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BLOG

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[Driven] Ellen Chisa's Roadmap to Product Management Success

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This post kicks off our latest series, Driven, profiling some of the hottest movers and shakers from all corners of the Boston tech startup space. Know someone we ought to feature? [Drop us a line \(mailto:kaite@venturefizz.com\)](mailto:kaite@venturefizz.com). We're open to people of all titles and career stages.

Ellen Chisa, VP of product at [Paul English's latest venture, Lola Travel](#) (<http://venturefizz.com/blog/lola-paul-english-s-next-company-your-rescue-button-planning-travel>), is the kind of person everyone wants on their team. She's brilliant. She's passionate. She's got opinions and she's not afraid to share them. And the lead up to her current role is beyond



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impressive.

THE EARLY YEARS: SCIENCE & MATH & ROBOTS, OH MY!



As a kid, Chisa was a self-proclaimed “geek.” Growing up in Southeastern Michigan, her parents (Mom’s a college professor and Dad’s a programmer and entrepreneur who studied economics) pushed her toward math and science.

Lucky for them, Chisa

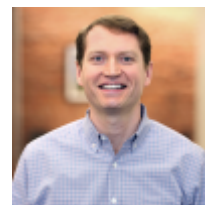
loved these fields and was seriously into robotics. She not only participated in [FIRST Robotics](http://www.firstinspires.org/robotics/frc) ([://www.firstinspires.org/robotics/frc](http://www.firstinspires.org/robotics/frc)), a competition joining the “excitement of sport with the rigors of science technology”, her team went on to win the world Championship in 2003.

For early accolades? Oh, nothing big - unless you consider attending Michigan’s award-winning International Academy - an International Baccalaureate high school that took first place on Newsweek’s list of the nation’s best high schools in 2003 and has topped the charts ever since - as impressive. (I do.)

Armed with an already noteworthy resume, Chisa headed off to Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering.

STEPPING STONES TO SUCCESS

Olin is notoriously small - less than 400 students - meaning faculty and staff were easily accessible. What’s more, leadership was welcoming of students’ input. Chisa was glad



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to share hers, and rather than waiting for the bi-annual President's Council meetings where students were invited to share feedback, Chisa would instead approach the president in places like the dining hall.

"Olin was an interesting place," Chisa reflects. "I didn't realize it wasn't like that everywhere. Your opinion mattered."

After her sophomore year at Olin, Chisa took time off to launch ed-tech startup [Alight Learning](https://angel.co/alight-learning-1) (<https://angel.co/alight-learning-1>) with six other students. The group lived in Waltham, renting out the cheapest place they could afford and living off of chicken broth. (Chisa says it was 'challenging.' I'd argue that term might be downplaying



internships included a spring and summer semester at Microsoft, and another summer at Microsoft. The latter wanted to hire her - only catch was they offered roles to college grads, which Chisa wasn't at the time. So in 2009 she cobbled together her remaining required courses, took classes online, and graduated a year early to join the Microsoft team.



There, she was a program manager for Office Mobile, where she worked on PowerPoint Broadcast for Symbian, Windows Mobile 8, and other mobile operating systems, like Android. Of the experience, Chisa says she learned a lot about business processes, about thinking through problems - especially those at the level of Microsoft, - and about working and communicating with a wide array of people.

In 2012, Chisa left Microsoft for a product manager role with Kickstarter, where she was responsible for the backer-facing aspect of the crowdfunding platform.

"I believed in the vision," she says. "Kickstarter enables people to do cool projects they couldn't do normally."

"It was neat to be at a company that thought about how to do the right thing and they were so passionate about their

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community," she adds. "It was authentic beyond what I've seen."

ELLEN'S LATEST ENDEAVOR



By mid-2014, Chisa felt she'd



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mplished all she could at Kickstarter, and (finally) ded to pursue Harvard Business School, which she had ed and been accepted to while still at Olin. She spent entire year thinking she'd intern for a VC during summer . But when she received the wise advice that a VC firm it not be for her because she'd have to turn so many le down, Chisa opted to change course.

Y summer, Chisa ended up interning for Paul English at e (<http://www.blade.net>), where she expected to support ompany's portfolio companies. But - as is so often the case - expectations rarely align with reality.

Chisa loves building companies, and she loves working for founders she respects. (Amen, sister.) That's why, when English put her on a research project instead of with Blade's portfolio companies, she didn't object. And - little did she know - her research ended up being the driving force behind English's latest venture, Lola, a mobile-first consumer travel company that gives users instant access to a team of human travel experts.

"I love travel and have an entire doc listing every trip I've taken," says Chisa. (I'll tick off just a few of her trips: scuba diving in Indonesia, Oktoberfest in Germany, the Galapagos.)

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"For some reason, I never realized I could work on travel and help other people travel."

Oh - wondering about where things stand for Chisa and HBS? As she did at Olin, Chisa's once again taking a sabbatical - something she's personally passionate about.

"It's important to have time to get bored," she explains. "That's when you start seeing what you gravitate towards. Lots of people worry that with space they won't get anything done - I used to. But after three days of Netflix, that gets old, and you start looking for totally new areas to create in."



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