

WORK LIFE; HOW I MADE IT: JESS LEE; Unlikely path to running Polyvore

[Lien, Tracey. Los Angeles Times](#) [Los Angeles, Calif] 04 Sep 2016: C.3.

The gig: Jess Lee, 33, is the chief executive of the social e-commerce site, Polyvore. Unlike most CEOs, who are usually part of a company's founding team or brought in specifically for the job, Lee was hired as Polyvore's first product manager before being promoted to the top. In her eight years at the company, she's had a hand in every part of the business, whether it's writing code, selling ads, hiring or firing.

Reluctant engineer: Lee grew up in Hong Kong with dreams of becoming a comic book artist, "but my parents are Asian, and Asian parents don't like art school," she joked. At 17, she moved to the Bay Area to attend Stanford University. With art classes ruled out, she tried her hand at programming and fell in love with it. "I'd always liked science and math, and with programming, you can output something that can be quite artistic," she said. "It's like a superpower where you can build anything. It's in everything. It seemed like a practical thing to do with a lot of opportunity."

Google comes calling: By her senior year, Lee was certain she would be a software engineer. Then Google invited her to apply for its associate product manager program. "I had no idea what it was, but I interviewed," she said. In 2004, product management -- overseeing a single project from beginning to end -- was a relatively new role at tech companies. The job title seemed wishy-washy compared to more traditional roles such as programmer or designer. Marissa Mayer, Yahoo's current CEO, was at the time an executive at Google and interviewed Lee for the post. "She asked if I had any questions, and I said, 'Yeah, I don't know if I want this job. I thought I was going to be an engineer. What should I do?' Which, in hindsight, was probably not a good thing to say at an interview, but I didn't know any better." Mayer told her that when she looked back at her own life, any time she had to choose between two paths, she always took the more challenging path because, even if she failed, it ensured that she would learn something new. Lee took the job.

The technical product manager: Lee went from knowing nothing about product management to being the product manager on Google Maps. She describes the role as being the captain of a ship -- she was in charge of the product's vision and strategy, and pulled together the resources to make it happen. Her background as a software engineer helped her understand what technical talent was needed to build things -- and how long it would take. "You have to prioritize the bang for the buck," she said. "How much will users like it divided by how hard it is to build."

A helpful complaint: While at Google, Lee started using a website called Polyvore. The site blended e-commerce with an online community. Users could shop for clothes but also drag and drop images of clothing and accessories to put together outfits and share them on the Polyvore website. Lee became obsessed with it. But being less than a year old, the site was still rough around the edges. She wrote co-founder Pasha Sadri with feedback on what the site did poorly

and how she'd fix it. "There's a difference between writing in to complain, and writing in to complain and also offering solutions," Lee said. "Pasha wrote back and said these are great ideas. Why don't you come here and build them yourself?" Lee could have stayed at Google and taken on bigger projects. Or she could join Polyvore, which was, at the time, a three-person start-up. She chose the more challenging of the two paths.

Doing everything: Lee says her move was "one of the best career decisions I ever made." As employee No. 1 at Polyvore, she had a hand in everything. In the early days, she wrote code and created a dashboard for the company to track its user metrics. The three co-founders were software engineers who preferred to focus on code, so when something needed to be done, Lee volunteered to do it. She wrote the company's blog posts, she helped hire employees, she answered the phones when advertisers called and when they outgrew their office, she found a new one. "I thought I'd learn a lot, help grow the company, then eventually start my own thing, but Polyvore became my own thing," Lee said. To the credit of the co-founders, they also saw how familiar Lee had become with every part of the business. In 2012, they made her CEO and honorary co-founder. "When people do good work, you take care of them," Lee said. "And they really, really took care of me."

Role models: Lee has never had a mentor, and she was uncomfortable with the idea of reaching out to a stranger and asking her or him to mentor her. Instead, she prefers to find role models from whom she can learn. "Go to places where there are amazing people that you can look up to," she said. At Google, she was able to learn from Mayer and the co-creator of Google Maps, Bret Taylor. At Polyvore she looked up to its co-founders. "You learn from people, so find the best people and observe them."

Failure: Lee's advice for people who want to get into the start-up game is to not define their careers through success and failure, but instead to heed Mayer's advice: to do something that will push you to learn new things. "Start-ups are hard and most fail completely," Lee said. "So you need to shift into a learning mind-set where your wins are the fact that you're learning something new, where learning is the reward in and of itself."

Personal: Lee lives in Mountain View, Calif., and remains an avid manga fan. She attends San Diego's Comic-Con International every year and camps out overnight waiting for panels to begin. This year she attended in costume, dressing up as characters from Pokemon Go, Scarlet Witch from "The Avengers," Star Lord from "Guardians of the Galaxy" and Han Solo from "Star Wars."

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