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The New Product Manager: A Conversation with Ellen Chisa

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What does it mean to be a product manager these days, anyway? It wasn't long ago that it seemed hardly anyone knew what a product manager did (<http://thenextweb.com/insider/2013/10/12/product-managers-mini-ceos/>), let alone what might make a “good” PM or an effective product management team. But those are some of the changes Ellen Chisa (<https://www.ellenchisa.com/>) is seeing in her field.





Chisa is VP of Product at [Lola \(https://www.lolatravel.com/\)](https://www.lolatravel.com/), an on-demand travel service that brings the individualization and improved customer service to the digital age. But she's perhaps most widely known as the subject of that [FirstRound article on the value of the quitter's mindset \(http://firstround.com/review/the-magical-benefits-of-the-quitters-mindset/\)](http://firstround.com/review/the-magical-benefits-of-the-quitters-mindset/).



While many people now understand the approximate purpose of a PM, many people are still confused about the current status of product management as a field, how teams find success, and how future product managers can develop the skills they need to thrive.

The product manager is changing



Product management emerged from the CPG (consumer packaged goods) industry. From there, large enterprises like Microsoft started exploring their own take on the role, one they still refer to “program manager.” Then thanks to Google, the role was finally put into the spotlight, creating demand for PMs in nearly every tech organization. That said, Chisa points out, there are sometimes large regional distinctions between the defining responsibilities and attributes to a PM. “What people think of as a PM in Boston is a little different than San Francisco, which is a little bit different than Seattle.”

Chisa says the PM field has always been a little disparate. “We need to do a better job of being a community and learning from each other.” The career used to be relatively unknown, but more and more companies are hiring PMs, even whole PM teams. This, Chisa says, is great news for the community, which has never seen much in the way of PM-specific events. But that’s changing.

“I think historically, as a discipline, we’ve done a lot of reinventing the wheel,” Chisa says. “And that’s going to happen anytime you have a discipline where you don’t specifically learn how to do it.” But now that there is a larger (and growing) number of PM roles in the world, that’s bound to change. Right?

Maybe, Chisa says. Product managers have had the distinction of being one of the few high-knowledge, high-skill roles in tech that doesn’t have a clear path. Because of this, PMs can come from just about any type of background.



Chisa, herself, came from an electrical and software engineering

Mokriya She says she never really intended to become a product

manager, but then again, she never planned on becoming an engineer

either. “Originally, I did not want to be an engineer at all,” she says.

“It was the only career path I had eliminated.” But, seeing some of the exciting new approaches to teaching engineering gave Chisa the itch to try it herself. Then, while working on a startup she cofounded, she discovered a big blind spot in her knowledge. “I realized there was something I was missing about how to get products shipped. And I knew I had to figure out how other people ship things.”

That led to an interview at Microsoft and a project management role that eventually led to a “program manager” role. After three years at Microsoft, Chisa moved on to a role at Kickstarter, and finally to her current role at Lola.

The anatomy of a great product manager

Now, years after her first foray into product management, Chisa considers herself a bit dated. In fact, when asked what advice she’d to give PMs just starting out in the field, Chisa was quick to point out that the field simply moves too fast, and she’s no longer an entirely reliable source for how to get started as a product manager.

“Because the discipline changes so quickly, I’m almost to the point now where when somebody asks me how they can break into becoming a PM, it’s hard for me to understand, because it’s different



now than when I was doing it,” Chisa says. “I tell them to try and find people who have been doing it only a couple years because their story will be more relevant and they’ll be excited to show someone what they’ve learned.”

There is one thing she recommends to new PMs, though. “Do more projects,” Chisa says. “Show that you can see something through to the end.” One of the most common mistakes new PMs make, Chisa finds, is that many are inexperienced at finishing an entire product. “When you’re doing a class project, if you sell a great vision and you have a great demo, it doesn’t matter if everything falls apart two days later. But in the real world that’s not enough. So someone new will come up with a great idea for a feature or product, but then as soon as you sit down and read through it you can poke holes into it immediately.”

In order to prevent this issue, Chisa recommends practicing with full projects, not just class assignments that don’t have to prove their worth in the real world. It’s also important, she says, to make sure your personality works as a PM. It’s often a very people-oriented job. For people who maybe trend toward being an introvert, like Chisa, that can take a toll. “I need a mix of working on things with people and working on my own, so I try to make sure my days have a mixture of both.”

The other personality trait of a great PM? “You have to really love making things, but you have to be okay with not being the person actually making the thing.” And that’s not an easy balance to strike.



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The PM has to have a passion for making great products, but without any of the glory that comes with it.



The future of product management

Looking ahead at the future of the role, Chisa thinks it's very likely that the Product Manager role will expand in scope, focus, and skill, much like the design field expanded over the last couple decades.

“Designers used to just be graphic designers, and now you have graphic designers who are also interaction designers and write code,” Chisa says. “I think you get the same thing with PMs, you don't just get people who are putting projects together, they also sometimes fill in other gaps in the organization.”

That's especially true that IoT is taking off. Suddenly, PMs need to know a lot about hardware, software, and the interaction between the two.

And as frustrating and inefficient as it can be to constantly reinvent the wheel, those PMs from diverse educational backgrounds and work histories are the perfect personalities to approach this varied, unique role. In fact, Chisa says that, in her experience, a product management team full of different backgrounds is more effective than a more homogenous team.

That shouldn't be too surprising, since we've seen a great deal of research indicating that other kinds of diversity are hugely beneficial for just about any organization (<http://www.mckinsey.com/business->





functions/organization/our-insights/why-diversity-matters). So while

product management is starting to make a distinct name for itself as a

critical role, that doesn't necessarily mean the road to becoming a PM

will (or even should) be straightforward. The future of great product management depends on a diverse group of people thinking complexly and creatively about products.

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About Tricina Elliker

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Tricina Elliker is a regular contributing writer to Mokriya, based in Portland,

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