



Stanford eCorner

Earning the CEO Role

Jess Lee, *Polyvore*

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Polyvore CEO & Co-Founder Jess Lee describes how the organic growth of the company made for her natural transition in the CEO role, as it became "less about building the product and more about building the team that builds the product." With Benchmark Capital's Peter Fenton, Lee discusses CEO ambition, control issues, and unexpected aspects of the CEO role.



Transcript

But the transition to CEO is a big one and the statistics show most people don't make it successfully. I don't want to jinx it so knock on wood but you've really in way that I haven't seen in my venture career take into the role. Could you tell us about how it's different and a little about, did you want the role? And now that you're in it, how does that change your role? Well, so one of my cofounders and I, Pasha, like we have always done a lot of - like done a lot of the leadership together like and we've sort of found our natural niches for what we were good at like Peter gives me too much credit like I think I am one of the users of the site like I like and i-like-to-shop, I like fashion. So I think about the product that way, but what Pasha is building at is designing architecting systems and thinking about like the feedback loops and just serve the way the product works from a system's design perspective. So I think the combination of those two things is really the soul of what made Polyvore's product take off. In terms of the transition, the way we'd always split responsibilities was, he was responsible for engineering, I was a product manager. He is also a brilliant product guy. But we - as we started to add more people to the team, like we added a sales team, we added finance and people operations recruiting, it just naturally fell to me that that those people just ended up reporting into me and engineering was reporting into him and so as we grew and other parts of the company grew, it just became more of a natural transition and it's exactly what Peter was referring to. It's about the company becomes the product, not just the product, the website or the app. I mean I - we realized both of us, Pasha and I, that the role of the CEO was shifting from being less about just building the product but building team that builds the product.

And so that naturally became more my purview. I always want to - always recruiting for us. So it felt like a pretty natural transition and we discussed it and we decided, alright, let's do it. But I never went into Polyvore ever expecting this to happen. Yeah. It's an interesting thing which - Jess makes the comment, she says 'well I wasn't looking for this' and there are - if I could be simple about it, there are kind of two types of people that come to this - the role of CEO: those that want to be CEO, and those that, if you will, earn the title. And I think founders inherently, when they're founders, CEOs are in the title, because they took the initiative but it's a red flag for us as venture capitalists and someone shows up at our office and says 'I'm really ready to be a CEO, so I'm looking for CEO opportunities.' I'm like 'that's great; you're going to - because you're going to adverse select into the broken companies that are looking for a CEO.' And there was something very natural about Jess's evolution to the role because it's sort of happening in the course of how she was scaling inside of the company. And I - the ambition to be a CEO is a - can be a dangerous thing but I actually - curious as you think about, now you are in that role, how is it different than maybe you - what your roles before and what's been unexpected about it? Yeah. Well, you know I think the role of the CEO definitely changes as the company gets larger, right, and I went into this assuming like, okay, there's a set of things we need to do in the next, I don't know, at least a year, ma be two years, three years that I think I can do, I think I know how to do these things or I can learn some of them, but I also I went into it thinking like there may be a point at which I might not be the right CEO anymore like maybe taking the company public requires a different sort of person. So I definitely went in with it that way.

So I agree like you don't want to - just to be like, you have to be the CEO, it's about what does the company need and what are you actually good at? And this was sort of the right period for me. Things that have been unexpected. I thought I would be able to spend a lot more time working on the product in addition to doing a lot of the other duties. That's turned out to be not the case. I spend so much of my time recruiting and meeting and thinking about architecting the right team to get what we need done. So that's been a little bit surprising. As a control freak, it's been difficult sometimes to let go of some of the product responsibilities. I was the VP of Product before that. But we have an awesome PM, Rachel, who - like it took me - it took us a while to figure out how to delegate, how to let things go, but I think we've gotten that done so that's been surprising. Oh, the amount of external stuff that I have to do has also been a little surprising.

I'm more of an introvert by nature, so having to do that is not the most natural thing, but it comes up a lot. So it's something you just sort of have to push and do.