

# AJVC SLACK CHANNEL

AMA#12 WITH AVISH RANA DATED 20TH  
SEPTEMBER

## SNEAK PEEK



Avish Rana is currently working as a consultant at McKinsey & Company. Before his current stint, he has close to 4 years of experience working at start-ups as a PM & has also been an entrepreneur.

He holds an MBA from the Indian School of Business & a [B.Tech-M.Tech] Dual Degree from IIT Kanpur. He wanted to be an aerospace engineer when he entered IITK but loved the fast-moving culture of the tech industry, eventually co-founding a consumer 3D printing company. They incubated the start-up in IITK's incubation centre, won a bunch of B-plan competitions, and raised seed funding but struggled with getting product-market fit.

The search for what makes a start-up successful took him to Housing.com where he led growth for their Online Rental Agreements product, growing it 3x in less than six months. He joined Shuttl right after their Series A in early 2016 & spent the majority of his short PM career there, leading three different products in 3 years - ranging from operations to consumer to enterprise. When not at work, he enjoys reading, running, playing video games and 'wasting' time on Twitter. He also happens to be a certified scuba diver.

"DISTRIBUTION > PRODUCT > BRAND.  
A LOT OF TIMES PEOPLE START  
SOLVING FOR A PRODUCT BEFORE  
SOLVING FOR DISTRIBUTION...."

AVISH RANA



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**What made you switch from product management to consulting, and do you plan to go back?**

While I loved product management and can totally imagine building a career doing that, I saw a bunch of CXO level folks at startups I or my friends worked at, and felt that while one can get promoted really fast at start-ups, people might not always be ready for that position high up. Particularly - generic business problem solving and structured communication are two key skills that consulting seems to prepare one for. So I felt the detour was a 'risk' I could take to get those foundational skills. That said, consulting/MBA are just two of many ways to pick those skills up, and very risk averse ones. And about whether I plan to stay or not, I plan my career in 6 month and 10 year time frames. Nothing in between. I know I want to stay at McKinsey for now, and I want to be contributing in a significant way in the tech industry 10 years from now - as a Founder/Product guy/VC. So my guess is as good as yours about how long I'm going to be here. McKinsey is also doing interesting engagements in tech now, so you might find me here 10 years from now. "How to pick a career" is a great post by Tim Urban that I have revisited every year for the past couple of years.

**What were some of the greatest challenges that you faced during your time at Shuttl?**

Here are a few off the top of my head:

- Year 1: Figuring out how to be a good product manager with very little development experience or technical know how.
- Year 2: Increasing growth while also maintaining retention in a product as well as service that has a huge physical/logistical component to it. On which I had very little influence.
- Year 3: Figure out how enterprise product management differs from consumer and how do I add value in something that is so 'sales' driven.

**Did Product Management come as a natural next step after starting up Objectify in college? What was the transition from a Founder to a Product Manager like?**

I wish it was easy! I knew some stuff from having done my own start-up and knew what failing looks like, but it still took me over a year to develop a sense of product-market fit. But yes, after a couple of years in Product Management, I could connect a lot of dots. So, it was largely helpful.

But I guess it depends on the kind of role one plays at their startup.

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**What would be the 3 things that you have learnt and would believe everyone should know to excel in diverse fields?**

These may not apply to everyone:

- What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I was laid off at Housing with 70% of the product team, but that experience of uncertainty has made me surprisingly resilient about job uncertainty today.
- Career is a 40 year game. It is okay to take it slow as long as you focus on the learning. I don't have to be a VP of a product within 8 years if I start as an APM out of college.
- If it's not a Hell Yes, it's a No. I took a pay-cut to join Shuttl when I had a couple of other offers from larger start-ups and did not regret it. Because I loved the problem they were solving & really admired the CEO.

**Among the people you've worked with during these roles, who do you admire and why?**

Lots of people. But if I have to choose 3:

- Amit Singh, CEO at Shuttl. Very calm, focused on the long term, super approachable.
- Gaurav Jain, ex-head of product at Shuttl: Taught me a ton about product management.
- Rahul Gill, co-founder KOKO (an e-rickshaw start-up): Exceptional thinker who taught me what first principles thinking is all about.

**What would be your advice to a founder who's struggling with product market fit? What's the correct way to approach it?**

Not an easy question, I would love to discuss this in person. But 2 common mistakes I've seen:

- It is better to have 10 people who LOVE your product than have a 1000 who sort of like it. Do things that don't scale to get there if you have to.
- Distribution > Product > Brand. A lot of times people start solving for a product before solving for distribution.

**What made you switch from Housing which at that point was pretty famous and heavily funded to a rising new startup like Shuttl?**

To be honest, I was laid off with 70% of the product team at that time. They gave a nice severance package i.e. 2 months pay and HR sent out an email letting people know about what had happened. Everyone started getting calls from recruiters, and most people got another job soon. I took a couple of months to explore some start-up ideas, when a random email from Shuttl landed in my inbox because they'd heard about the layoffs. Housing was shutting down "rent" entirely. So they didn't need the team.

**What made you opt for an upgrad product management program along with Shuttl? What are some things you felt maybe can be improved upon after your stint at Housing or during initial days at Shuttl?**

I was actually a tutor for the UpGrad course. Kind of a teaching assistant, giving feedback on assignments. It was a good experience getting to look at other people's learning journey through PM. The biggest flaw in my thinking for the first couple of years: Jumping to the solution too early. Stay in the problem space for a while, get to the real problem your users face and you'll automatically have a better product.

**How was your transition from Product Management to Consulting? What all factors helped you in getting into consulting?**

I think it's fairly straightforward once you get to a B-school where these firms come to hire. You need spikes across 2 or 3 portions of your resume:

- Academics - so good grades
  - Work experience - I think mine was pretty okay
  - Extra curriculums - Usually national level player kind of stuff. I didn't have much here.
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**Can you share some of your learnings from entrepreneurial experience?**

**What made you feel MBA would be the right step since you had practical experience in product space with respect to marketing and strategy and a PM course done?**

**Would also love to get to know your thought process for planning a career roadmap since you have dabbled with multiple experiences.**

Chase product market fit!

Here's what I call the first-time entrepreneur mistake - starting with a solution instead of a problem. We started by wanting to build a consumer 3D printing company when there was no need for it. Same with a lot of my friends who wanted to build an AI/ Blockchain company. They ultimately pivoted to find a genuine user problem or had to shut down.

Honestly, MBA was more of a gateway to consulting.

An MBA has the following benefits in my opinion

- Network
- Career change
- Location change
- Brand

All of us would assign different weights to these things and decide if it's worth the money. The classroom learning is valuable, but that is becoming far more accessible with every passing year due to online courses.

**What would you say were some things you did right in your career and why? Any mistakes or things one should avoid while building his or her career?**

Things I did right:

- Joined a company where I liked the mission and the people, every single time.
- Took time out to read/learn about what I was doing, really helped me become a better PM. You have to take time to sharpen the saw while you're using it.

Things I messed up & still do sometimes:

- Humility: People can teach you so much if you just stop to listen.
- Prioritization: You cannot do everything. Find the top few things and just be great at that. It will be enough.

**What are some books you would recommend?**

- Product: Lean Product Playbook
  - Life: Man's Search for Meaning
  - Culture: Creativity Inc., Hard Thing about Hard Things
  - How to be a manager: High Output Management
  - Human Psychology: Behave by Robert Sapolsky
  - Negotiation: Never split the difference, How to win friends and influence people
  - Conflict resolution: Nonviolent Communication
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**What is the most important lesson you learned during your time at objectify technologies which is helping you in the present?**

Don't think about the solution.

We were so focused on building a consumer 3D printing company that we never stopped long enough to wonder do people even need what we're selling? And this was when we won 3 B-plan competitions across IIMA/B and IITD. It is very difficult for other people to help you if you are not talking to your customers and know their problems.

**Any learnings from your internships during your college years which have been significant in your career?**

It was good fun working in a different country.

I think it's worth trying if you get the opportunity. But yeah, I didn't accomplish anywhere close to what I had planned to do on that internship.

It taught me how important mentorship is when it comes to PhD. Kind of the reason why I moved to entrepreneurship from wanting to be a researcher.

**What learning you imbibed from Scuba diving?**

It's a great meditative experience, and teaches you to take long deep breaths. Which is also an important skill to have outside of the water.

Takes you about 10 dives and 5 days to get an advanced scuba diving license. I've done 15 dives so far.

I would recommend checking out one of these places for affordable options:

- Koh Tao, Thailand
- Amed, Bali, Indonesia

**I also co-founded a company and currently working as a PM at a startup. In 10 years time frame, I want to build a large company by solving a big problem. Will working at a VC firm will help me in any way in this journey? In what ways?**

I honestly don't know.

I know people who said that it has helped them and people who have said that it was useless.

My current understanding is that working at a VC firm with zero experience with start-ups (like folks coming from consulting) helps with building understanding & a network.

But if you've seen how a start-up works, there might not be a huge value add from an entrepreneurship perspective.

**Do you have any suggestions for budding entrepreneurs?**

Not an easy question, I would love to discuss this in person.

Here are a few that might help

- It is better to have 10 people who LOVE your product than have a 1000 who sort of like it. Do things that don't scale to get there if you have to.
  - Distribution > Product > Brand. A lot of times people start solving for a product before solving for distribution.
  - Your co-founder should ideally be someone with whom you have some history together, of disagreements, then resolutions, fights and still being friends. It really helps when you will have disagreements.
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