering, Mark worked in a variety of jobs – project manager, photographer, designer, started a video game conference, and produced commercials – but nothing felt right. Then one day, a video for a Google product caught his attention, and he first learned about the job “Product Manager,” and it was exactly what he felt he was good at.

Mark started learning as much as he could about product management and put together a plan to get his dream job. He was able to convince a company to allow him to work for free for two weeks so that he could sit in the same room with real Product Managers and learn how they did their job. He attended meetings, listened to debates, and heard the jargon. These learnings were the early foundations of his knowledge and would prove useful in future interviews. Mark also documented his product ideas and what he admired about products. It was the basis for a portfolio and helped him practice what he was learning.

As he was building this portfolio and learning about product management, Mark was also looking for a product management job. He picked his “Top 5” – five companies he would love to work for. By choosing companies he admired, Mark was more motivated and was able to focus more attention on each one; this was important because he didn’t have resume experience and therefore needed to find ways to stand out. He did things like create websites for each company explaining why he was a good fit; he researched and made case studies for the products of those companies, even dropping off personalized gifts to the offices with links to his custom websites. The combination of his enthusiasm, initiative and persistence throughout his job search set him up to become a Product Manager.

Mark maintains his persistence in his role; he once paid external animators out of his pocket to work on a feature since the company didn’t have the budget to do it. He wouldn’t compromise on the experience he desired for his users. Mark is currently a Director of Product at CrowdRiff and the founder of Revere, a note-taking app for notes about people that helps you build more meaningful relationships.

Comprehensiveness

There is a substantial amount of value that comes with having extensive knowledge that spans across industries. It takes time and patience to acquire but proves to be a fruitful investment because it trains individuals to pick up concepts quickly and apply it when required to solve problems. Product Managers who are comprehensive strive to ensure they consider all the possible options available and pull from their broad knowledge base to tackle situations they find themselves in.

Alex took a personality test in high school, which revealed him to be a generalist. As a result, his guidance counsellor recommended pursuing a managerial role as a career path. He spoke to as many managers as he could, and after some research, he learned the typical route to take was to go to a prestigious business school then work for a large company. Alex decided to go to Western University for the Ivey Business school and used his summer terms to apply for internships at large corporations. While working as an Auditor intern at RBC, he spent time speaking to senior leaders to learn how best to be like them. After completing his auditing tasks early, he got to work as an Assistant Project Manager in the technology division for the company. Alex enjoyed that experience and returned for another internship, taking on responsibilities to execute business requirements with the technical team. In subsequent internships, Alex evaluated competitors and created business cases on the decision to invest technical resources in building products within the trade finance space.

After taking a full-time job as a Project Manager at RBC, Alex discovered product management and that became his career

goal. Everyone kept telling Alex that he would require five years of experience to transition internally to that role and saw that as a common trend across the industry. While doing additional research on what could get him a Product Manager role, he noticed that larger companies preferred MBA candidates, smaller companies valued start-up experience and others required a technical degree. To solve his problem, Alex decided to get an MBA and went through an accelerated program to complete his studies. He learned how to code to ensure he could fulfil the technical requirements and started a side business, tutoring high school economics. Using the combination of code and his side business, Alex developed a product for economics examination preparations to go through the motions of product development. Since he wasn't sure what size of company to join, he took the comprehensive approach to be prepared for the opportunity that felt right for him. Alex's thorough approach allowed him to apply to various companies confidently and felt he met the qualifications of what it meant to be a Product Manager. He got seven interviews with a variety of companies and ended up joining Voices.com as a Product Manager.

Initiative and the Desire to Learn

Companies rely on Product Managers to form a vision and lead teams towards new opportunities that benefit the business. They must take action to stay ahead. This is driven by the initiative to continually learn since customer needs change at an unpredictable pace. Technology is always advancing, therefore unlocking additional possibilities and competition has a way of sneaking up on you, which puts pressure on companies. A clear path isn't usually defined, so creating time to learn and investing in best practices helps overcome the challenges that are required to deliver great products.

Jenny studied Environmental Science at McGill University as a path towards getting into medical school. After graduation, she decided to postpone any further education to go work at a tech start-up, Universe, which closely aligned with her philosophy. While working as an unpaid Marketing intern at this early stage company, she was required to build an understanding around the product to customers. Jenny took the initiative to try out different ideas to find what was effective. She posted on social media channels, attended events to pass out flyers and went around the city to create awareness with customers. The experience gave her exposure to learn a lot about raising awareness in a short amount of time.

After her internship, one of her brothers, who ran his own business asked Jenny to come work with him. He convinced her to learn front end web-development to help build a website for customers to customize and purchase bicycles. At this time, she had never written a line of code but was open to the opportunity

of learning something new. Jenny took several online courses and built out smaller projects and gradually worked her way towards building the more challenging custom site. She enjoyed the process of learning once again, and after completing the website, Jenny then moved to Berlin to work as a Business Analyst at a start-up. The size of the company allowed Jenny to drive matters that would be valuable to the business, and the first thing she did was help them gain some competitive intelligence by doing market research. Jenny created a new go-to-market strategy to get an additional stream of revenue for the product. There were two Product Managers at the company, and while facilitating design sprints and supporting them whenever she could, Jenny realized that was the job she wanted.

After 18 months in Berlin, Jenny moved back to Toronto to find a Product Manager job. She attended every product event and spoke to everyone in her network to get any conversation possible that could get her to her goal. While applying for jobs, employers rejected Jenny due to her lack of experience, which spurred her to seek related roles, leading to product. She decided to apply for Customer Success roles because it would ramp her up on the product and interact closely with customers. During her interviews, she was very upfront about her desire to get into product, which was well-received when she joined UberFlip as a Customer Success Coach.

Jenny found as many opportunities to do product-related tasks, sharing customers' insights with the product team and created a beta program for customers to relay their feedback about the product. She also started a product advisory board where anyone in the company could share their opinions with the product and engineering teams. While still on track to transition

internally into product, the founder of the start-up she previously worked for, Universe reached out to recruit her as their Product Manager.

Communication

Communication seems like an evident skill that most jobs require since it is such an essential part of interacting with others. When relating this to product management, it is probably one of the essential skills to have because communicating with others is the majority of the job. It carries a lot of weight, and it is easy to make a mistake or misunderstand what others intend, which can have a significant impact on customers or the business. Whether in a verbal or a written format, Product Managers often have to share the same information in different ways to different people who are working on a specific context of the project, and it can be a challenge to communicate effectively. Communication, in this context, encompasses listening to different perspectives and asking the right questions to clarify ambiguity for the collective good.

Eric loved the intersection of business and psychology, which led him to specialize in marketing for his university degree. He secured an internship as a Marketing Specialist at a small company to help run campaigns, perform market research, and documented case studies. A friend of his convinced him to join the technology company, Kik for his last internship, and Eric felt this could be an excellent opportunity to learn about a new industry. Eric started as a Business Analyst, where he helped drive the product launch of

chat bots by streamlining processes and communication between an external development agency and internal stakeholders. Eric liaised between both parties to ensure there was an open line to raise any issues and foster collaboration. Before Kik, Eric never considered tech as a possible career path for him, but he enjoyed this challenge and returned as a full-time employee.

In his new role as a Service Associate, Eric had to interact with the internal engineering and design teams, and he approached this new challenge by asking a lot of questions to learn how each individual's contribution fit into the vision. His goal was to make sure the teams were productive and could execute on their deliverables. He gradually learned how to remove unnecessary work that didn't move the project forward. Eric, who then transitioned into a Project Manager role, helped to answer engineers' questions regarding what they were working on and removed any dependencies that existed from other teams. He went on to take an introductory course to understand software development so that he could better communicate with his team members. It helped him to translate requirements and technical terminology for different groups into analogies that can be better understood by the broader company. Showcasing his unique ability to understand complex concepts and earning the respect of various disciplines across the company helped him easily transition internally as a Product Manager.

Being a Team Player

The majority of responsibilities of a Product Manager involve interacting with other members of the organization to execute on a vision. Unlike other standalone functions across a company, a Product Manager can't carry out their tasks autonomously. It is why building trustworthy relationships with customers, engineers, designers, executives and others is one of the most critical functions to be successful in such a role. Being a capable team player goes beyond telling others what to do; it involves championing the vision, motivating team members, collaborating on ideas, unblocking them and recognizing their efforts. A great team player builds a unique culture around ensuring every member of the team knows how they contribute to the vision and fosters activities to promote enjoying the process of bringing the ideas to life.

Morgan was set to become a doctor and initially started studying general sciences at Queen's University until she took a computer science elective, which inspired her to switch her major. She enjoyed the programming process of breaking down complex problems into manageable pieces and wanted to extend this beyond code, so she pursued her MBA to grow her skills and learn about new industries. Following her education, Morgan worked in two vastly different roles, one in strategy consulting and the other in technical project management at a retail company, but neither of these felt perfect for her. She found her way into the Product Support Network team at Shopify, where her role was to funnel valuable customer insights to the product team.

Morgan built a great sense of customer pain points and formed close relationships with various product groups and team

members at all levels of the company. She was able to use her knowledge to form strong opinions about the products she worked closest with to influence the product team's direction. Maintaining a close rapport with other Product Managers helped her fill in for the role when an opportunity presented itself. While working on a small project as an interim Product Manager, she leveraged the relationship she had formed with others across the company to ramp up and learned ways to apply the combination of her skills to solve problems. While executing on the roadmap she built, she made the process fun for everyone involved, which allowed her to get the best out of the team and drive them to success. Morgan excelled at this and transitioned fully to a Product Manager on the multi-channel team. She remains at Shopify and is now a Senior Product Manager on the same team.

Detail Orientedness

Many great benefits come from understanding things at their core. Product Managers that pay close attention to details when building products are more likely to be laser-focused on the problems they are solving. They tackle issues from First-Principles perspective, which accelerates the discovery of root causes for any challenges they face. Their ability to observe customers grows more confident when determining what experiences to prioritize. As a result, making improvements becomes second nature, and finding opportunities is an area where they excel in moving the business forward.

Andrea had a strong interest in her science courses which propelled her to volunteer throughout high school at the hospital. She did occupational therapy for patients which led to studying Life Sciences at the University of Toronto. While working at the Toronto CCAC, in the admitting and health care records department, she used different tools and systems to enter information about patients. Finding information using various applications and navigating the several systems introduced a lot of wasted efforts, which frustrated Andrea, who found the process ineffective. She started giving feedback on how to make the workflow and applications better, looked for alternatives on her own and kept questioning why they were doing things in a certain way. It showed the business that she cared deeply about what she was doing, which brought opportunities to her. The tech lead for the office saw her attention to detail when it came to workflows and referred her to work in the project management office of UHN.

During her time at UHN, Andrea worked with hospitals on

clinical redesigns to find ways to enhance patient care. She facilitated the clinical teams in mapping out the current state to identify gaps in how to optimize the care they were trying to give. As part of the process improvement team, her goal was not just to make a change to the physical space and technologies used but also to drive a cultural shift in the way people think about their jobs.

Andrea also spent time helping health care workers understand the magnitude of their work, entertaining the idea of change as they engaged more with her. She investigated several issues experienced in different clinical environments, reviewed her findings with the executive teams of those departments to enhance the care delivery model to pivot toward a more patient-centered approach. She was able to use various data points she collected to convince executives to invest in the solutions she recommended.

After three years working on the redesign, she spent the next 18 months at UHN focused on more technology-based solutions, one being an ETL project, leading a team to build out internal data translation tools for the company. It was her first experience working with developers, and she embraced it by learning as much as possible to understand the people in the role as well as their responsibilities. Gradually she increased her understanding of the technicalities of the system and built a work culture that earned her the respect of everyone on her team. While applying for her next project management job at Point Click Care, Andrea was interviewed by the product management team, who offered her a role as a Senior Business Analyst. She excelled in that role, taking on increased responsibilities and then advanced into a Product Owner role with the duties of a Product Manager.

Resourcefulness

Resourcefulness is the ability to use the tools at one's disposal to effectively solve problems in creative ways. It builds up the capability to handle situations that fall out of plan and allows for flexible workaround. Similar to scrappiness, it enables Product Managers to see beyond their current constraints and utilize existing resources to achieve the desired outcome for all.

Mostafa decided to start a company early on in his career and without any validation, he set out to build out a loyalty program app for mom and pop shops. The goal of the app was to replace the need to carry loyalty cards in wallets, a problem Mostafa always had as a user of loyalty programs. When it came time to launch, he learned he had solved the problem for customers but not for merchants that needed to adopt the system in the first place, which caused the app to fail. Mostafa abandoned this idea and moved on to his next venture, which was a food delivery service that focused on providing high-quality, healthy meals that could serve customers. It was a problem he had experienced and wanted to find a way to solve it personally as an MVP. This time, Mostafa decided to leverage technology that already existed to test out the idea. Mostafa built out a Shopify store and customized it to fit the need that he was trying to fulfil. The approach served him well. He spotted early signs of growth before dedicating additional resources to the business. He was resourceful not to spend time building out a custom solution when the market had a product that could help validate his idea more cheaply and effectively.

As time went on, he dedicated more time to his business, maintaining the site's unique user experience, running A/B tests

and marketing campaigns. Facebook ads helped him drive traffic to the site, and he was able to create an appropriate funnel to convert visitors to sign up for the service. Mostafa, who bootstrapped the business with very little capital, eventually took a step back to think about how far he could go with just his own money since he didn't want to seek outside investment. The decision led Mostafa to the path of product management at tech companies, which had more resources that would allow him to solve user problems at a larger scale than what he was currently doing. He began searching for a job and mostly talked about his experience building out his ventures during interviews. A lot of companies were fascinated by his stories, and after speaking to a few companies, Mostafa decided to join Influitive as a Product Manager.

Mostafa now heads the Product team at SnapTravel, an AI-powered bot to help customers find the best hotel and flight deals where he helped grow the company from **\$30M** to **\$270M** in revenue in under two years.

Adaptability

Advancements in technology ensure companies always have to move fast to keep up with trends and industry best practices. This is especially true for start-ups. Often pressured to deliver a unique value proposition at speed to release functionality to end-users. In such an environment, sudden changes occur, and individuals must be adaptable to fulfil any unexpected request which may arise. As a Product Manager, several situations can result in things not going according to plan, but the expectation is to keep moving forward. A common challenge is the lack of resources required to complete a project, and in such situations, the Product Manager fills in that gap to ensure things still get done.

Quadri chose to study business to provide many possible options for a career choice after graduating. While attending the Schulich School of Business, he took an internship at a start-up where he got to immerse himself in the many moving pieces of the business. He wanted to support the founders in as many areas as possible so they could spend their time doing more valuable things. Quadri started in business development to help build and market the product, and then in operations and logistics to ensure suppliers delivered their product in time to prevent fulfilment delays. He moved on to Customer Support once the product began to ship to assist users with any challenges they faced with the product. As sales started to grow, Quadri used his accounting knowledge to help the company keep their books up to date. Anytime a change happened that required a new responsibility or a new skill, Quadri made sure he did his best to add value as needed.

The experience enabled Quadri to build the skills of getting things done, which helped him get his first full-time role as a Junior Product Manager at a product studio. Not knowing what the title meant at the time, he attended many client meetings, leaned on his mentor, and attended a course on how to be effective on the job. While performing the responsibilities of a Product Manager, Quadri also helped out with book-keeping and in the operations of the product studio since it was essential to the business. He has maintained this spirit of adaptability and was one of the initial Product Managers to join Gigster, the platform for building dynamic teams made of top global talent that create industry-changing custom software. He worked on multiple client projects with different teams and adapted to their needs as required. The experience allowed him to grow into the role to enable other opportunities at various organizations as a Product Manager. Quadri is currently a Product Manager at eCompliance and a lead educator at a technology bootcamp, where he teaches product management.

Continuous Improvement

Releasing a product to the world is a great accomplishment; there is so much that goes into bringing an idea to life. The challenge that follows is to ensure customers continue to use that product, and it is improved over time to meet their changing needs. Continuous improvement is necessary for any product to be truly successful. It makes Product Managers aware of any inaccurate assumptions made while developing the product. It also helps to plan out the correct approach to fix any outstanding errors and fuels the practice of iterative product development. This way, putting customers at the center of product design.

Continuous improvement also applies to every individual on the team. The Product Manager must make it a priority to ensure everyone has a plan to grow or learn something new while working on a project. It is essential to track how the team is improving and how they are resolving different challenges over time. Investing in the team creates the cohesion required to tackle any technical problems that may arise in the product.

Magda immigrated to Canada to find job opportunities after completing her master's degree in economics and computer science. She secured her first full-time role in Business Intelligence at a consulting company where she solved problems for clients such as Loblaw digital. This relationship led to her transitioning at Loblaws as a BI Consultant. During her time at Loblaws, Magda worked on several data reporting products for executives but wanted more opportunities to work closely with customers rather than receiving requirements to execute on. While searching for her next move, she came across product management postings

and was intrigued.

Magda attended meetups to meet other Product Managers who she could learn from and discuss with. She read online blogs about the role and took introductory courses for all the bootcamps in the city. Magda applied to over 100 postings and secured about 80 interviews over the course of the year, leveraging this as a way to increase her knowledge of the field. Whenever an interviewer asked her a question she didn't know, she wrote it down and did her best to find an answer for it with the resources she had exposed herself to. While still working at her current company, she looked for product management related tasks that she could work on, which served as practice for her. Magda went through this continuous cycle to educate herself and regularly tweaked her resume to reflect what she knew about product. She was forthcoming in her weaknesses and told interviewers she'd only take the job if there was a senior PM in the company that could mentor her. The iterative process proved to be useful and led her to secure her first Product Manager role at Ada.

Presentation

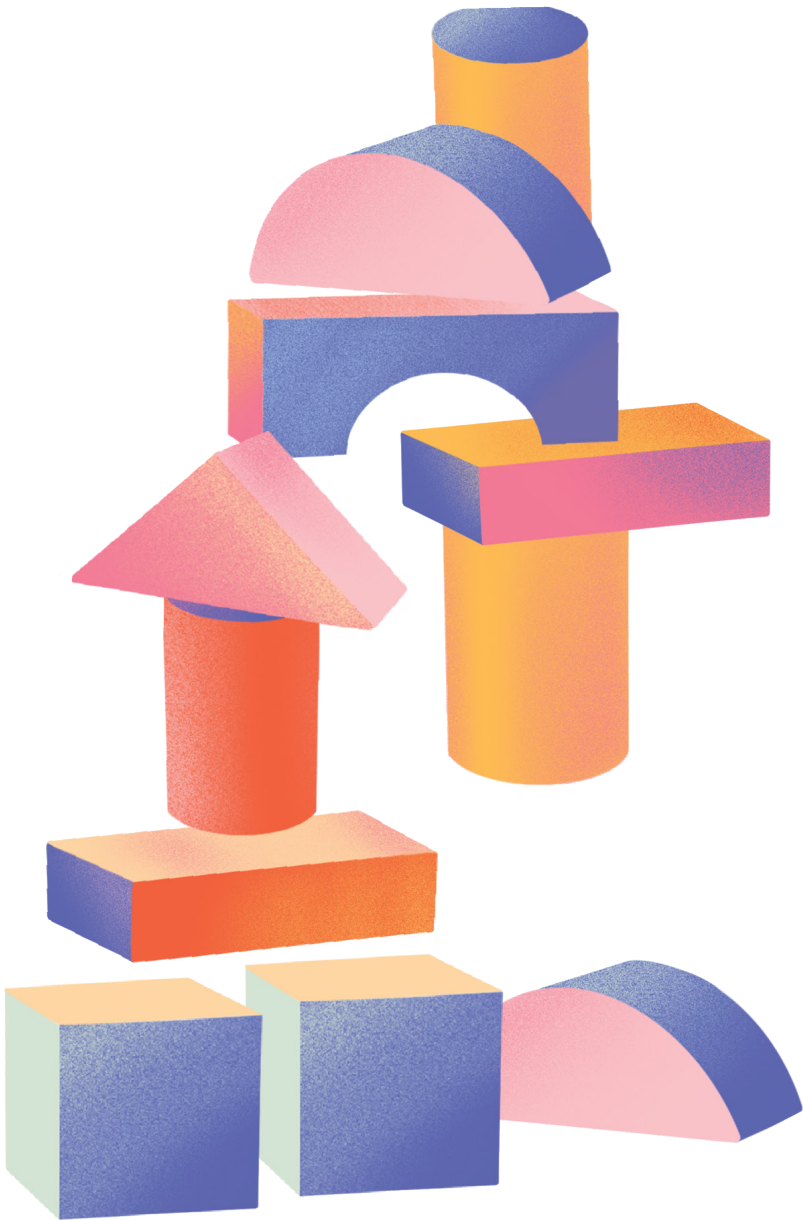
Product Managers are exposed to enormous amounts of information about customer needs, competitor offerings, market behaviour and technology trends, which they have to make sense of. Researching is a big part of gathering valuable information and synthesizing various data points into digestible chunks before presenting it to stakeholders across an organization. Presentation skills come in handy to deliver details that matter in a concise way, which keeps the necessary parties informed at the right times.

Mann was interested in understanding how businesses ran, and this motivated him to pursue a degree in commerce with specializations in marketing and finance. With the program focused on a lot of theory, He decided to apply for a competitive graduate rotational program at the National Bank of Australia, which would provide multiple options for a career path for him. As part of the interview process, candidates were presented with different challenges and asked to research solutions to present to the hiring board. The months of preparation helped Mann build up his presentation skills and prepared him to work at different departments of the bank. After trying various roles, Mann ended up as a Product Analyst and managed process improvement.

He analyzed the features that the banking product offered and pitched several enhancements that highlighted business opportunities three years into the future. Mann then moved internally into a consulting role doing more strategy and change management as he worked on projects that strengthened his presentation skills. The biggest takeaways for him while working as a consultant was the ability to structure his thoughts correctly,

put things in writing and communicate clearly to stakeholders.

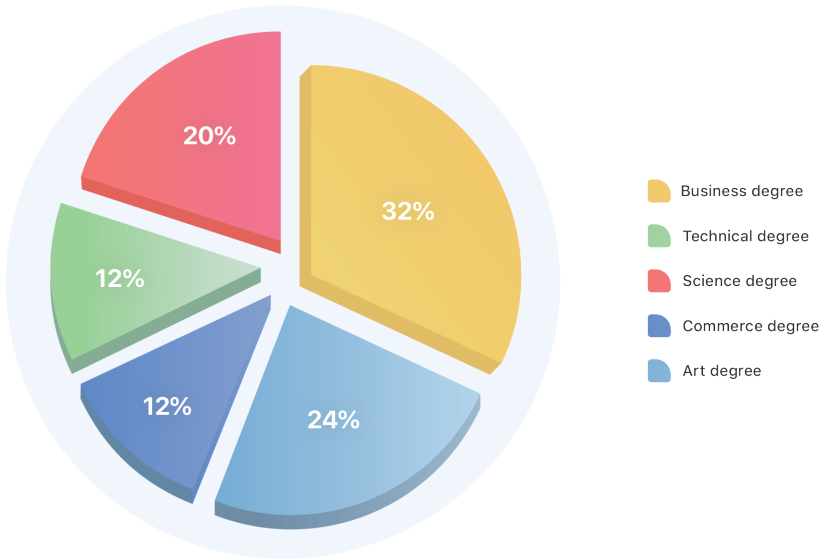
Mann decided to switch industries with more growth potential and identified tech as a way he could push himself to learn more about the world. He learned about product management and felt like it was the perfect mesh of all the things he enjoyed while working at the bank. Mann prioritized going to meetups in the community to establish connections with others to learn more about the role, which led to a referral to interview for a product management job at Points. During his assessment for the job with a case study, Mann was able to accurately present his ideas which were good enough to secure him his first Product Manager job at the company.



Next Steps

Tips for Job Hunting

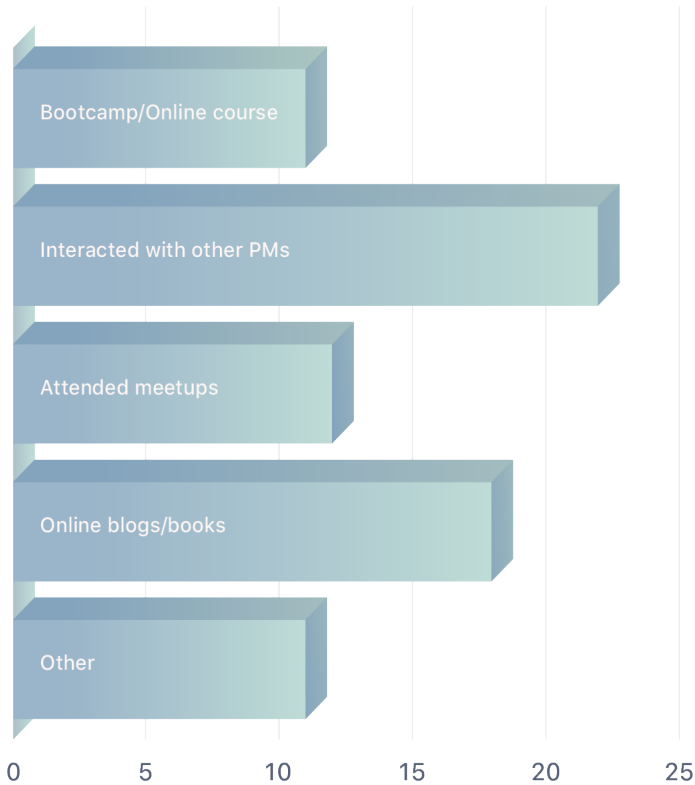
There isn't a proven formula for getting into product management. The first lesson I'd highlight is to not let what you studied determine what you do for the rest of your life. If you have enough drive to go after what you desire, then you'll find ways to learn what is required to get you there. It may not be easy, but it is possible. That is why I took the approach to tell 25 unique stories, which might inspire your adventure ahead to figure out what might be most effective for you to get to your goal. The chart below shows the breakdown of degrees for those discussed in this book. You can see that despite being from diverse educational backgrounds, they all ended up in product.



Learning About Product Management

Learning about the different responsibilities of the job was one of the early steps in the journey to become a Product Manager. Candidates approached this by educating themselves as much as they could. They did this through different mediums to better understand if there was a fit for them in the role. This initial research had a significant effect on the path towards the next step of exploring how to gain the skills needed to be successful.

Learning about product



From the graph of 40 PMs I interviewed, the majority of people used different combinations of resources to get up to speed on what next they needed to learn. There isn't one ideal way to learn about product management. What you choose totally depends on your learning style. You should ultimately prioritize what would be the most effective for you. **Half** of the people who I interviewed interacted with other PMs and looked to online resources to gain their initial understanding of product management.

Over a third attended meetups and reached out to speak to multiple PMs. As a result of this step, it provided significant help

on how to find relevant information on the product development processes and best practices. Jyoti found her mentor at a meetup who helped with forming a strategy that was effective for her while Kyle organized a new meetup where he was able to network with product leaders.

During this stage, it is crucial to use a combination of different resources to acquire as much knowledge as possible. Based on how you learn, you can prioritize where to put most of your effort. Below is a graph on the resources used to first learn about product management.

Acquiring the Skills of a Product Manager

Long before learning about product management, one can be in a position with similar responsibilities. This can be the reason for the initial spark to dive deeper into the role, which then allows one to understand what to do to improve on the crucial skills needed to execute the job. Candidates can also come to the realization they want to be Product Managers and then search for ways to take on those duties in their current role. Either way, the exposure to working with different disciplines across the organization can help to gain valuable experience on how to be a compelling PM.

It is best to try to work with as many disciplines within an organization to build up the skills to become a Product Manager. The more groups of people you know how to work with, the better it will be for you moving forward. When analyzing responses from the interviews I conducted, the results were fairly spread out with a few standing out and contributing towards accelerating their

path towards product management. The graph below highlights the distribution of the activities they were doing that helped to improve their product management skills.

Working with others



Over **half** of the Product Managers interviewed wore multiple hats and performed different responsibilities beyond their job descriptions. It helped them broaden their skills in various areas of product development. Jenny worked as a Developer, Business Analyst and Customer Success Coach at different companies while Stacey worked with every department at a start-up. The

diverse skills gained from maximizing how they worked helped set them up to become Product Managers.

87.5% mentioned they started working closely with developers and technical teams in their previous roles. They reported how it helped to contribute to their understanding of the feasibility of the problems their company was trying to solve. The relationship they fostered with these teams also naturally helped those without formal technical backgrounds better comprehend how to build software—therefore making it easy to suggest enhancements to work on and knowing how best to communicate it to the teams.

67.5% reported working closely with clients to gather requirements that needed to be delivered by the company. Doing this continually helped them understand the importance of the tasks they were communicating with the teams that were in charge of execution. It also provided a lens on how to effectively prioritize needs for customers who, in this case, were clients.

Other disciplines PMs worked as or jointly within their previous role include Customer Support, Design or User research.

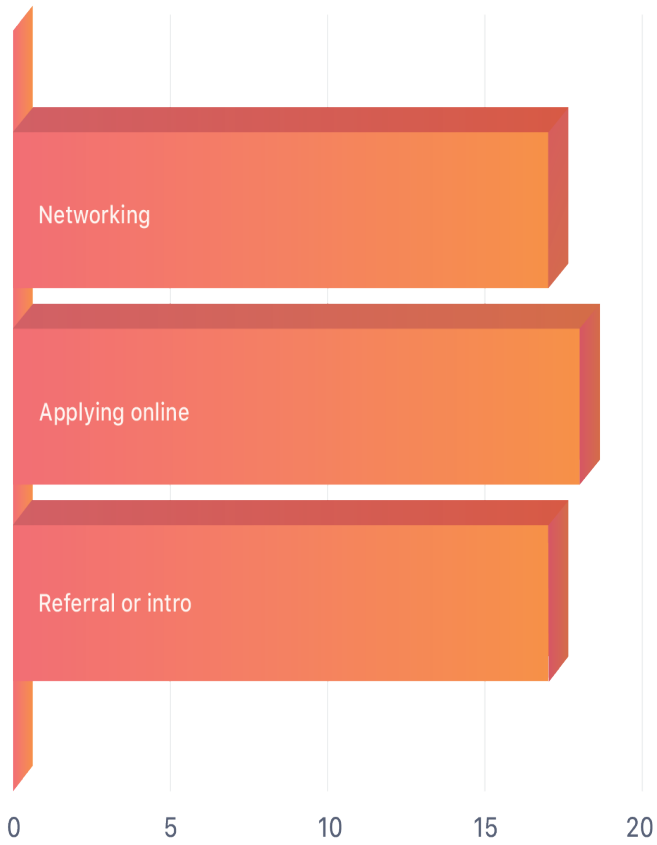
Applying for a Product Management Role

Job-searching is very tricky because there are so many things that contribute to when a posting becomes available, as well as who has access to it. Several biases prevent certain groups from having the privilege to be aware of when opportunities are available. And with referrals being one of the most common ways to recruit people, it mostly brings similar candidates into companies. Some companies are tackling their diversity problem and are making it a priority, but a vast majority are still behind. It is essential to understand the many challenges to help navigate the unfair system to find the jobs that are most beneficial to you.

The best thing is to have a plan, try it out, and then iterate on what is working. Mark was very intentional about what companies he wanted to join during his search for a product role and did everything he could to impress them. Jyoti worked closely with her mentor and a recruiter to continuously tweak her resume and to find opportunities that were best suited for her. Once you know what you want, use your endless drive to explore as many options as possible until you achieve your goal.

The candidates I interviewed tried out a wide variety of ways to find a job, and since they were sparse, I bucketed them into three evenly distributed categories. Networking, referrals/intros, and applying online.

Next Steps



What's Next?

I really enjoyed putting this project together, and if you found it valuable, please shoot me a note on LinkedIn and let me know what you think. I'd appreciate it. If any of the stories really inspired you, reach out to the person and tell them what action you were able to take, which helped you in your journey. I'm sure they will appreciate it.

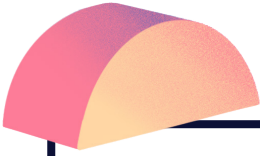
I intentionally started with this project because it is early in the funnel for those who have just begun gathering information about product management or the technology industry. By now, you should have a better understanding of what it takes to get into product, and how others have landed their first product roles. You are also aware of the challenges necessary. Be kind to yourself and understand that it might take some time to achieve your goal. However, rest assured that it is possible. I hope by reflecting on the stories, they will keep you motivated to keep pushing forward.

Getting a job might not be your immediate goal, but keeping up to date with best practices, tips and tricks might build up your confidence when you are eventually ready to go after product management or any related field. If you have enjoyed reading this and would love to see the other projects I work on in the future, please join my mailing list on howtoproduct.io.

I can probably only send one email a month, so I want it to have meaningful content that will be beneficial to your career development. It could include other inspirational stories, helpful articles, workshops, seminars, cheat sheets for your interviews or job postings. Who knows, maybe I'll share details about another book I'm secretly working on. It all depends on your needs.

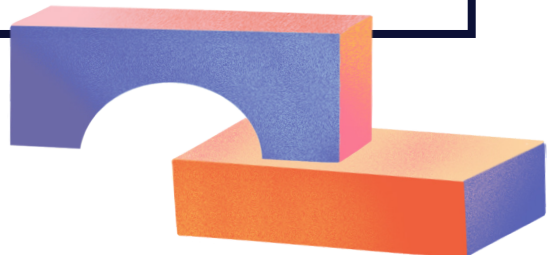
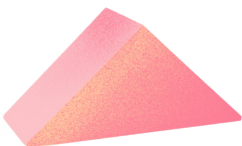
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