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CHAMPIONING PRODUCT

A Discussion with Praneet Chandra (Peak AI)

Self-confessed foodie and Product Specialist, Praneet takes us on his journey through India, South Africa, Silicon Valley and Manchester, scaling and building up teams in a variety of businesses. Praneet is currently the Head of Product at Peak AI, where he is responsible for managing Peak's product vision & strategy.

Praneet began his career at Deloitte consulting on Digital Transformation before moving to Roche (Tech Mahindra) working on tech projects primarily front end & mobile technologies. This was his first product role which was actually accidental as someone else was supposed to start but couldn't. He immediately really liked understanding and solving problems over coding.

This was when he knew he wanted to stay in Product. Praneet later joined start up company, Mxit, which was a very innovative business that taught him a lot about user discovery, problem discovery, and user pain points. Product innovation became very important, and it was here that he learned the biggest lesson; "always look where your users are going." At Mxit, they lost millions of users over a year during the shift in mobile technology to Android and iOS, as they didn't predict that Smart Phone technology would become popular. Product innovation and using roadmaps is key.

At Gainsight in Silicon Valley, he became the first externally hired product manager and helped to build the entire product function, resulting in the tripling of revenue. He then joined Peak AI to build up their team. He was the 27th person in the business and there are now over 120.

Advice on Product Innovation
"ALWAYS LOOK WHERE YOUR USERS ARE GOING"

GROWTH MINDSET, PEOPLE & CULTURE

Praneet suggests that across all of his different, global experiences businesses are not differentiated by the technology that they use. Across the world, everybody is generally on the same level in terms of using the same technology. What truly separates businesses from each other, is their treatment of people and their culture.

Many companies are commercially focused and therefore have a strong growth mindset. Praneet advises all job seekers to approach any company cautiously. They might be growing fast but it's important to consider the company culture and also how they treat and organise their people. If 'people and culture' isn't number 1 or 2 on a business' priority list, then there is an issue. Even where growth mindset is the main priority, people should then come second.

If you hire the right people, you will naturally cultivate a positive working culture. If you hire the wrong people, just because their skill set aligns, then it is unlikely to work out.

Praneet's hiring principle is that "I would hire someone with empathy and no ego over a brilliant jerk". Somebody who has the necessary skill set, but none of the people skills or cultural attributes is likely to cause interpersonal issues between staff, leading to business disruption, personality clashes, and potentially a poor culture and high staff turnover.

THE DIVERSITY CHALLENGE

As a global company, you need to be everywhere. This ties in nicely with the fact that sometimes the right people to hire, aren't all in the same place, and it's important to be open to expanding your horizons. When you can't find the right people don't let yourself be bound by geography. This can help you find the top talent from a wider candidate pool, whilst also introducing an element of diversity into the business. This is something that Praneet already does within his company. However, when you have offices in different locations, it's important to ensure that there is consistency in the quality and facilities of each office.

The biggest challenge is further increasing this diversity, e.g. women in the male dominated business. To achieve a more even gender split in the office, Praneet explains the importance of instilling confidence in women to enter the business and strive for their own goals, whether that be a junior position or a managerial position. Peak AI, are current running programme which aims to enable and empower diversity within the workplace, whilst also avoiding token diversity hiring. Finding the balance between merit based hiring, open-minded hiring, and diversity and inclusion is the key to naturally improving diversity and inclusion in the workspace. Simply masking details that may trigger unconscious bias on a CV is not enough, change needs to happen from a mental mindset perspective.

Further to this, Peak also have an internal committee dedicated to analysing the hiring and outreach processes to ensure they are maximising diversity. Additionally, Peak are committed to improving their employee's experience and journey in terms of how they can help mould future leaders.

PRODUCT MANAGEMENT KEY ATTRIBUTES

Throughout his career Praneet has gained valuable insights into Product Management, the most of which focuses on people over product, to ensure a collaborative work culture which encourages everyone to want to work hard. These key attributes of a great Product Manager are summarised below.

Empathy

Be people oriented and have empathy for your colleagues, customers and clients. Being understanding and approachable will help you resolve issues quicker and create a productive and collaborative working culture.

Critical Listening

When somebody talks to you, don't just listen. Engage fully in the conversation in order to gain a full understanding of the situation using probing questions to truly get to the root cause of the issue. This allows you to identify and solve issues more efficiently.

Managing People Effectively

Effective management is more than just sharing the company vision and planning to get there. It's the ability to lobby, motivate, and bring together different departments through inter-department communication to hit targets, achieve goals, and overcome challenges.

Be Confident & Patient

It's very easy for Product Managers to experience Impostor Syndrome. Product building takes time, and therefore it's rare that you start to see results straight away. This can lead to Product Manager's questioning themselves; "Am I doing something wrong?" Praneet suggests that it is imperative to maintain confidence and patience, by reminding yourself that you know what you are doing and you are the closest person to the customer, and accepting that these things take time.

Advice to Younger Self

"Be patient, utilise critical listening, embrace failures and be confident that everything is going to work out."

PRODUCT OWNER VS PRODUCT MANAGER

Product Owner is the role, whereas Product Manager is the job title. Product Owner is the role that a person plays when collaborating within your team, scrum, or squad, but you cannot be a good Product Owner without effective management and a good understanding of customer problems as they will then struggle to correctly prioritise backlogs. Having both of these roles in one business is unnecessary and can actually cause misalignment and disruption to the product process.

STEPPING INTO PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

Praneet gets a lot of questions about how to step into Product Management, so he talked us through a few suggestions for anybody who is apprehensive about, but wanting to, make the move.

Praneet advises people to analyse what they are currently working on and what the Product is. Think about how you could improve it and even draft up a short spec, ideas board, or presentation to show your ideas to your team. If you're in the right team, nobody is going to hold you back and this will demonstrate your ability to assess, plan and strategise product improvement and innovation. It will also demonstrate your initiative, passion and creative problem solving skills.

It's also important to remember that there are different flavours of Product Management. There's technical, Non-Technical, Marketing, and Commercial Product Management. So just because you don't fit into just one of those areas, it doesn't mean you can't Product Manage. The most important aspect of Product Management is the ability to solve customer issues, regardless of whether your a Technical Product Manager, or a Non-Technical one.

PRANEET'S TOP TIPS

For anybody entering the Product space, Praneet advises to find yourself multiple mentors who can support and guide you through different challenges. These mentors don't have to be renowned industry leaders, they just need to be someone you look up and trust and can support you in different ways. Additionally it's important to always afford time for learning or reading so that you are up to date and constantly absorbing new information. Praneet suggests Silicon Valley Product Group for great Product insights blogs.

PREDICTION FOR MANCHESTER

Growth of the Manchester tech scene has been accelerated by COVID-19, and the working landscape in general is rapidly changing with the increased acceptance of flexible and remote working. As a result of this, geographical restrictions on hiring have been removed, allowing companies to attract talent from a much wider candidate pool as more businesses look to hire from further afield within the same or similar time zones. This will likely introduce salary parity and change the role of the physical office forever. Praneet expects to see remote and flexible working become an option for most employees.