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Jackie Hu: Launching into Leadership

Jackie Hu woke up to an urgent ping on Slack, “Have you seen the latest dashboard?!” Hu rushed to her computer to find four red alerts flashing. Working from her home office in Los Angeles, Hu poured over the progress of the fourteen different workstreams she was managing to migrate the Nordstromrack.com site onto the Nordstrom.com platform. The move to integrate the two websites was a high-visibility and extremely complex project for the 120-year-old fashion retailer Nordstrom and its off-price subsidiary Nordstrom Rack.¹ “It’s essentially changing the engine of an aircraft mid-flight of a multi-billion dollar e-commerce company,” noted Swarup Acharya, VP of Product for Digital and Hu’s manager.

Hu thought to herself, “We are less than 50 days away from launch, and more than half of the workstreams are behind schedule. How are these issues just now surfacing?” What made it more frustrating was that a couple of the workstreams, including merchandising and customer accounts, seemed like they were turning things around, but now they had turned red.

Four months ago, Hu had arrived home after vacationing in Hawaii when she got a call from her previous manager Alberto Martin: “I’m leaving the company. You should expect senior leaders to contact you about taking on my role.” Prior to the trip, they had discussed the plan to integrate the Nordstrom Rack website and mobile app onto the same platform as Nordstrom (See **Exhibit 1**). She had been looking forward to working on Martin’s team and was taken aback by his departure. Now, unexpectedly in his role, she was fighting fires she could have never imagined.

Hu wondered what to do. Was this a time to advocate for a delay? How would senior leaders respond to that decision given the high visibility of the project? Maybe she needed to rethink how the team operated and revise their approach. Many people Hu had talked to thought it was “crazy” to get the project completed by May. Were the red alerts a sign they were right all along? How would her next move reflect on her as a leader in her first major role?

¹ Off-price retailers rely on the purchase of over-produced, or excess, branded goods at a lower price, enabling retailers to sell to consumers at a discount compared to other stores which purchase an initial run. Source: <https://hbr.org/1985/05/dont-discount-off-price-retailers>

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Jackie Hu

Hu grew up in Silicon Valley. Her parents were long-term employees at Hewlett Packard, and each spent more than 20 years working at the company. She credited both for instilling in her the desire to work hard and go after opportunities:

They both came over from Taiwan at the end of high school. They didn't speak much English, which was tough at first. For example, my mom had to look up 50% of her textbooks in her Chinese-English dictionary. On top of this, they also worked to put themselves through UC Berkeley. My mom worked in the dining hall and mailroom and my dad worked as a waiter in Chinese restaurants. They went on to have really successful careers, which instilled in me the value of hard work, perseverance, and possibility.

This mindset stuck with me. As an example, I decided to try pole vaulting in high school, even though I'm not very athletic. When I saw someone do it, I thought, "I want to try that. I think I can do it" and signed up for the team the next day. It took me one month to get over the lowest height, which takes most people about a week. When I finally got over it, my coach said, "Wow, I've never seen anyone take so long. I thought you were going to quit."

As children of immigrants, Hu and her younger sister sometimes found themselves wanting to fit in. Hu remarked, "Growing up, my parents filled our lunch boxes with pot stickers, peeled fruit, and Asian crackers. Everyone else got Lunchables and Doritos. As we grew older, we realized the amount of effort our parents put into preparing us good food and preserving our culture - we just didn't appreciate it then."

During her time in high school, Hu also developed a vision to be a businesswoman. She developed projects on the weekends for her and her younger sister to complete, which ranged from creating scrapbooks to rearranging furniture. Hu recalled, "I felt so passionately about becoming a businesswoman that I bought a \$20 pinstriped suit from Charlotte Russe² and dressed up as a businesswoman for Halloween."

Hu went to the University of Southern California and graduated with an undergraduate degree in business. While there, she became president of the Business Student Government. After USC, she worked at Apple for five years. She started out as an associate in an 18-month finance rotational program that exposed her to seven different groups. Hu recalled, "the ability to build relationships and ask questions was really important. I had three months in each role and had to get ramped up quickly." During that time, she said, "I realized – and I'm very thankful for it – what I wasn't good at. And that was traditional finance roles."

She then joined a project management organization for Finance that worked on "org readiness," which involved developing change management efforts aimed to improve systems and tools for the 1,400 finance employees at Apple. There, Hu learned that "if you put in all of the time and money to develop these tools, but your employees don't adopt them, then you've wasted a lot of money."

After two years, Hu moved to the Mergers and Acquisitions (M&A) integration group at Apple where she led integration planning and execution of acquired companies across software, hardware, and internet services. Hu decided to apply for the position after a manager that she had worked with on the "org readiness" team moved. "I realized what a great leader she was, and I was missing that when she left. I thought, 'This is someone who has given me great opportunities, who's taught me a lot, and who is fighting for me, for what she believes I'm worth.' I had no idea what acquisition

² A U.S. based clothing retail chain store whose core customers are women in their teens and twenties.

integration was, but when a position opened up to work for her again, I applied.” While in the role, Hu learned about product management roles:

I hadn’t heard of the job before this. I met product managers through the companies that we acquired, and I realized, “I want to do that.” I tried applying, but everyone just wanted to hire me for what I was already doing because I didn’t have product experience. So, after about a year and a half there, I realized, “I know the solution. It’s business school.” And my manager was really supportive.

Hu applied to Harvard Business School (HBS) with the aspiration to expand her learning and pivot into the product management space. On the personal front, she was eager to experience life outside of California. During her time at HBS, Hu remarked, “My experience was first and foremost about the people - amazing classmates who became lifelong friends and professors who changed how I think about the world. It was a blessing to have two years to reflect on what’s important to me and the type of person and leader I want to be. I got to explore new industries, see what it’s like to start your own company, intern at a start-up, and travel to countries I never would’ve imagined visiting. I’m grateful for the opportunity to try new things and dream big.”

After HBS, Hu worked as a Senior Product Manager at Wayfair for one year where she worked with Emily Levada, director of product management:

When I think of what good leadership looks like and what I try to emulate at Nordstrom, I think about Emily’s leadership, on the little things as well as the big things. She would schedule one-on-ones and protect that time, no matter how busy she was. She scheduled time every two weeks to talk about development. And it would be focused on that, not about your work, but let’s talk about your career and where you want to go.

And then she did these big things. She led a 100 person-plus organization of product managers, engineers, analysts, and user experience (UX). The organization before she got there had some culture issues. And she brought this whole mentality of how to create a psychologically safe organization.

Looking for an opportunity to move back to California, Hu leveraged her experiences from HBS and Wayfair and joined Nordstrom Rack in October 2018 as a senior product manager involved in cart, check-out, and order confirmation processes.

Nordstrom Rack

Founded in 1973, Nordstrom Rack is an off-price division of the Seattle-based fashion retailer Nordstrom that was founded 72 years earlier. As the parent company, Nordstrom is a publicly traded company that serves customers across its 350 Nordstrom, Nordstrom Local,³ and Nordstrom Rack locations and digitally through Nordstrom and Rack apps and websites.

In 2011, Nordstrom acquired HauteLook to enable Nordstrom to participate in the fast-growing private sale marketplace and provide a platform to increase innovation and speed.⁴ HauteLook, based in Los Angeles, was an online private sale channel that offered limited time flash sale events of fashion and lifestyle brands. In May 2014, HauteLook launched nordstromrack.com, an e-commerce site and mobile app built on the same platform as the HauteLook site that allowed customers to shop

³ Nordstrom Local is a service hub where customers can access Nordstrom services in central locations. Source: <https://press.nordstrom.com/gallery/16766/grid>

⁴ “Nordstrom to Acquire HauteLook,” Nordstrom Press Release (Seattle, WA, February 17, 2011), <https://press.nordstrom.com/news-releases/news-release-details/nordstrom-acquire-hautelook>

Nordstrom Rack merchandise alongside HauteLook flash sales events.⁵ In short, the acquisition of HauteLook created the foundation of what would become the e-commerce division of Nordstrom Rack, employing a couple hundred employees in Los Angeles and operating in separate offices from the Nordstrom headquarters in Seattle.

When Hu joined Nordstrom Rack in 2018, she enjoyed the scrappy mentality of the small product management team. Throughout her first few months on the job, the business grew quickly with frequent changes in leadership. Six months into her role, five senior people left the company including her direct manager, peer, and director. As Aneesa Memon, a peer of Hu at the time, recalled, “Whenever there was a change in leadership, people would wonder, ‘Where does this leave us?’ People were trying to figure out where they fit in and where they could grow.” Amidst these uncertainties, Hu saw opportunities, “Because of the sudden gap in the product management space, there was a lot of room for growth. Even though I did not actually have the leadership title, this was a moment for me to lean in.”

One specific opportunity arose in September 2019, when Nordstrom Rack typically kicked off its annual planning process. The annual planning laid out a vision for the upcoming year that aligned the team around a product roadmap and clarified the resources needed to execute on the vision. Hu realized that her team needed someone to coordinate the planning efforts, and no one had stepped up to lead the effort, so without any prompting from anyone, she decided to take a leap.

I remember thinking, ‘Okay, I’ve done this before for just the purchase experience. This is similar, but I cannot do this alone. I need to coordinate the product roadmap across the other areas as well.’ I sat at my kitchen table in the early mornings before my puppy woke up to map out the people I would need to get on board and a calendar for the planning process. I would work backwards and say, ‘If we want to deliver a roadmap by early December for feedback, what does that mean?’ With that, I figured we would need to kick off with an off-site gathering in October.

Prior to the October off-site, Hu reached out to leaders not only in product management, but also in analytics, user experience, and other business areas to ensure alignment on the high-level business goals. These individuals also had insight into and data on customer pain points, site performance, and trends in the industry, so she asked these individuals to present at the off-site. In the planning process, she recalled:

I knew I didn’t have the formal authority to make these asks, but I remember a VP from Seattle had discussed the importance of roadmaps, so I leveraged that to tell folks, “Our leaders in Seattle are going to need this. We’re going to need to put it all together. I’m here to help and facilitate.” I also partnered with the manager of user experience and the manager of analytics to do it as they had more formal authority.

I remember thinking, “I don’t have all of the answers.” So, I went to the user experience team and said, “Hey, you have done great work to identify customer pain points. I’d love for us to be able to educate our broader team about these in an off-site as we kick off this planning process. Could you pull something together?” And so, we partnered on that. I also knew we needed a view of industry trends so I asked a senior product manager on the team, “Could you do some research and pull together a view of the top industry trends in technology and commerce that we should consider in planning?”

⁵ “Nordstrom Rack Launches An Integrated Online And Mobile Shopping Site,” Nordstrom Press Release (Seattle, WA, May 5, 2014), <https://press.nordstrom.com/news-releases/news-release-details/nordstrom-rack-launches-integrated-online-and-mobile-shopping>

Hu organized the off-site in October 2019 with 30 people, including individuals from product management, analytics, user experience, and business operations. “Instead of meeting at the office, we brought people to our photo studio where we shoot product images for the website. We ran through the day’s agenda, a mix of product exercises, read-outs, and team bonding activities. We also created and shared a template that everyone would need to fill out afterwards. Following the off-site, Hu sent a draft of the proposal to Seattle-based leaders in December 2019.

From Peer to Manager

Amid the annual planning in November 2019, Hu was formally promoted to take on the role of Manager of Product Management (see **Exhibit 2** for Hu’s career progression). Alberto Martin, Director of Product Management at the time, was part of the interview process and remembered Hu:

The thing that most stood out to me was her positive energy. I think that’s a key aspect when it comes to managing people. Especially in product, it can be a tough, very polarizing job function, where you have different people pulling you in different directions with different goals and objectives. She did not have as much experience with some of the product fundamentals, but I thought we needed to give this person a shot because I knew she would be able to learn these skills quickly.

Hu’s quick promotion process meant that in the original team of eight people in product, three of her peers would become her direct reports. In the transition from peer to manager, Hu was concerned about balancing the relationship that she had developed with these individuals and establishing credibility in her new role. Hu wanted to be intentional in how she approached the role and the people on her team. She created a meeting agenda to prepare for the first one-on-one meetings she would have with her former peers, now her direct reports (See **Exhibit 3** for a document Hu used to prepare for her initial meetings with direct reports).

I remember asking a peer who was the head of analytics, “Should my first one-on-ones be over coffee or in a small meeting room? What should I ask them about? What are my expectations? Should I share my management style?” I also showed him this 20-page deck I created about my management style because my manager at Wayfair had one. And he advised, “You should share expectations, but not all at once. Really focus on listening, Jackie. Understand what’s going on in their space. Ask them what they enjoy. If they have any concerns, you should really focus on listening. You have a tendency to dominate a conversation. So, you might have to consciously pull back a little.”

When recalling her first one-on-ones, Hu remembered how nervous she was for those meetings:

It felt like my heart was beating out of my chest, and I was thinking, ‘Keep it together, I can do this, totally got this. This is normal. People go and do one-on-ones all the time. Don’t worry, you’ve got your script.’

Aneesa Memon, one of Hu’s direct reports who was formerly a peer, noted about their first gathering:

Jackie at our first meeting acknowledged that she was going from a peer to a manager role, and then she did a lot of due diligence in just listening to what my goals were in my career, what I was looking for, and what spaces I’d like to be in. She asked me, “What are the problems you’re willing to fall in love with,” “what do you really like to do,” and “what are you skilled at?” She helped me reframe where I wanted to be. I figured she was probably doing the same for herself.

As she moved forward, Hu established a weekly cadence of check-ins to ask her direct reports four questions: 1) How are you feeling this week? (1= low to 5 = high) 2) What are you working on this

week? 3) What are your blockers or concerns? 4) Is there anything you want to talk about? Kezia Lange, one of Hu's direct reports noted:

In one of our conversations, it was clear I just had a lot of personal trouble saying no. If someone came to ask me for help, instead of pointing them in a new direction, I would stop my day and help them with things. When I went to Jackie with this issue, she said, 'Let's make a slide that has several areas that you're working on. Can you put in the percentage time that you're spending on those things? And then on a different slide, adjust the percentages to what you want to be working on tomorrow?' Doing that exercise brought a lot of clarity to what I needed focus on, and it made a big difference for me.

Amid these changes, Hu was preparing to hold annual performance reviews for her three direct reports. Every January, Nordstrom Rack conducted annual performance reviews. Hu noted, "In a perfect world, you'd hire people, you'd observe their performance for a year, and then you'd write their performance review. But the real world doesn't quite work that way." Part of the challenge for Hu was giving unbiased feedback as a manager when she had 10 months of experience working as peers and only two months of experience working as their manager. Hu wondered, "How do I write these reviews? How much do I include based on my observation as a manager or as a peer?"

As she gathered data for the review process, Hu discovered that one team member was struggling. He was routinely late on deadlines and his behavior was negatively impacting the morale of those on the team. During a team meeting, he disagreed with a proposed plan for the week without providing justification and took credit for joint work that involved other team members. She realized that her experience with him was not an isolated incident. Hu remembered the stress of preparing for her difficult conversations with the team member, "I woke up in a sweat at 3 AM worried about how I would approach the conversations. The stakes seemed very high for him and me. The fact that we had been peers just a few months ago made it all the more difficult."

Gaining Visibility as a Leader

As Hu was preparing performance reviews for her direct reports, she was also receiving reviews from her managers about her performance. As a product manager, Hu worked with business stakeholders to understand their business goals, clarify and translate any problems associated with those goals, and coordinate with engineers and UX to solve any issues. As Acharya, put it:

The product manager role is very tricky. A big part requires figuring out what the problem actually is, and sometimes that is not what the business unit thinks it is. Moreover, product managers are constantly getting requests for things to be done. Product managers must be good at saying no, because they often don't have resources for everything that comes their way. Often, business stakeholders want something yesterday, and it's always a little rough and tumble.

In observing Hu navigate these responsibilities, Acharya noted:

One of Jackie's superpowers is that she can cut through the noise to identify the root cause of problems. The other superpower is that Jackie has a velvet hammer. She has the ability to deliver a 'no' in a way that the person getting the 'no' is still smiling and nodding, and that's an amazing skill.

Martin, who had interviewed Hu for her promotion and became Hu's direct supervisor, noted:

In her performance reviews, I encouraged her to work on two things: the first was to continue working on strategic thinking. For example, we worked on connecting the dots between what we're doing with their impact on profits and losses. The other was to be a little bit more outspoken in

meetings. When you ask her, she always had a good opinion, but she never interrupts when she doesn't need to. So, I encouraged her to be more vocal in meetings.

As she worked on these skills, Hu got the attention of VPs at the company. Once a month, Nordstrom conducted a company-wide technology review meeting to align the organization around ongoing initiatives. Attendance was often over 500 people with C-level officers including the CTO and COO present. Hu, alongside other product managers, took the opportunity to present at these review meetings to share their progress on various projects. As Acharya remarked, "It's not easy because you get asked tough questions, and you have to be quick on your feet to give a thoughtful answer. I've seen Jackie go through it, and she's handled that room with poise and a sense of knowledge of her space."

Hu not only prepared herself for these meetings, but she also coached those on her team. As Holland Peterson, one of her direct reports noted:

Jackie does a really good job with listening. She has nailed making sure we're prepared for the monthly product review meetings. I think she listens carefully to what questions are getting asked for other presentations, and then she will coach us by saying, "We need to focus on this hypothesis since that's what's getting asked lately. Let's make sure we're getting that detail in the presentation."

Unbeknownst to Hu, her performance in these review sessions played an important role in her next career opportunity.

Project Rocket

In the last quarter of 2020, Martin and leaders of Nordstromrack.com set in motion a plan to integrate the nordstromrack.com and nordstrom.com websites onto a shared technology platform. Customers expected a seamless transition from the website to the store, but the seamless experience was difficult to implement with the technology stack in two different places.

The migration to one stack, internally called Project Rocket, kicked off in December 2020. Hu explained, "It's not just a migration of a website – that's just the tip of the iceberg. It's everything that is underneath the surface, including connecting the content of the site to our inventory, supply chain, and finance systems on the backend." Megan Kiester, Senior Vice President of Technology, remarked:

This project is ambitious. Because the Nordstrom Rack digital business grew out of HauteLook, the Nordstrom Rack and Nordstrom e-commerce businesses had grown independently and each business to some extent had a separate set of processes associated with them. We knew that by collapsing the tech platforms, it would require us to make changes across those business processes. This project involved bringing together the product management and technology teams between Nordstrom Rack and Nordstrom. It would've been ambitious just from a tech perspective but adding in the organizational change components takes it to another level.

The migration was not as simple as "copying and pasting" the existing Nordstrom platform for Nordstrom Rack as the sites had different policies and promotions to serve different customers. For example, Nordstrom offers free shipping and returns, whereas Nordstrom Rack offers free shipping for purchases over \$89 and returns within 45 days. In addition, Nordstrom Rack has daily flash events – curated items sold limited in quantities – as well as Final Sale products. As a result, many of these features unique to Nordstrom Rack needed to be built onto the new platform. In addition to these changes, the two entities had different ways of measuring website traffic and conversion metrics; streamlining the new platform meant coming to agreement on key metrics and how best to report them.

Another central challenge for the project was the tight timeframe for completion. The website needed to be launched by May 10, 2021, a critical timeframe because Nordstrom had an Anniversary

Sale event in July. As Acharya described it, “The Anniversary Sale has a long tradition at Nordstrom. We have an extremely loyal customer base. Once Anniversary starts, traffic on our site increases dramatically, and we devote our full attention to Anniversary. The goal was to start and end the migration before the Anniversary Sale. We don’t want to update the stack in case something goes wrong.” Furthermore, as Olga Ehrhardt, Senior Principal Technical Product Manager at Nordstrom put it, “Memorial Day weekend was going to be critical for Nordstrom Rack, because we run these promotions that are very specific to Memorial Day. It was critical to be on a technology stack so we could support that.”

The launch would roll out in waves, with the target to move 1% of the traffic on the site by May 10 and then scaling to 100% by June 7, 2021. Ehrhardt noted that, “Ideally, we get as much as we can done by early June, make it through Anniversary, and then celebrate and come, September, October, we can do fast follow-ups that weren’t critical to the rollout. Delaying would mean that the momentum would get lost.” Acharya added, “Not launching before Anniversary would realistically mean that the project would get delayed by a year because after Anniversary is preparation for holiday events.” To make these deadlines before Anniversary, senior leaders agreed to make Project Rocket a priority for the first half of 2021.

Leading the Launch

In January 2021, after having worked with Martin for ten months, Hu received a call from him notifying her that he was leaving the company. As Hu recalled, “I was shocked by the news. We had just kicked off Project Rocket a month earlier.” A few days later, Hu was on the phone with Acharya, who stepped in to work with the Product Management team in Martin’s absence. Acharya told Hu, “We need somebody to lead Project Rocket with Alberto moving on. You are in the best position to do it. We could bring somebody from the outside, but a lot of it is to understand the Rack business and nobody knows that as well as you do.” A week after that conversation, Hu agreed and was officially promoted to fill Martin’s role as the Product Lead for Project Rocket. Ehrhardt noted, “Jackie was thrown in the fire with ambitious timelines to meet.”

In her new role, Hu was set to lead an integration team, that included her as the lead on the Nordstrom Rack side and Ehrhardt and two technical managers on the Nordstrom side (see **Exhibit 4**). The team reported to senior leaders in Seattle and New York (Megan Kiester and Swarup Acharya). This integration team also oversaw the progress of fourteen different workstreams that needed to come together (e.g., merchandising, change management, and promotions; see **Exhibit 5** for the full list of workstreams). Each workstream had about 20 to 30 core individuals who focused on a complex set of issues requiring coordination with engineering teams. Hu noted, “This was my first time working with so many leaders and teams in Seattle. And it was the first time many teams from Nordstromrack.com had exposure to the broader organization. A successful launch would mean that we were able to come together and win as one platform and one team.”

The integration team as well as each workstream operated as geographically distributed teams. In particular, Nordstrom Rack employees based in Los Angeles coordinated with multiple individuals on the Nordstrom side based in Seattle to build the new nordstromrack.com experience together. Hu and her integration team would meet with workstream leads to discuss any misalignments, issues, or questions that surfaced from these meetings. Even where employees were previously co-located, they had to adapt to the remote work environment precipitated by the COVID pandemic. As Ehrhardt noted, “Projects like this are much easier when you see people in person because you pick up on body language and you understand what sticks with them and how to influence them. Working remotely, you don’t have the luxury of impromptu one-on-one conversations. Sometimes the remote meetings are intense, but when it’s over, people just click out of the meeting; there is no space to decompress and

no easy avenue to connect about what just happened.” An executive highlighted that “projects with this amount of complexity really expose the strengths and weaknesses of their leaders.”

Becoming product lead of Project Rocket meant frequently meeting with her team and key stakeholders. Hu joined weekly integration team meetings, which had launched in mid-December under Martin’s leadership. During those meetings, Ehrhardt noted that “Jackie knew the business side of Nordstrom Rack very well, but she wasn’t aware of delivering on the platform and all the details. My technical engineering partner who owned the platform and I helped her get up to speed.” In addition to those meetings, Hu had regular meetings with leadership and joined Nordstrom Rack executive meetings, including their monthly offsites, to discuss progress and updates. On top of these meetings, Hu aimed to meet with every workstream lead. Hu added:

At the time, I was overwhelmed by what I didn’t know. I could barely articulate what we were doing and why it was important, so I went on a mission to go find out. I set up time with people, talked to them and tried to really understand. I figured, if I can build the story and it makes sense to me, then I’ll be able to explain it to anyone.

As Hu was learning about Project Rocket, she also had to get buy-in from people across the different workstreams. During meetings with individual workstream leads, Hu tried to understand what they were working on and their overall scope. A lot of people asked, “What does this practically mean for my team and me?” Hu recalled:

When we announced Project Rocket, we simply said, ‘We’re going to do it.’ But we hadn’t told anyone what exactly we were going to do. If we were going to do something that could change employees’ day-to-day, then it’s important to help them answer the questions “But what am I going to see? What’s actually going to happen?” None of the details had really been articulated.

My approach was, ‘I’ll let the workstream leads tell me what’s going to happen in their workstream because they’re the experts.’ I would let the workstream lead for checkout tell me what Project Rocket would mean for the future Nordstrom Rack checkout experience, what that means for the existing systems and tools in place, and what they think is feasible. And what I learned in those conversations was that people were still wrapping their minds around the idea of a migration. We didn’t have clear answers about what it would take to launch the new site. We needed to build it together.

Getting people on board required understanding areas of reluctance and resistance. Hu said, “I realized that the why was actually very clear, but the when was much less obvious. Some people said it had to be done in the Spring, but many more people asked, “Are we doing this too quickly?” I heard a lot of doubt amongst several teams, from people that I trusted a lot, too. People would say, “There’s no way May is possible.” Additionally, Ehrhardt noted that doubts came in different forms:

There are the ones that are very blunt, who say, “This is not going to happen.” I actually like those because it’s obvious where they are, and then you can have a productive conversation. Then, there are people who say, “Yeah, this is great. We could totally do this... BUT.” The third type is the trickiest, where they agree to something, and we would seem aligned, but to the team and to the leadership, they would say something else. Then, it will cascade down to us through my manager or through another leader. Then, I’m thinking, “Oh, no—they were positive at the stand up so why are they communicating to leadership something else?” Those are the ones that I have to really understand.”

Some of the push back stemmed from the uncertainty employees felt around what the integration would mean for their work and the culture of Nordstrom Rack. Kiester added, “the Nordstrom Rack teams came from more of a startup-type culture and felt really connected to each other, to the leadership, and to the brand. This type of integration work led people to question whether they would have to assimilate to a different culture or what would happen to the identity of the brand.”

Part of the challenge was understanding the scope of decisions and roadblocks on the horizon. Acharya added, “Every time you open the hood, you uncover stuff that would require you to open three more hoods. It is like uncovering a rat hole.” As one example, Hu described the process of integrating shipping policies onto the new platform.

Nordstrom Rack was onboarding onto a platform that doesn’t have the same policies. Nordstrom is all about customer service so it’s always free shipping and free returns. In contrast, Nordstrom Rack is an off-price business, so we charge for shipping. In building those features onto the new platform, we found out we had a shipping surcharge for heavy items. How do we determine what’s heavy? Where does that information come from? How did we land on this number? What would happen if we didn’t charge it? These are nuanced questions for just one area that was a subset of a workstream.

As the project progressed, Hu recalled, “My calendar was double- and triple-booked. I wanted to meet with each of the workstream leads, but I only got to about half of them.” As the number of meetings multiplied, Memon noted, “Jackie is accommodating, but she has to focus on being either an individual contributor or manager. She does both really well but gets saddled with doing both in times of transition.” Kiester added:

Jackie tends to over-prepare. I think it’s the right instinct to go and meet with all of the work streams at the same level of detail. But the reality is it’s probably more important to get a handle on the overall view in that role than it is to get a very detailed handle on each work stream. Because she is so bright and so quick in terms of her ability to learn and synthesize information, she’s able to keep a hold of a lot of those details in her head. But one of the things that I have wondered is when will she get to the point where she can’t keep track of all of the details anymore, and then what will happen? What kind of coping strategies will she develop to deal with the fact that she can’t have a handle on everything that her team is doing all the time?

To develop a bigger picture of the progress across the workstreams, Hu and Ehrhardt created a progress dashboard that monitored how each of the fourteen workstreams were progressing. Hu recalled, “We color-coded progress based on a ‘green, yellow, red’ system. If you are on track with the plan, then you’re green. If you have a plan, but you’re behind, you’re yellow. If you don’t have a plan and you don’t know how to get there, you’re red. When we initially released the dashboard, ten of the fourteen workstreams were green, four were yellow, and none were red.” In devising this system, each workstream lead had to determine which functions within each workstream were critical for the May launch, and which functions could be deployed at a later date.

Red Alerts

By March 26, 2021, Hu and her team received a progress report of how the workstreams were doing: nine of the fourteen workstreams were yellow or red (see **Exhibit 6**). Some of the workstreams had been yellow or green just the prior week. A key challenge in managing an on-time delivery of a large-scale project involves counteracting the forces that obscure the true status of progress. Acharya noted that “people didn’t want to deliver bad news, and hoped they could make it work.” Workstreams gave optimistic status updates until, as Kiester noted, “with two months left, people can’t hide anything anymore. You lose your ‘fudge factor’ and start to realize, ‘Oh, actually the math doesn’t work.’” Ehrhardt added:

At the stand-up meetings, everything went great. Things looked good. But then, we started getting messages like, ‘Oh no, we are slipping,’ or ‘We cannot work through the weekend.’ We would respond, ‘But, it sounds like you are missing the date, and that you’re at risk. Have you dug deeper into your risks?’ Even the leaders would say, “No, no, we’re feeling green.” I would respond, ‘But feeling green is not a plan!’

Some of the reds were not surprising. For example, the change management workstream had been red throughout much of the project. Change management involved the way work would get done in the future. It addressed questions such as, who would be responsible for key roles? How would work proceed? Which teams would own what aspects of the website? Hu noted, "Customers are used to websites changing, but what was actually harder to implement was how employee roles and processes were changing as well. We had a lot of trouble with getting people on board with these changes that would affect their day-to-day, and there was a lack of clarity into how we should tackle it." Additionally, because leadership for this workstream changed a couple times, there was a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, and a lack of structure for how to approach the change management strategy.

Another particularly surprising challenge came from the item set-up and merchandising workstreams. These workstreams entailed structuring processes from Nordstrom Rack buying items from clothing brands to publishing them on the website. Item set-up involves the retail process of "enriching the item" and ensuring that the product and its images are visible to customers on the website, and Nordstrom and Nordstrom Rack had very distinct processes for item set-up. Hu recalled, "We need products on our website so people can actually buy them. Without it, we can't run our business."

Hu reflected that part of the surprise may be a function of her leadership style, "I tend to trust. That's my style and that's the leadership style I've grown up with as well. You surround yourself with people who are experts, hire people who are smarter than you. You trust them to do their jobs, and you try to guide them and motivate them..." *"Owner at heart"* is one of the pillars at Nordstrom. It's something that we take to heart, but I think people's ideas of what that means and how that plays out were different."

Acharya noted, "I told Jackie, you need to double click on the constraints a bit more. Sometimes engineers might say something will take three months, and you know that's an optimistic assessment. Part of being effective at the product management role is finding the balance between taking what your teams say at face value, but also having a healthy level of skepticism. You have to 'trust but verify.'"

Escalating Tensions

These red alerts led to daily leadership escalations that resulted in team-wide, impromptu meetings. Hu added, "At that point, leaders started getting really invested and asking really challenging questions, and I couldn't answer all of them. If I knew something was going poorly, I would have raised it to them and asked them for help."

As the May deadline approached, tensions were running high. Hu recalled, "I felt constantly behind. I was trying to figure out what I needed to take off people's plate, put on people's plate, shift teams around. I remember at one of these daily meetings, I blew up at our director of testing, who was leading the session. I remember interrupting him, "There are all of these important issues. When are we going to talk about the status of those? Let's go into them!" He went with it calmly and said, "Okay, we can talk about those first. I was going to talk about these ones but if you're really concerned, let's discuss those now." I realized in feeling the anxiety, I just burst out and took over someone's meeting to talk about what I was worried about, when he was going to get to it. He had a process, and I totally steamrolled over it."

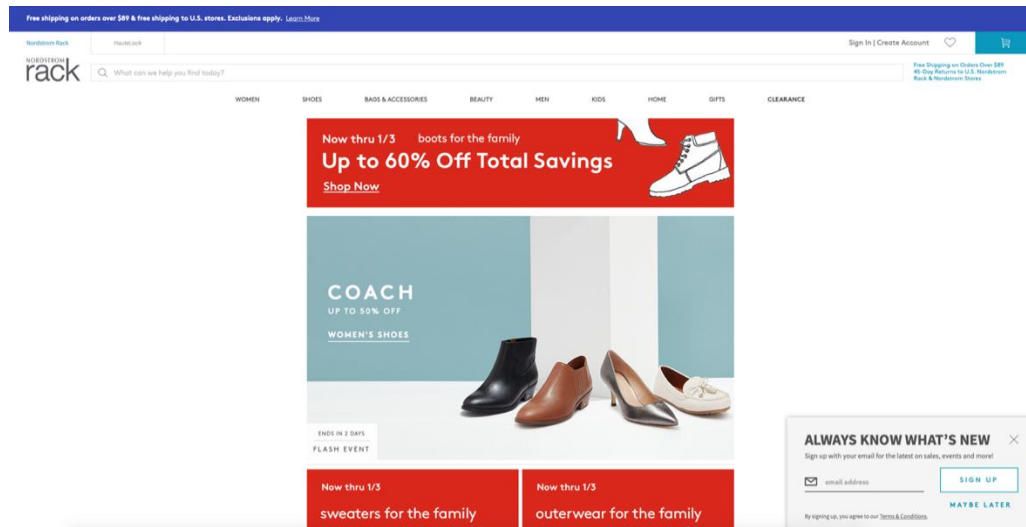
One other concern for Hu was the ever-growing list of "fast follows." As the various workstreams laid out their plans for the integration, they categorized features as "must haves" which needed to be done by the May launch date, "fast follows" which needed to be done before Fall sales in September, and "nice to haves" which could be done later in the Fall or not at all. As the workstreams prioritized

their plans, the list of follow-ups was rapidly escalating, and Hu wondered if that signaled an even more important concern. Lange, one of Hu's direct reports who worked on building the Flash events feature, noted:

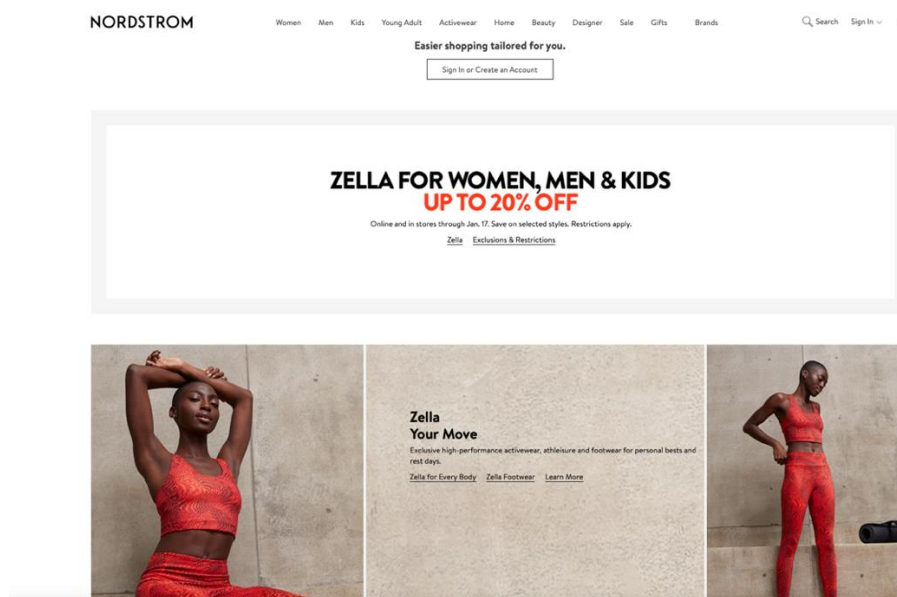
We were getting close to launch, and engineering was coming back to us saying, 'We don't have the capacity to do all of these things you're requesting.' These were stressful conversations with a lot at stake. We were on a very tight timeline, and a lot of things were being decided as fast follows.

As the deadline loomed closer, Hu questioned what she and her team should do. With less than two months remaining, sticking with the May deadline might mean they would miss the target or worse, launch a site with preventable errors. Either case would be a loss of morale for those rushing to meet the deadline. An error-filled launch could also influence how senior leaders and cross-functional partners perceive Hu's capabilities on her first big project. On the other hand, deciding to delay meant that they would miss a critical opportunity to meet customers' expectations for more seamless online and in-person shopping experiences leading up to the Memorial weekend sale and the Anniversary Sale event. Additionally, waiting would mean a loss in momentum on the project. Realistically, it would be difficult to make a major push on this initiative between the Anniversary sale and the holiday season around the corner. As a result, delaying could mean that the project was put on hold for at least another year as consumers were demanding more seamless web-to-store shopping experiences. Hu decided she needed to walk her golden retriever Waffles outside to make sense of these options.

Exhibit 1 Comparison of Nordstrom Rack and Nordstrom Webpages for Desktop and Mobile
Nordstromrack.com on Desktop in January 2021



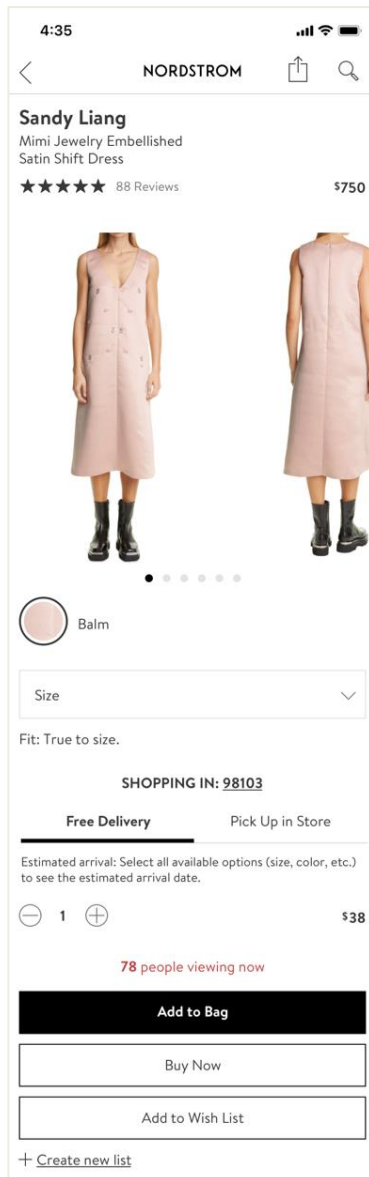
Nordstrom.com on Desktop in January 2021



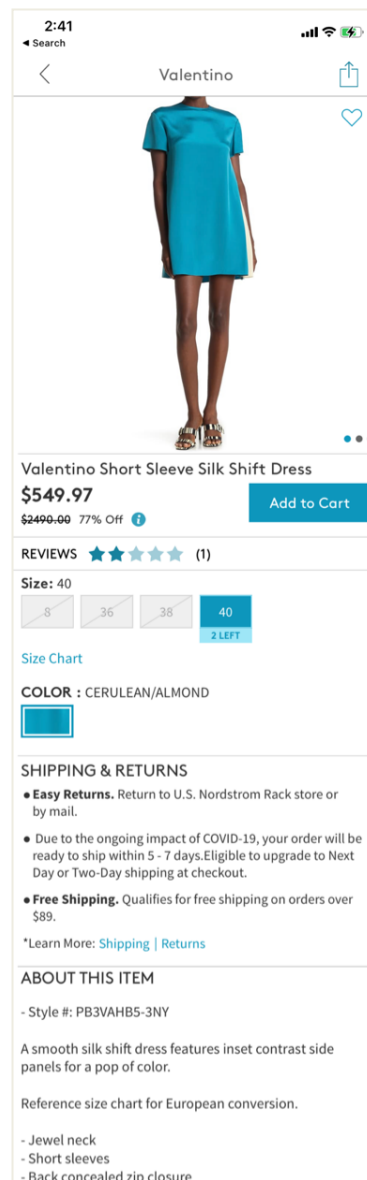
Source for top image: Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/*/nordstromrack.com, accessed May 13, 2022.

Source for bottom image: Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/*/https://www.nordstrom.com, accessed May 13, 2022.

Nordstrom.com on Mobile



Nordstromrack.com on Mobile



On the left is the Nordstrom iOS app vs. Nordstrom Rack iOS app on the right. While core elements are the same, there are some notable differences, including different shipping, returns policies, and saving features (e.g., Nordstrom had a Wish List feature, whereas Nordstrom Rack had Favorites).

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 2 Jackie Hu's Professional Roles and Education**PROFESSIONAL ROLES****Nordstrom***Senior Manager, Product Management**January 2021- Present*

- Lead a team with 4 direct reports responsible for brand differentiation and events across Nordstrom.com, Nordstromrack.com, and Nordstrom.ca.
- Lead the integration of Nordstromrack.com onto the Nordstrom.com platform and supporting the sunset of the HauteLook brand, website, and apps.

*Manager, Product Management, Nordstromrack.com | HauteLook**November 2019-January 2021*

- Led a team with 3 product managers who owned key parts of the Nordstromrack.com and HauteLook.com customer shopping journey including product detail page and product reviews, cart and checkout experience, shipping and delivery offerings, as well as customer activation and retention initiatives.

*Senior Product Manager, Nordstromrack.com | HauteLook**October 2018- November 2019*

- Drove the product vision and roadmap for the purchase experience on Nordstromrack.com and HauteLook.com, overseeing the cart, checkout, and order confirmation pages.

Wayfair*Senior Product Manager**July 2017-August 2018*

- Drove product for Wayfair's loyalty, consumer financing, and gift card programs across all brands, geographies, and platforms.

Apple*M&A Integration Lead**April 2014-August 2015*

- Led integration planning and execution for acquired companies across software, hardware, and internet services.

*Project Manager**April 2012-April 2013*

- Managed portfolio of global finance projects. Developed and implemented change management strategies that maximized employee adoption of system and process changes. Facilitated over 20 successful projects from ideation through launch.

*Finance Associate**September 2010-April 2012*

- Developed a corporate finance skill set through competitive rotation program.

EDUCATION**Harvard Business School***M.B.A**2015-2017***University of Southern California***B.S. Business Administration, Architecture Minor**2006-2010*

Source: Jackie Hu, LinkedIn profile, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jacquelynhu/>, accessed June 2022.

Exhibit 3 Meeting Agenda

Information I want to share:

- This is a transition from peer to manager and it might get uncomfortable but, I think if we work together, it'll be a successful one

Management style:

- While I haven't managed anyone before at Nordstrom, I managed briefly at Wayfair. That said, every company and team is different.
- A little about me and my management style:
 - I care about our team (product and Buy), building cool things that customers love, and smart business decisions.
 - Ownership - I believe in Geevy's wide boulevards analogy.⁶
 - Development - I will work as hard as you in your own development. I will set up recurring meetings where we will set concrete development goals. Where I can, I will provide proactive, forward-looking coaching. In areas outside my expertise, I'll connect you with others who can help.

Housekeeping & expectations:

- My phone number is [REDACTED], don't hesitate to call or text at any time.
- Slack is a good way to get my attention, but text if something's urgent. I'm often sharing my screen and don't pull up Slack notifications during meetings.
- Please alert me to any vacations or time off by adding a "free" meeting to my calendar, in addition to requesting that time off in Workday
- Communication - I expect you to keep me up-to-date on your KPIs and your work. I don't care about format or style, just that there is a lot of it.
- Meetings:
 - **One-on-ones** - I will have a 30-minute one-on-ones with you each week.
 - **Development meetings** - I will schedule separate development meetings once a month.
 - **Buy team meetings** - We have a recurring team meetings with the Buy PMs.

Other things to note:

- I will be working on re-prioritizing and transitioning my IC responsibilities.

Questions I want to ask:

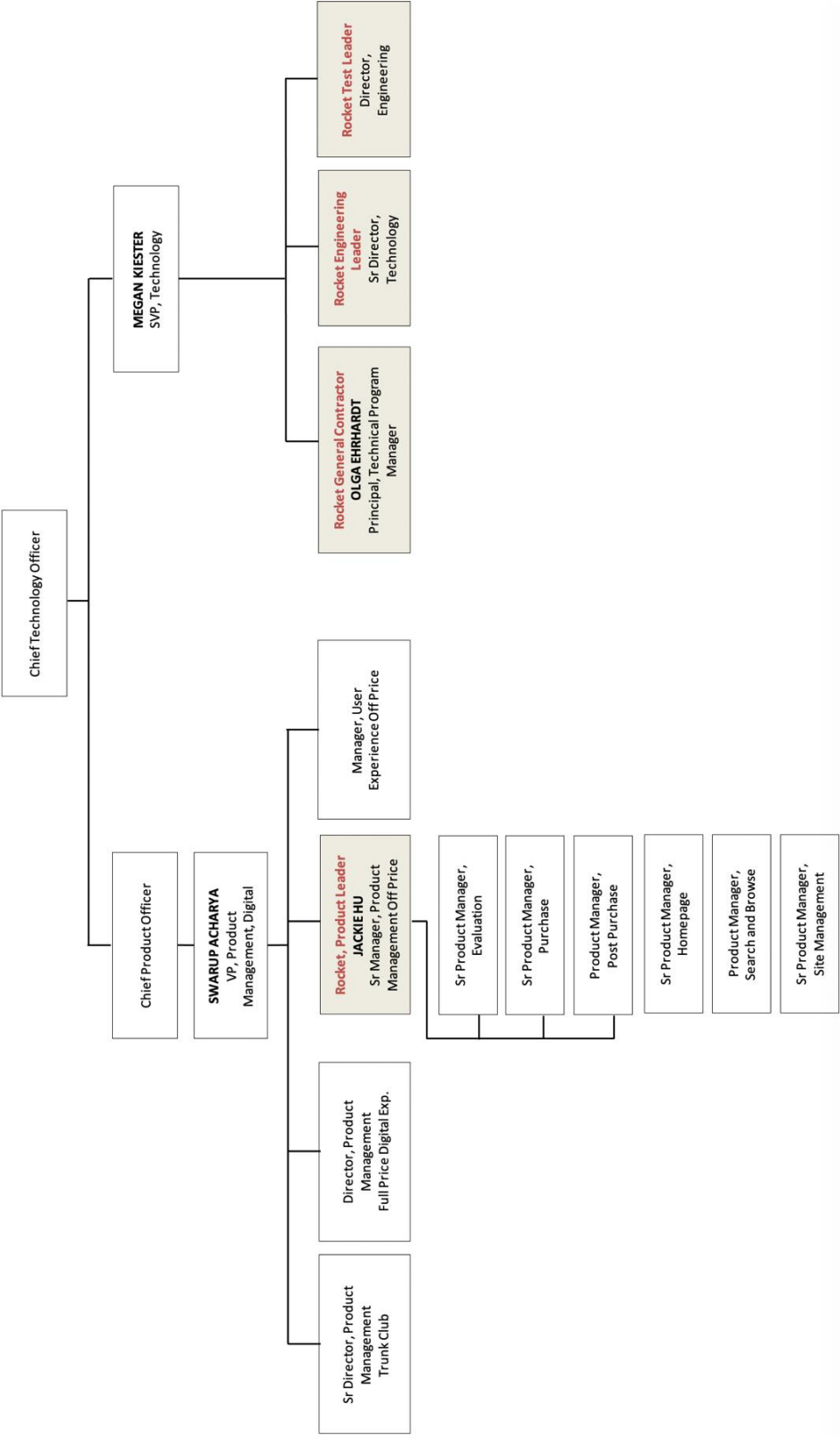
- What do you enjoy working on? Where are you today, and where do you want to be?
- Do you have any concerns with me being your manager?
- Any current challenges you'd like to surface or share?

THIS SHOULD BE THE BULK OF THE TIME · FOCUS ON LISTENING!

Source: Jackie Hu

⁶ Nordstrom Rack's President Thomas Geevy shared with employees his philosophy that leading empowered, effective, and engaged teams entails giving employees a lot of autonomy (wide boulevards) and setting clear guidelines (high curbs).

Exhibit 4 Organizational Chart



In February 2021, Jackie Hu became the leader of Project Rocket on the Nordstrom Rack side and managed the project with co-leaders on the Nordstrom side, including Olga Ehrhardt (General Contractor) and two engineering leads. This view was assembled to highlight the Project Rocket core team and supporting leadership. It does not show the full organization reporting into the CTO, CPO, SVP Technology, VP Product, or into their reports.

Source: Company documents

Exhibit 5 Workstream Descriptions**Descriptions of Fourteen Workstreams**

| Workstream | Description |
|-------------------|---|
| Item Set Up | The Item Setup workstream is responsible for getting items ready for sale on the website. This includes item attributes, image assets, item enrichment, publishing, and selling rules (where the item can be sold). |
| Merchandising | The Merchandising workstream is responsible for buying processes, including the creation of purchase orders, replenishment processes, and intra-network deployment. |
| Supply Chain | This Supply Chain workstream is responsible for working with suppliers, fulfillment, distribution, and stores to get items to customers. Scope includes warehouse management, delivery date estimates, shipping, and returns. Nordstromrack.com had a different shipping (Free Shipping over \$89) and returns policy (45-day returns, unless items are Final Sale) than Nordstrom.com, which offers free shipping and free returns. |
| Promotions | The Promotions workstream is responsible for setting up and managing promotions. As an off-price business, Nordstromrack.com has unique promotions that do not exist on Nordstrom.com, including: Flash events (15-20 limited time events launching twice a day, daily), shipping discounts (such as free shipping sitewide promotions), Clear The Rack (limited time promotion where customers get 25% off clearance items; loyalty members get early access to the sale), and Final Sale items (items not eligible for return). |
| Marketing | The Marketing workstream is responsible for all marketing channels (email, SEO, affiliates, Google SEM, Google Shopping, social) as well as loyalty program enrollment and benefits. |
| Web Platform | The Web Platform workstream is responsible for web platform capabilities, including A/B testing, UI configurations (site colors, styles, fonts), feature flag capabilities, and country identifiers. |
| Apps | The Apps workstream is responsible for building the new iOS and Android Nordstrom Rack apps on the shared platform. |
| Discovery | The Discovery workstream is responsible for upper funnel pages and experiences - Homepage, Search and Browse, Product Detail Page, Recommendations - and the internal tools supporting these pages. |
| Commerce | The Commerce workstream is responsible for the checkout experience, payments, fraud, and compliance. Commerce is also responsible for migrating to a single set of tools and processes for order servicing by our Customer Care team, allowing for differentiation by brand (different policies, operating hours). |

| Workstream | Description |
|----------------------------|--|
| Customer | The Customer workstream is responsible for the sign in/sign up experience, account management, purchase history, and Wish List. This workstream also includes customer data migration, with the goal of ensuring customers can use a single login to access both Nordstrom.com and Nordstromrack.com. |
| Analytics | The Analytics workstream is responsible for ensuring we have critical reporting on website and business performance when we launch the new site. |
| Data | The Data workstream is responsible for ensuring data across all workstreams is setup and flowing correctly to support reporting and business decisions. This includes maintaining legacy systems for a period of time in order to support historic data extract needs at cutover, then deprecating and archiving legacy data systems. |
| Finance | The Finance workstream is responsible for ensuring data is flowing correctly to support finance and accounting requirements. |
| Training/Change Management | The Training/Change Management workstream is responsible for ensuring the organization is ready for the changes coming with Project Rocket. The scope includes identifying process changes and impacted roles, preparing and distributing communications and training, and supporting teams as we ramp up the new site, apps, and processes. |

Source: Jackie Hu.

Exhibit 6 Workstream status

| Status Date | 12/29/20 | 1/8/21 | 1/16/21 | 1/22/21 | 1/29/21 | 2/5/21 | 2/12/21 | 2/19/21 | 2/26/21 | 3/5/21 | 3/12/21 | 3/19/21 | 3/26/21 |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| Overall Status | Discovery | Discovery | Discovery | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Red | Yellow | Yellow | Red | Red | Red | Red |
| Status by Workstream: | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Item Set Up | | | | | Yellow | Yellow | Red | Red | Yellow | Red | Yellow | Red | Red |
| Merchandising | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Yellow | Green | Yellow | Red |
| Supply Chain | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Yellow | Green | Green | Green |
| Promotions | | | | | Yellow | Green | Green | Green | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow |
| Marketing | | | | | Green | Green | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow |
| Web Platform | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Yellow | Yellow | Green |
| Apps | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green |
| Discovery | | | | | Green | Green | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Red | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow |
| Commerce | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow |
| Customer | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Red |
| Analytics | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green |
| Data | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green | Green |
| Finance | | | | | Yellow | Green | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow | Yellow |
| Training/Change Management | | | | | Yellow | Yellow | Red | Red | Yellow | Yellow | Red | Red | Red |

Source: Jackie Hu.