

One Knight in Product - E115 - Princess Akari

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SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, Princess Akari

00:00

Hello, and welcome to the show. I'm your host, Jason Knight. And on each episode of this podcast, I'll be having inspiring conversations with passionate product people. If that sounds like your cup of tea, why not come over and join me and some of the finest product thought leaders and practitioners in the world on OneKnightInProduct.com, where you can sign up to the mailing list, subscribe on your favourite podcast app, or follow the podcast on social media and guarantee you never miss another episode again. On tonight's episode, we talk about the journey from civil engineering and construction to product management and how one person realised there wasn't much of a support group to go to and set up a community where product managers could have a safe space to talk about their problems, their successes, and help everyone lift themselves up together. We also ponder what it's like in a working culture where product management is even more undervalued than we'd expect both in prestige terms and financially, as well as the shocking thought that there are people out there who actually think this job is easy. For all this and much more, please join us on One Knight in Product. So my guest tonight is Princess Akari. Princess is a singer songwriter, so we'll see if we can get any songs out of her in this interview, and also a passionate product manager community builder, an educator looking to help provide learning pathways for junior product managers and help them get fairly recognised in the companies they work for. Princess says she's cool and reserved online, but a lively drama queen in real life. So I'm expecting sparks to fly tonight some impassioned hot takes on product management. And hopefully we'll still be friends at the end of it. Hi, princess, how are you tonight?

01:32

Hi, Jason. I'm good. I'm fine. I'm okay.

01:38

So you for one. That's good. So first things first, you're a product manager for brass or FinTech in Lagos, Nigeria. So for the record, what problem does blast so for people,

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I work for Brass, and Brass helps businesses grow. We provide banking solutions for them. We also provide financial tools that help these businesses with their financial operations and their cash flow. We help them save their time and their money with our simple banking services. That works.

02:09

Excellent. So you're providing a really important service. And I guess it's really interesting these days, and certainly in the UK where I am, but of course around the world as well, this whole concept of Challenger banks and Neo banks coming in and taking over the world of banking by storm, would you put yourself in that category?

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Yes, yes, yes, I would say Brass is in that category.

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And is that focusing specifically on Nigeria at the moment? Or is it kind of regional or Pan African? Like, what's your client base looking like?

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Right now we operate in just Nigeria, but we are planning on expanding to other parts of Africa.

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Excellent. And what's the banking industry like in Nigeria? Is it fairly established and big and slow moving and kind of ripe for disruption? Or have you got quite a lot of exciting big banks as well as the fintechs and challenges that are coming in now?

03:00

Yeah, we have a lot of big banks. We have a lot of microfinance banks. We have a lot of banks. And of course, there are a lot of FinTech options these days, a lot of banks on that end, as well as the fintech. And so there are a lot of banks doing several things. But for Cyprus, we're focusing on only providing banking solutions for businesses. So that's about it. We have several banks who are costing billions. And we have smaller banks who are doing smaller figures. So

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You'll get to billions one day, but you're a product manager at Brass. So what sort of stuff you're specifically working on yourself at Brass.

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So I work on our mobile products. So one of our products is the actual banking app, where customers have the option of using their mobile phones for banking. So I manage that. And the second mobile product is even sales up. So we use that app to onboard customers. So it's like an offline solution where people go into the places where businesses are, and onboarding them. So they have the app. And then they collect the information from the business, use it to onboard the businesses on that particular sales agents app. So those are the two mobile apps. That's I manage adverse to that to mobile apps. And I'm focused on managing those two apps, the actual banking app, and then our sales agents are

04:41

Excellent. sounds really interesting. I'm sure you get stuck into a lot of different areas there as you're building out. But you started out as a project manager before moving into product in 2020 or so. But your degree was in civil engineering, so have to ask how come you're working in FinTech or banking products and not say building bridges or something like that?

05:02

Okay, that part of my life, sadly, has ended. And I don't think I'll be going back there for several reasons. Okay, it was fun. I was a structural engineer, I practised for some time. But I had to stop because I had a better opportunity. And of course, there were so many challenges on the field, because I was, I had to go to an actual construction site every day. So it wasn't a case of me being in the office working on drawings, and plans and strategies for the construction, I was actually on site. So being on site every day can put a strain on your fiscal health, and every other thing, and I didn't have a choice, the company wasn't so big. So I had to do a lot of things alongside being a project engineer on site manager and structural projects. So I wasn't really happy with what I was doing at the time, coupled with the stress, so I decided to do something else.

06:09

That makes a lot of sense. And we'll talk a bit about your actual entry path into product in a minute. But I wanted to stick to the theme of building bridges, because you're also building figurative bridges as the founder of people in product, which is a product management community in a safe space for product managers to learn, share, and connect with like minds. Yeah. So before we talk about people in product and some of the goals like what was it that made you want to start a community up in the first place?

06:36

So when I transitioned, I was looking for people who would help me with several things that I had challenges with. And I was very, very fortunate, and blessed to have some tech people around me

challenges with. And I was very, very opportune, and blessed to have some tech people around me already, but they were not product managers. I had a few product managers around me, that other people introduced to me. But most of the time, I couldn't get any form of help from them. They were very helpful at some points, but you know, life gets busy, they get busy. And they're not just enough people to reach out to. And I found out that I was going through a lot of challenges. And I'd say, personal stress as it relates to my transitioning. And I felt alone. And no one else was experiencing that. I was like, Okay, why can't I get this thing? Right? Why can't I do this, right. And I was learning on the job literally, because as I transitioned, I got a job. So I was learning on the job. And he was, so he was feeling so much pressure, and no one to talk to know where to vent, no one to, like, hold my hands. I was literally just trying my best at the point. So it was very, very challenging. I had someone who helped me a product manager at the time, she was super helpful. But I just needed like a community. So I joined one. And you know, when you join a community, and you just join, and maybe the activities, or the way the community setup doesn't allow you have, I wouldn't say the freedom, but it's not warm enough for you to want to talk or want to speak or want to reach out and ask for help. Even though you know that if you reach out, someone may help you. So I was in the community and nothing was really happening. So I just decided, okay, let me just like form a small group of people who are like me, where we can just like, share together, we can net walk, we can talk about what we're going through and solve our problems together. So that was what was brewing in my mind at the time. And it went on for several months. Then I just went ahead to open a Slack channel. And I was like, Okay, I'm just going to talk to a few people about this. If they're interested, they will join me. So they join me were like nine, when we started now we're over 1000. And we're growing strong. I hear testimonials from people in the community talk about how people are always willing to help. They feel comfortable enough to talk about their problems, their challenges their journey. We also share our successes together, everyone is just warm and so kind, very supportive, very loving in the community. And that is what I was going for the past several communities in Nigeria and they are focused on several things, maybe learning, education, several things, providing product management knowledge, through classes, courses, webinars, etc. But as is focused more on the actual product managers, the humans, the product managers, and how they can find like a supportive group where they can always come back to if they have problems if they have issues and also to celebrate with them. When they achieve something, we also do webinars, and we also have like, learning channels. But that's just part of the package. The main package is providing a safe space where people can just relax, share their problems and get their problem solved.

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Yeah, I remember when you and I spoke before this a few weeks back, you kind of described it as an Alcoholics Anonymous for product managers. Do you think that? Isn't that's a fairly cheeky way to put it? I mean, I guess you must have heard quite a few war stories in there already. I mean, do you feel that it's just a way for people just to get stuff off of their chest and feel supported, like you say, and that that's the most important thing that you can get out of it?

10:44

Yes, yes, I'd say so. So there's a weekly segment we have on Saturdays, we call it the weekly check in calls. So on that call, you get to talk about your week how your week winds and the challenges that you experienced that week. So you can hear a lot about how maybe they were not able to get some kind of results from your teams? How did this or the designers related with them and how they didn't like what happened? Or you can hear stories about how maybe someone is not being treated properly at work? What should the person do? Most of the times they're talking about things that they go

through advice from others, like they want to receive advice from orders, or what do I do? If this keeps happening on my team? What do I do if they keep giving me this stuff? And I don't think is my task. What do I do at such and such. So it's mostly like, just expressing yourself. That happens once a week every week. But we also have like interview preps, where we do like a mock interview, there's an interviewer, and there's a mock interviewee, and, you know, they have an audience. So just like a comfortable space for you to maybe fill out the interview, if you're really not so good. We interviews, and then the interviewer, like, he helps you. He says, Oh, you didn't answer that correctly, I think you should answer it like this. And then of course, the audience audience is learning. They're learning as well. Because when they listen in, they say, Oh, I'm not supposed to answer like this, I'm supposed to, like this. So there are lots of people who have gotten jobs after practising at the interview prep. So in as much as we're creating, like safe spaces for people to vent for people to run and get advice. We're also creating opportunities for people to prepare for Product Management interviews, we also have a group mentorship session, where there's like a senior product person or like a product leader, who answers all the questions of the people who are in that mentor mentorship session that day. So it can range from Oh, how much should I collect for such and such project? To? I'm transitioning, what do I need to do? At whatever level? The mentor has an answer for you. So it's not just the ranting is just like a whole bunch of things we're doing. But everything still comes down to how, you know, we care about the actual people who are doing this this work?

13:13

No, it sounds really amazing. Actually, I think one of the things that I've been reflecting on recently is some of the themes that you've already just been talking about in such detail, which is the idea that product management can be a very tough gig, and especially if you're working for maybe a slightly less than ideal product company, or in a slightly less than ideal product market, where, in some cases, even the value of product management itself is being challenged or misunderstood. So just having safe spaces, as you say, and being able to offer peer mentorship and things like the interviewing and stuff sounds absolutely amazing. So I'm sure that's having a really big impact on the lives of some of the people that are trying it. But one question then is based on the third year or so that you've been doing that now? Is there like an example you can share of maybe someone who came in who was having a bit of a challenge, maybe didn't really know where to turn and the way that then people in product managed to turn that around for them? I mean, obviously, I don't want any specific details and naming and shaming but like, is there like an example that you use as a validation of the things that you're doing?

14:17

Yes, yes. There are several examples, but I'll just use one of them. And yesterday, he also talked about it as well. He said, He's the founder. And he joined the community because he feels like he's doing a lot of product jobs. You know, as a founder, you do a lot of things for he is, let's just say his close to his product side. And he was talking about how supportive the community has been for him, because when they raise money in their company, he announced it and we overdressed with him you know, knowing that they somewhere you can go to to talk about the winds of your company and of your personal life as regards your career, and people are willing to congratulate you to welcome you. So he was very, very happy about that. And also, he talked about the weekly checking calls, he's always seen all his he's never going to miss checking calls. Because, you know, just hearing from people, how their week went, and everyone is trying to offer solutions to them. It's just heartwarming to see that people are willing to help other people like on the go, you hear people say, Oh, I had a

very terrible week after Google, like, Oh, my God, so sorry, what can we do to help? How do we, you know, at the end of the week, where everyone is so stressed, coming back to just know that on Saturday, there's a place where I can go to and talk about my week, and, obviously get solutions. So he was stressing on that. And before he joined the community, I'm sure, maybe the people we had around him didn't really understand his problems when he was speaking to them about it, especially when maybe they are not in tech, or they're not product people. So they may not understand your problems. Yeah. When you say all my engineers are responding to me, they may not really get what we understand when you say, Oh, I'm trying to talk my engineers, and they're not responding. I'm trying to communicate with these people, or they give me a terrible deadline. I don't know how to fix this. So we don't just say sorry, we actually provide solutions to the best of our ability. Yeah, so this particular guy, this founder, he has had a lot of help. And then several people who have joined, who were just transitioning, and who tried to speak up in the community and said, Oh, this is what I do. This is where I am right now. Most of them even went ahead to do the interview prep than they did the real live interview, got the job, and doing well on the job. Because they know that if they get stuck on the job, they can always come to the committee and say, Oh, I'm stuck. I've been tasked to do this and this and this, and I don't know how to approach it. And then several people are just floating in to answer your question, oh, I think should try this, or read more about it on this link. So stories like that, like these two stories, like one is if I use the founder example. So it doesn't look like we are focused on only people who are transitioning. And then the second example I use is someone who was transitioning, and now has a job, because the person, you know, found a place to talk about, had problems, and also was involved in the interview, prep, had a real live interview, and then got the job.

17:38

That sounds really amazing, and says that you're changing lives. So obviously very happy to see that and hope that it continues to grow, and that you continue to help other people as well. Yeah. So we spoke before and just now in fact about the value of Product Management being potentially under appreciated. And I know that you said before that there is a problem with people in Nigeria and product companies understanding the value of a product manager. And it's obviously not unknown for product managers in general to feel under appreciated. But when you talk about the value of a product manager, you talking about the concept of the value that they bring to a company in the overall sense, or you're talking about the literal financial value that's attributed to product managers and the amount of getting paid.

18:19

I think it's both of them. So I'll just start with the financial side, like, a lot of product managers are undervalued, financially, especially people who have been at this for quite some time. For people who are transitioning and who are just getting into the space, they have more knowledge, and they can ask for larger sums. But for people who have been in the space, I hear some salary amounts. And I'm like, okay, is that proper for a product manager? And then on those same teams, the designers and the developers, and way much more? And you'd find out, okay, what's the severity level of disruption, or synergy synergy level of DeSantis. And then you just find out that at the end of the day, the company's value developers, first designers than product managers in a product team. So they are willing to pay developers any amounts. And they are willing to pay designers any amounts, which are like, oh, a product manager, or let's just get someone or when they get the person, they pay a certain amount. That is not what I say, does not fit that role. Because while in the role day, a lot of things that you would do that are very stressful. And there are a lot of things that you do that maybe you didn't

plan to do before you joined that particular company. So you're doing even much more than you were asked to do, but you are paid way less than your designer or developer account. About. So it's really a problem that way. So I don't know why that happens. Many companies, when I speak to people are like, Oh, I have such and such level of experience. And I've done this and this and this, but I feel in the least in the product theme, so a designer just joins the team, and has maybe less years of experience than yourself, or a developer joins the team and ends and has less years of experience than you, but the alien model you already so I think is also the value that is placed on the roll. A lot of companies do not really understand the value that product managers bring. And also, they may not understand because some of them do not blatantly, do not want to understand that like, oh, we can just we can just do this ourselves, or what exactly do product managers do. So they need to have some form of education as to why they may need product managers on their team. So even why if they need product managers at that particular time on their team. So there are just a lot of what I say power dynamics in the product team with how they value who and who and how they pay who and who so is most is mostly like, Oh, you're not a developer. So you can't really ask for a higher pay. So you hear some people say, Oh, are in this and you're like, Wow, that's a really good word. You know, an engineer, how do you add this, and then most product managers want to transition to become engineers, because it looks like oh, that's where the money is. That's the place that has more financial value in Nigeria. So it's just very sad that when people want to transition, you see, you can transition to being a product manager, but if you're doing it for the money calling out, coach. So yeah, so it's already there, like, in people's minds. And people know, that product managers do not in as much as the companies who pay product managers very well be companies, or put up during companies, where the founders understand the importance of having product managers on their product team, or D themselves were product managers, and they're trying to like pay, people will or they just have money, and are willing to pay any amounts that you can ask for. Many others, generally pay product managers way less than the other team members of the product team.

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You've got a big community, in people in product now. So presumably, you could start to pull together some really good salary benchmarks from some of the people that you're working with and try to maybe use that to drive transformative change in the industry. Do you think that's something that is on the cards for you and something that you think would have an impact? Or do you think that it's more a problem, as you kind of touched on that there's this general misunderstanding of the value of product management and what product managers do? I mean, I've spoken to people from Nigeria before who've said that, in many cases, product managers are very much treated in the Nigerian market as project managers and just there to manage backlogs and kind of do what the management say, Do you think that the people that need to make the changes here to help product managers get paid a fair price for their talents is actually, do you think they're gonna be receptive to some kind of salary benchmarking type exercise? Or do you think it's deeper than that?

23:30

I think it's deeper than that. But we can try. So a member of the committee did, she did a research as to how much product managers in and there was also a document I found online, about, like periods or pay grade, as product managers in Nigeria. And he was funny to see how some senior people were earning the same as some junior people, and how some people who were mid level were any more than some senior people. So it's a big cottage, there is no specific range. You can see from this cities, at least you can have such and such amount. So the only thing we can do is to encourage the humans

who work at these companies first to try to maybe drive a change within their company. Because the industry change to happen. There has to be some form of higher power, you know, moving things around and saying, Oh, I think this or this should happen. So if I just come out and say, Oh, this is this should be the industry standard. There's just a number of people who listen to me, but there are some people who are product leaders. There are some people who have influence in the tech industry, who can make these kinds of things happen. So if we want to do this, like through the product leaders, it's going to be more like oh, this is the result from the research. This is another document that says this and this and this. I think the pre grades should be regularised not just for product managers, but for technical in general, because you will find that so I know a product manager, who had at least two years experience, who was earning 80,000 In Naira, and then some someone who had like one year experience in the same country was earning like 250,000 naira. So the person dies, any TK is just okay with it, and doesn't know that he can earn as much as 500. At his level. Yeah, so it's a bit scattered like there is no there is no structure to the pay grade, and is just for people within first like, oh, you can ask for more at your company, because you have the level of experience to take such and such amount, or they pay you this amount as a junior product manager. That's great. Just keep at it and encourage them to employ more people and pay them properly. Yeah, so if you want to go through the route of maybe talking to industry leaders, that can work for Muslims, they can really affect any, I wouldn't say durable, I would say maybe lasting change, or any change at all, because they don't know the pockets of these other companies. But the problem is that most companies, they say, Oh, we don't have money to pay PMS, well, both those same companies can pay any amounts to be very good engineer, or very good developer as the case may be. So it's just a thing of value. So I think the first thing that product managers in Nigeria should be focusing on is how to create more value. I know that a lot of people are creating values in their companies. But just like expressing that, okay, this is what I am doing for the company, and stating their achievements stating what they've done, maybe maybe just talking about it like publicly like, Oh, I feel like product managers should be valued more, they do this, they do this, they do this, I think companies, so if people can talk more about it, and raise some kind of awareness, maybe companies can even like, listen, because you see a very large team. And they just have one product manager, maybe 50, man, product team, just one product manager, or like, I know someone who is working on eight different products, just one person, just her. She's working on eight different products. Well, I know that within that team, they would have different engineers who are working on these products. So they are all person can do everything. Now, what are you doing? What exactly are you doing that you cannot handle all of these at once. So it's just a bit stressful. And then because of the economy, you're trying to keep your job, you don't want to over complain. So you don't lose your job and then start looking for a new job. So it's just, I just feel like people should be able to talk about the value, that product managers great. And then like the actual product managers should also talk about the value that they bring to their company and the industry at large.

28:09

Yeah, 100%. I think that the lack of respect for good product management in a number of places, obviously very disappointing. And I think it's really time to stand up for product managers around the world and make sure that they're getting a fair shake. But it's interesting, though, because I know that you're really passionate about advancing the cause of women in product as well, and making sure that we get good representation of women at the table. And of course, women traditionally have an even worst time of it in any situation when it comes to pay or recognition or advancement opportunities. And that's not just a product thing, but it's obviously also a product thing. Is that something that you think is an additional layer here where, aside from the general problems of

recognition and advancement opportunities, and being paid effectively, in order, the stuff that you've just talked about, is that something in your experience is just way worse for women as well. And just an additional thing for them to have to bear.

29:06

Personally, I think everything in this world, just we will say yes, yes, yes, I think so. But I'm really encouraged by the fact that a lot of women are transitioning to product management. And I really sincerely hope they are not transitioning because people will say, Oh, you want to transition to take? Let's start with the easy roles like product management. So you are accruing. The had roles to like the male counterparts, and then the easy ones, like product management to the women like oh, just just to product management. And then I'm so glad that there are some communities in Nigeria who encourage women to code and do other things. She could Africa they have a large wonderful community or A female coders, they teach. They have mentorship programmes as well, for people to learn how to code and they just guide them in their coding journey. But most times, there's a stereotype that you want to transition to tech, you a woman, just go and do product management. So that's the first problem where people even see product management as the low hanging fruit intake, where you can just do anybody can be a product manager, and they just be like, oh, yeah, just go. Just go and do product management. So they don't even think of. Yeah, so I think that stereotype is the first problem. And then when people join teams, maybe they are working, I've heard stories of how the product manager or the female counterpart can see something. And then nobody really listens. And then demand comes and says the same thing. And you're like, Oh, yes, that's a good word. Wow, why didn't you think of that? And the ladies just there, like I said, this thing just now. And sometimes he happens glaringly. Sometimes, he happens very subtly. So you can't really tell when it's really happening. And sometimes you can't really say, oh, is because I'm a woman? Because they'll be like, Oh, no, we didn't see it, or we hear you or something. But the man is always head somehow. Yeah, but the woman may be too quiet. And most times too on the team. You don't need seen in there, like 14 men, and you're the only woman on the team. A lot of women can get timid just by that. Yeah. And they may have a wonderful idea or a wonderful solution to what is being worked on. But they may not be able to speak up. So oftentimes, the challenges that women have on these tech teams, I just challenges of all how do I say this, or maybe they have said something before, and then a month to credit, and they didn't want trouble. So just allow that to happen. So don't ever speak up again. So I like I said, when I started, women are just generally marginalised. Like, in so many places, I don't know about pay grade men and women in Nigeria. But I'm well aware that some companies who have paved but by levels, whether you're a man or a woman, you would end the scene. What, what's the problem? Like I said before, the first problem is, they see product management as a low hanging fruit. And then they say, Oh, you're a woman. Very easy. They don't see you a woman. But when you come to someone, maybe it's your personal take on strategy to take, what can I do? Or where can I go? Yeah, what can I do to transition? And you're like, oh, yeah, there's so many things you can do. You know, product management, is just this is just the unconsciously in people's minds, that when a lady wants to transition, she should transition except people who already know what they want to do. Either like, oh, I want to do product markets, and I want to I want to do mobile development, I want to do front end work, or back end work. Like, if they don't know the particular thing to do most of the time. When they're speaking to men or even women. They just say, oh, yeah, the product manager, it's very easy. It's very, like, I'm not saying it's hard. But it's just a stereotype that all women should just go into product management. And then they don't think of saying, Oh, I think you should learn how to code first.

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Right? Well, hopefully, initiatives like yours are gonna, people in product are going to help to drive some of the value discussions that we've been talking about, and really making sure that product managers, male and female are being given the respect that they deserve. And hopefully that will help to dispel the idea that product management is an easy job. And that's just somewhere that people should go. But I also think that it's really important for women to get involved in design and development as well. I think that just having equal access across the board is so important. So hopefully, you can help with that. Um, we hope so. Um, where can people find you after this, if they want to talk to you more about any of the issues that we talked about, hear about people in product about product management in general, or maybe even try and get you to sing them a song?

34:20

I'm on Twitter, I'm very active on Twitter. And I'm also on LinkedIn. And you can also reach me via mail. So Twitter, LinkedIn, and my email... I also write on Medium. So yeah, that's that's, that's about it. Really.

34:38

I'll make sure to put everything into the show notes. And hopefully you get a few people coming across and sharing some more stories with you. All right. Well, I spent a fantastic chat. So obviously really appreciate you spending the time and telling me some of your experience and some of the initiatives that you're working on and some of the things that are going on in product management in the area in general. Hopefully we can stay in touch but as for now, thanks for taking the time.

35:00

All right, thank you so much for your time. Thank you.

35:06

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you do again, I can only encourage you to hop over to OneKnightInProduct.com, check out some of our other fantastic guests, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app. Make sure you share with your friends so you and they can never miss another episode again. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest. But as for now, thanks and good night.