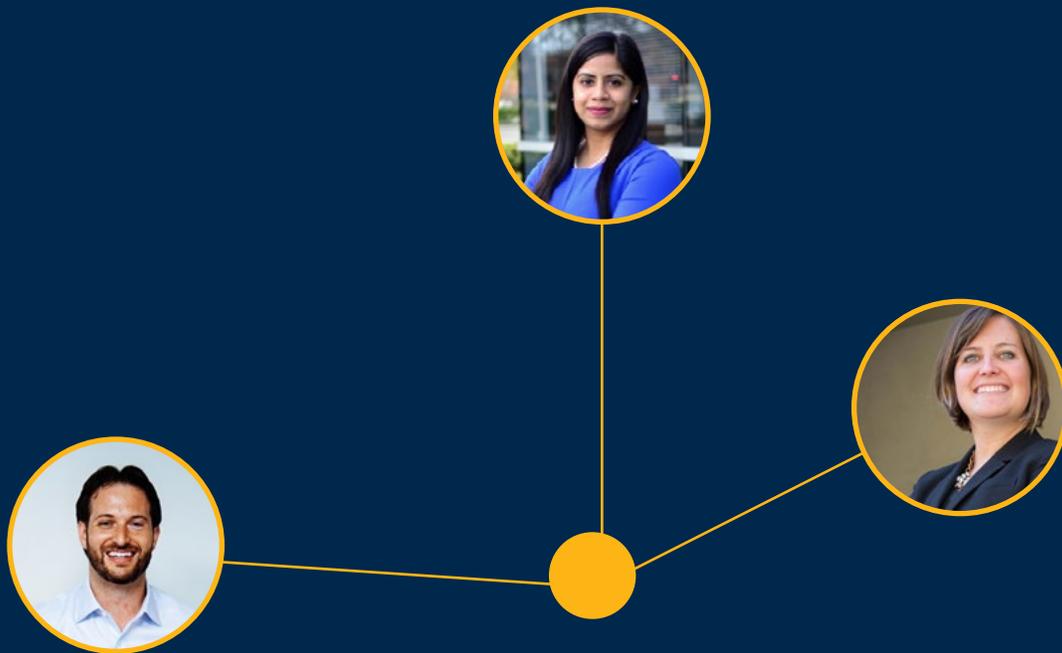


Breaking Into Product Management

Insights from Berkeley MBA Alumni



BerkeleyHaas

Haas School of Business
University of California Berkeley

Can't wait to get your hands on The Next Big Thing? Neither can Stephanie Curran, Max Wesman, and Kavya Mallesh—Berkeley-Haas alumni and product managers at Amazon, GoodHire, and Sling Media.

Frequently called “mini CEOs,” product managers (PMs) draw on numerous skills to envision, justify, produce, and help market their products.

How do you prepare for a role in product management? What qualities does a good PM have? What do product managers actually do and like about what they do?

Read on for insights from Max, Stephanie, and Kavya.

Is product management the right path for you?

“You’ll need a combination of innate qualities and preparation,” says Max Wesman, MBA 10, vice president of product management for GoodHire. As an alum, Max coaches MBA students at Berkeley-Haas who aspire to work in product management.



Qualities of a Product Manager (Max’s List)

1

PROACTIVE

As a product manager, you can’t wait for someone to tell you what to do.

2

EXTROVERTED

You need to be a fearless communicator and not be shy when presenting to small and large groups, both friendly and hostile.

3

ORGANIZED

You need to stay on top of things and be willing to take responsibility. As a product manager, the buck stops with you.

4

ANALYTICAL

You’ll need numbers (not just a gut feeling) to back up an investment of time and people to work on a particular feature.

5

TECHNICALLY INCLINED

You won’t have to code, but you need to understand what’s feasible, how long things take, and how to communicate with engineers.

6

TEAM PLAYER

This is not an individual contributor type of job; you’re only as effective as you make your team.

Do you need an MBA to be a product manager?

Whether or not you need an MBA to be a product manager depends on your background, according to our experienced PMs:



Stephanie Curran
MBA 14
Senior Product Manager, Amazon

Stephanie found that her MBA helped her transition from her highly focused role as an equity analyst to product manager.

“I knew I needed an MBA to make the 180-degree pivot into a different role as well as into a different industry. I needed to build skills and experience that matched those required for a PM.”

For example, she learned how to develop a minimum viable product (MVP) in a new product development class at Berkeley-Haas.

“In one semester, we drove a product from concept to MVP. We learned to prioritize features into must-haves, should-haves, and nice-to-haves. I think back to this exercise every time I begin writing a Business Requirements Document for a new product or feature we are planning.”



Kavya Mallesh
MBA 17
Senior Product Manager, Sling Media

Kavya utilized her MBA in a number of ways. “The curriculum gives you a well-rounded understanding of business and people skills. My networks at Haas were invaluable—they opened up doors to new avenues and helped shape my decision to become a product manager.”

“I found many valuable resources at Berkeley-Haas that helped me: on-campus recruiting, the Career Management Group, student clubs, and the Haas Alumni Network to name just a few. “

Max Wesman
MBA 10
VP of Product Management, GoodHire



“If you’re coming from a very disparate career,” Max says, “then it really helps, especially if you can use the MBA as a way not only to take relevant classes, but to engage in projects or internships that give you experience.”

Max says he has benefited from his MBA as he has moved up in the field. “Having general business training and a better understanding of finance and accounting is helpful as you move up and take on broader roles. An MBA would definitely help if your aspiration is to run a business or be a division manager.”

How can you prepare for a career in product management?



TAKE CLASSES

Some courses that can be helpful are statistics, marketing, pricing, leadership communications, and any course with elements of launching a product or gathering customer feedback.



DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Set up general informational interviews and do some research—understand what a product management role entails, what skills are needed, and how you might build those skills.



USE YOUR NETWORK

Talk to people who are doing the job you want to determine more specifically the knowledge and skills that are valued—and to help you shape your MBA curriculum and other learning opportunities.



GET TO WORK

Seek out projects that will help you better understand the PM role or allow you to try out the role to figure out if it is right for you. Startups are a good place to look for these opportunities, since they often need people.



GET AN MBA

If product management is where you want to go, then the curriculum, network, and career resources that business school provides can help you get there.

Q&A

Are you pondering what a career in product management might look like for you?

We asked Kavya, Max, and Stephanie about what they do, what they love about what they do, and how they arrived at their careers in product management.

Perhaps their answers will help you picture your path to product management.

Q: What did you do before becoming a product manager?



Stephanie

I was a senior equity analyst at Bloomberg LP in San Francisco.



Kavya

I was a graphics software engineer at Intel, leading development of media graphics drivers for Apple products.



Max

I was a management consultant at Deloitte Consulting.

Q: Why did you want to work in product management?



Max

I loved consulting because of the variety of work I was exposed to and the challenge of constantly learning new skills while attacking challenging and interesting problems. However, I felt I was lacking a strong sense of ownership over the work I was doing and the feeling of creating something tangible.

For me, product management was a great opportunity to blend what I loved about consulting with being able to nurture, build, and launch a product or service into the market that people would use and enjoy.



Kavya

I love technology and worked in a purely technical capacity as a software engineer for a long time, but I realized I was not making as big an impact as I'd like to.

Product managers function as the CEO of a specific product, managing it from concept to launch and taking into consideration all aspects of its development and marketing. As a product manager, I can look at the bigger picture and make a meaningful impact.



Stephanie

I wanted to go beyond my narrow focus on the numbers and spreadsheets in finance to a broader role that would allow me to touch and dive deep into many aspects of a business.

As a product manager, you manage the road map that determines how and when your program will launch and what resources you will need. You get to work cross-functionally with software developers, designers, finance, editorial, legal, product managers in other programs and, in my case, also the retail team at Amazon.

My interaction with these teams has led me to learn not only about how to manage a program, but about tech development, user experience and user interface design, and how to think on a global scale.

Q: What do you do in your current role?



Kavya

As a senior product manager for Sling TV products, I develop the strategic product road map and define product features by working closely with user experience and consumer research teams, as well as other product managers.

I collaborate and negotiate with development teams to drive milestones. I also work with marketing, legal, and customer experience teams on the launch.



Stephanie

I led a product team focused on brand protection in Amazon's Marketplace. We built automated tools and processes that identified and removed inaccurate data from the Amazon catalog of more than a billion products.

In the time I have been at Amazon, I have enjoyed a number of Senior Product Manager roles—each of which expanded my scope and responsibilities and have allowed me to become an expert in multiple aspects of the third-party seller business. My team currently consists of business analysts, product managers, and program managers.



Max

In moving up from senior director of product to vice president of product management, I've expanded into areas beyond PM. For instance, I now communicate more with the sales team, and I also work more with marketing automation tools like HubSpot to help the marketing team.

In terms of finance, I am more involved in fundraising discussions, as well as how we report on P&L, and the effect that has on overall business and how outside investors evaluate us.

I am also more involved in operations, particularly in supporting how we can add ways to automate so our business can operate more efficiently. Moreover, I now have more people to manage, so I have more coaching and HR responsibilities.

Q: What do you enjoy about your job?



Stephanie

I enjoy building something every single day. I get to create a vision of where I see my program at end of year, in three years, in five years, and then lead my team to execute that vision.

We work on very big, complex problems that no one else has figured out yet, so we are becoming thought leaders in this space. Nothing feels better than launching a solution to a problem you have been working on for some time and seeing customers' feedback on your innovation.



Kavya

Having been in the same shoes as my technical team members, I can relate with them well, and this helps me lead my teams to deliver the best products.

I also love the idea of combining my technical background with my newly acquired business acumen to bring to life products that can change people's lives.

Q: Has your MBA experience been helpful in your PM role?



Kavya

There are both qualitative and quantitative aspects to product management, and the curriculum for the Evening & Weekend MBA Program at Berkeley-Haas addresses both.

Courses like marketing research, strategic brand management, pricing, and design thinking have greatly improved my product management skills. Power and politics and leadership honed my people skills.

Class projects at Haas also offered me opportunities to work with team members of different skills and perspectives. More often than not, they were culturally diverse, too. These experiences prepared me to work better with geo-diverse and cross-functional teams.



Stephanie

I consistently go back to frameworks I learned at Haas. For example, we were recently debating the definition of a “brand.” I went back to some class notes and used them with my colleagues to provide some insight on what our definition should be.

Additionally, I’m involved in recruitment for Amazon at Haas, so I not only get to meet a new generation of Haas students, but also graduates who are now colleagues. It is a wonderful way to learn about other parts of the business and network with people who I know are like-minded. These relationships have definitely helped me grow my network.



Max

Taking finance classes at Berkeley-Haas certainly helped me with company finance and investors. The organizational behavior course has helped me deal with organizational intricacies and politics, and the need to motivate people and establish a strong culture.

I continue to talk with other PMs in the Berkeley-Haas network about how they approach similar problems and tools they think are more or less effective.

Ready to make your move into product management?

Learn how an MBA from Berkeley-Haas can be your next big step toward the next big thing.

Whether you're looking to go to business school full-time or get an MBA while working, we have schedule options to fit your life.

Evening. Weekend. Executive. Full-time.

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