Stanford eCorner

Learn by Working in Large Organizations

Jess Lee, *Polyvore*

November 07, 2012

Video URL: http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/3029/Learn-by-Working-in-Large-Organizations

In making career decisions, Polyvore CEO Jess Lee cites advice she received from Marissa Mayer, "Always choose the path that is most challenging." In this conversation with Peter Fenton of Benchmark Capital, Lee discusses the benefits and challenges of working inside a large organization and the value of learning from mentors.

Transcript

So coming back to the decision to go to Google, I suppose a lot of people wonder, do you go to a startup or do you go to an established company? And I know for Google it was not yet public or about to go public? It wasn't public at the time. Okay. So it was... Slightly before. Slightly before, but probably you knew it was going to be a good company. Tell us about that decision and whether or not in hindsight you think it was the right move. And I guess along those lines, mentors you found at Google and how they impacted your career? Sure. So I actually - what I finished - when I graduated or right before I graduated here with a degree in computer science, I thought, hey, I'm going to be an engineer, that's what computer science majors do, and I didn't even know what a product manager was at that time. so I got an offer from Intuit and I was going to be an engineer there. And then I got a call from Google recruiter saying, hey, we have this thing called the Associate Product Manager program, which I highly recommend, if anyone is thinking about that path and it was sort of...

Be a Polyvore Associate Product Manager. But it was a program to train product managers straight out of school and it was created by Marissa Mayer, who is now the CEO of Yahoo! and I so I thought okay, I'll give it a shot, I don't know what PMs are. So I went to the interview, not really knowing what to expect. And I remember I actually was so green at the time that when I spoke to Marissa, I was like hey, I don't know if I really want this job, like this is very - I never imagine that I would do this and she explain to me that all the best decision she had ever made in life, when she had to choose between two things, she always chose the path that was more challenging. And so I thought about that and I decided, hey, what I've always planned to be an engineer, but this PM things sound really hard. I have to lead teams of engineers who are much older than me, who know their stuff and I don't, I'm fresh out of school, so I decided to just to try it based on her advice and she did become a mentor in his sort of - we've kept in touch all these years and she was a big, big influence on my entire career path through Google. Yeah. I look back on that and I think well I could have started, maybe had a startup out of school, but the great thing that being at Google provided was - there's a few things; one, I got to meet a lot of really, really smart people, some of whom have gone on to do amazing things in Silicon Valley and some of whom I've got them to join Polyvore, because we work together there, so you sort of build your network at a larger company. The other thing is just the experience of being at a larger company and seeing all the - the benefits which are having infrastructure, there is a IT guy to help you when everything is - your computer, everything is broken, the network is down, the great perks of - the culture, the food, all that stuff I got to experience there and Google does have a really, really great culture, it's very engineering driven. But then I also got to experience downsides of a big company like red tape, bureaucracy having to work the system to get launches approved, so I've got to see both sides and then I was able to take that experience and apply it at Polyvore where we're recreating our own culture and our own sort of infrastructure.

It made me really able to appreciate, how nice it is to be on a really small team where you just get stuff done really quickly, there's no communication overhead, you know everybody, you know everyone's significant others, like all the great things

about startups that are small. I was able to appreciate that so much more because I've been in a larger company.