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 Meet Ellen Chisa, the Newest VP
 at Paul English's Lola



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Meet Ellen Chisa, the Newest VP at Paul English's Lola

She's taking a break from HBS to lead product at the travel app startup.



Olivia Vanni
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Ellen Chisa, Lola Travel's new VP of Product.

Ellen Chisa's [resume](#) is a prime example of that "non-linear path" that so many startup players claim to have traveled. She attended Olin College and has done a couple of stints living the corporate life at Bose and Microsoft. But she also took time off from her undergrad education to start her own company - Alight Learning - and has been involved in multiple local startups. Most recently, Chisa took a hiatus from Harvard Business School, where she was getting her MBA, to play an influential role at Paul English's newest venture: [Lola Travel](#). The Boston startup, which [unveiled itself in December](#), is working on a new type of travel app that integrates live travel agents.

Being recently named VP of Product at Lola, Chisa is in an enviable spot. I met up with her to hear all of the details about how she got to where she is today- and, naturally, I fished around for some tidbits about the under-wraps venture.

Olivia Vanni: You've worked at big companies like Microsoft, founded your own company and worked at startups. Why the transitions?

Ellen Chisa: The good thing about going the corporate route is that you're building products that affect a lot of people. Even if you're working on small part of Microsoft Office, you're responsible for a little change that helps a lot of people. It's a true and rewarding experience.

For me, my dad was an entrepreneur and my mom is a professor in Michigan, so I always knew I wanted to try my own thing. And, in general, corporate culture wasn't a fit for me. I like to question everything and I'd ask, "Why do we have to do it this way? How about we try this?" That's not feedback large companies want to hear, especially from a 22-year-old. I also had to be careful not to work outside my space or else I'd step on toes and someone would get offended. My natural work style just didn't work there.

One of the things I love about startups is that there's always work to be done, so you're never taking away work from someone else. You can also have more impact on the day-to-day...With startups, you're more in control and you're able to bring your personality to your role.

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into it anymore. So I said, "I'll just take you to all of their info sessions."

We dated for only a few months and we're still friends. We both ended up at Olin...I got to know the admissions officer really well and I started telling everyone about the curriculum, which was heavy on student feedback. Coming from the IB world, structured and standard across the entire world. I loved the idea of being able to influence my college curriculum

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At HBS, I spent most of the year thinking I'd go into VC - except that I knew deep down that I wanted to start my own company. I didn't want to be one of those people who founded a company just for the sake of it, though. I wanted to do some sort of prep. One of my professors suggested that I find another founder I looked up to and find out how they approach startups.

I was at Kickstarter and there were great founders there. But then Blade was looking for an MBA intern, and I really wanted to work on the project. I applied and got the position. While I was there, Blade stopped funding and decided to focus on Lola. I loved the team, the new focus and I knew that I wanted to stay on. Luckily, HBS has been really gracious about letting me take leave. They're really trying to get more students into the startup realm and they'll help out any way they can...I was just promoted to VP of Product, which is awesome and totally unexpected.

OV: What can you tell us about Lola Travel?

EC: I guess I can say this because it's my personal opinion: One of the things I don't like is the bad stress associated with travel. So if I'm traveling and I arrive at my Airbnb and can't get inside, or my flight connection is canceled, those are unnecessary forms of stress.

There's also the good stress that comes with travel. Like the stress of being in a new place where you don't know the language and don't know where to eat, so you wander into some amazing authentic restaurant that's basically in someone's house and is full of locals. That's the kind of stress you want to experience when you're traveling.

Lola will help reduce bad stress, so you can focus on the experiences that will get you out of your comfort zones and that are rewarding.

OV: If you could go back and give younger you some insight, what would it be?

EC: I actually made this 10-year plan, which I had lost and then recently found. Ironically, I made it right when I was about to leave college and I said I wanted to spend two years at a large company, two at a startup and then get my MBA. I don't know how I came up with that because it didn't feel all that easy living it...But the advice I've been giving a lot recently is that college usually rewards people who do many things, not the people who do one thing really really well. But it's important to focus and excel at one thing. I wish someone had sat me down and told me that.

Image via Ellen Chisa.

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