

## Module 2: Interview with Nia Johnson, Product Manager at Axios

[00:00:12] **Adriana Lacy** Hi, everyone. For this week's module, what we're hearing from Nia Johnson, who's a fellow product manager at Axios. Nia, how are you today?

[00:00:21] **Nia Johnson** Good. How are you?

[00:00:22] **Lacy** Pretty good, can't complain. So how did you get into product management? Kind of working with news. I would love to hear your journey.

[00:00:31] **Johnson** It came from a pretty interesting spot. Like once I graduated Howard University in 2016, I actually got into tech consulting and through that I became a business analyst, which is slightly different, but actually very close to a PM [product manager]. So basically just under the consulting product structure, it's more like a BA and a product owner and the BA will gather requirements. You gotta do all that requirement gathering work and then work with the product owner to come up with like the actual pieces of work needed to be done and approve that and that would actually go to the developers. So the difference there was that at Axios was that it was more of a PM team structure rather than a PO/PA structure. So that role was kind of that PA/PO role was kind of combined into one role. So I actually came in pretty prime to kind of take on that because there was a lot of the day to day stuff. Those are the stuff I was already doing under a different project model.

[00:01:45] **Lacy** Oh, wow. That's really interesting to kind of see that story, because one thing that we're seeing with this course is a lot of students that are enrolled may not have a traditional kind of journey into products and they're typically in bridge roles and wanting to kind of make the jump. So it's kind of cool to see what your path looks like. Could you talk a little bit about what the day to day roles of kind of a product manager looks like?

[00:02:08] **Johnson** OK, so a lot of the day to day rolls is basically just meeting with stakeholders and a lot of it is just managing people. So it's like managing stakeholders, managing your team members, making sure that you're answering any questions or kind of clarifying any sort of miscommunications to make sure that both your stakeholders and the engineers implementing the project are on the same page because if they're not, then it's not going to be done.

[00:02:39] **Lacy** I can imagine. Stakeholders are something that we talk a lot about in this course as well, because in news in particular, there is a lot more editorial standards and editorial things to deal with, as well as the product and the type requirements.

[00:02:52] **Johnson** Oh one hundred percent. And I think the one thing that makes a huge difference with news versus like any other industry is that as much as I think on the team level, we want to maintain agile processes and agile stuff. The thing about it is that you can't really help when news happens. So it's kind of just like keeping that workflow as intact as possible while also still being able to respond to the needs of editorial as they're ever changing and moving super fast.

[00:03:24] **Lacy** Yeah, absolutely. I think being being nimble and just being willing to just pivot and think this super important for working in news. So something else you're talking about, this model particularly is the product discovery path. So starting from figuring out what are user needs to figure out a solution and then ultimately kind of launching your product. Could you give an example of a product you've worked on from that beginning stage to launching it?

[00:03:52] **Johnson** OK, let's say there is this one thing that I was above creating this curation feature that was in our Axios Internal CMS. It was mostly our like it was already designed out like these already designed out by the time I got there. But like, one thing I had to do is kind of just follow up with the stakeholders to make sure it is still what you want? Is there anything else that you see? And then kind of doing that interfacing and then making those into your requirements and then actually just shipping the product and launching it. Even just towards the end of the launch process, it was like kind of the change management aspect. So not only just asking people what they want, but once it was built, kind of educating the users. This is how you use this. This is how you actually can get from point A to point B, because without that education, then it can easily go awry and it can also mean the difference between a very successful project and not so successful project if your stakeholders don't know what to do with what you've already built.

[00:05:10] **Lacy** That's super interesting, kind of just going off of that really quickly, the education aspect. For you, what does that typically look like? Is that somebody just like doing a demo or anything else?

[00:05:19] **Johnson** It can really be anything. I think ultimately for me, like I like to ask my stakeholder's like, how do you want this to be? How do you want this to be delivered? So often they'll ask for like maybe webinars or like a user guide or like a one pager that they can quickly refer to. Some people have asked for Slack chat, being able to communicate by Slack. So it's kind of just making yourself available to your stakeholders in whatever way they need. So they feel supported in doing this new thing.

[00:05:50] **Lacy** Yeah, that's a great point. I think a lot of people think that the solution is just one size fits all, but it really just depends on what that specific user need is. You touched on this a little bit, but what are some of the challenges and maybe opportunities that come with being a PM?

[00:06:13] **Johnson** I think the challenge is realizing that this is a very people-oriented job and I think it's very easy to kind of get really deep into the requirements, really deep into the product discovery, and forget that there are people on both sides of this. There are stakeholders that you need to build relationships with, but you also need to build relationships with your team. So while there is a lot of that technical deliverable work, I think the most important thing is to have a relationship with all of your stakeholders, because in that way, you're kind of the glue that holds like this kind of communication exchange together.

[00:06:55] **Lacy** Absolutely, that's vital. Another question is, there's a lot of people in this course who don't have a product title right now, but they really want to break into product in the future. What are your tips on how to navigate that?

[00:07:08] **Johnson** I say it's kind of going back to what we've talked about before, about rituals like I would say, like even if you can't get a product title now, there's also jobs as a product analyst. I've heard people use those models to kind of break into product manager roles. I personally got in through being a business analyst, a consulting or just a federal contact. So there's ways that you can do that with federal or even enterprise companies. I think it's kind of just utilizing those kind of bridge roles. If those aren't available to you, then I would say another way to do that is to get in contact with somebody who is in product and organization and kind of build some sort of like mentoring relationship with them and then use that as your way in.

[00:08:03] **Lacy** That's great advice. I think the mentoring is a big aspect because they've got a lot of people you don't necessarily need a degree in product management, but being able to get those experiences and get that mentorship super important.

[00:08:16] **Johnson** One hundred percent and I feel like of any job I've noticed is like networking is kind of that huge thing. It's like networking and showing that you can deliver if you are given something, if you are given that opportunity.

[00:08:31] **Lacy** Yeah, absolutely, and I guess for those of us who are in this course who may never be product managers but want to bring this product thinking into the news process. Do you have any tips for that?

[00:08:45] **Johnson** I would recommend Project to Product. The book basically just builds a connection between the project mindset, which is kind of dominated the 20th century with car making and stuff like that and talking about how now our main export is digital products and services, and having to move from a project to a product mindset and how we kind of reorient ourselves to that workflow. So I would go with that. I would also recommend doing CSPO, which is the CSPO certification. There's the IIBA certification and just taking product bootcamps, maybe learning more about agile and agile processes. I think those are very easy ways. Also the CSM certification as well, which is like the master one.

[00:09:42] **Lacy** Yeah, I think we can learn so many tools and you can really just kind of repurpose for the future newsroom life.

[00:09:50] **Johnson** Yeah.

[00:09:52] **Lacy** Lastly before you go, a lot of people have been asking about what platform to use for product management such as Airtable or Notion. Could you share some of your favorite workflow?

[00:10:04] **Johnson** I feel like I have only one favorite. Like I've dealt with so many workflows and my favorite of all of them is Jira, and it's not necessarily because Jira is amazing, I feel like just out of all the workflow tools, Jira is the least forced one out of the bunch.

[00:10:22] **Lacy** That's a great idea and that's something I was telling people in this course. At the end of the day, like your best workflow tool is the one that everyone is using. If that's Google Doc or Airtable or Jira, whatever works for you.

[00:10:37] **Johnson** I think it's important for us not to get too attached to a particular workflow, I obviously have my favorite, I just love that. At the end of the day, you're not choosing the workflow tool your most likely, so you just kind of have to work with the one that is in that organization and kind of make sure that all the information is there based on no matter what the interface is, kind of just have to express it with the tool you're given and have worked with that the best you can.

[00:11:08] **Lacy** I completely agree. Thank you so much Nia for joining us and talking a little bit about your journey, I really appreciate it.

[00:11:14] **Johnson** Any time I'm happy to help. Thank you for inviting me.

[00:11:19] **Lacy** Of course, thanks.