

HOW YOUR NEXT EXECUTIVE ROLE FINDS YOU

FEATURING

ELLIE WU



VICE PRESIDENT,

**CUSTOMER SUCCESS
AT INSIGHT PARTNERS**

BY GINA RILEY



Looking for your next leadership level role? What if you dropped the traditional “spray and pray” approach for resume submissions and started conversations with people who **influence** hiring decisions? What if you took an untraditional approach by thinking like a hunter or curious explorer versus flooding job sites with your resume?

This article features an interview with **Ellie Wu**, who recently signed on to join **Insight Partners as Vice President of Customer Success**. During our interview, she shared the intentional ways she created opportunities and accelerated her move into executive roles through connections with hubs of influence.

Ellie has over 17 years of experience across hyper-growth SaaS and multinational corporations with deep expertise in effectively guiding teams to identifying and understanding the evolving needs, opportunities, and challenges customers face to help them maximize achievable value. As a new executive at Insight Partners, she will work closely with high-growth portfolio companies to build winning Customer Success strategies and functions.

Prior to joining Insight Partners, she led Customer Experience at Bugcrowd, a crowdsourced security platform and before that was the Senior Director of Customer Experience Transformation at SAP Concur. Ellie has also led Community Experiences at TEDxSeattle, is a Certified Customer Experience Professional (CCXP), a graduate from Stanford Graduate School of Business’ LEAD program and serves on the Board of Advisors for Women in Cloud.

As you progressed through your career, what were your primary career goals?

The north star of my career has been finding or creating environments where I can continuously grow, improve and evolve. I aim to seize opportunities just outside my comfort zone and expand my expertise by reading books, taking classes to learn a new skill (in-person or virtual), or



hiring a coach who can help me reach the next level of success.

If you were to point to one activity that has helped keep you on track and find success faster, what would that be?

One skill that's had an outsized impact for me is mastering ways to increase my productivity and impact with a clear focus on what success looks like, both personally and professionally. By leveraging my most precious resource (my time), I prioritize the vital few items and move from being busy to being effective.

This ruthless prioritization is how I create space to tackle audacious goals. These experiences to stretch allow me to test my boundaries, sharpen my awareness on when to ask for help, and broaden my chances to apply different perspectives.

I've heard you describe yourself as an unapologetic optimist who sees herself as a persistent underdog. How has this mindset influenced your career journey?

Growing up in an immigrant household, the elements of optimism and persistence were part of my blended world. While there was struggle

in my family's experience, there were also many situations that offered hope. Seeing the different possibilities from an early age helped me develop the belief that nearly anything can be achieved through hard work and ingenuity.

This mentality influenced many life decisions including why I chose computer engineering as my major. While I was contemplating this choice, I was told I didn't "look like an engineer." What this person didn't know was that I was renting a room from an Asian woman who was not only an engineering manager at Microsoft but a single mom to three kids! By seeing someone who looked like me do so much with her Engineering degree, it inspired me to follow her on that path.

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When you grow up without the comfort of fitting in, obstacles become part of the path to any goal. I got comfortable with taking risks and dreaming bigger than I “should.” The struggle for each win helped reframe my relationship with failure and rejection as part of the journey to reach important goals.

With each setback, I looked for ways to create opportunities, such as investing in the coursework needed to stand out or exploring alternatives that got me to my intended goal. For example, after getting rejected for my first (retail) sales job because I was an engineering student with no sales experience, I immediately drove to a different location to apply and ended up being one of the top salespeople.

Despite the obstacles, how have you maintained a positive career trajectory?

It boils down to having a clear understanding of what's most interesting for me, so the pursuit is energizing. This approach has allowed me to show up with caring and authenticity while blending my technical skills and soft skills. Even with clarity and due diligence, each role has been a mutual leap of faith - sometimes that means I am betting on a company and other times I am betting on myself. In the end it has been about creating environments where I'm inspired to care radically, the goals are clear, and I've built feedback loops for my teams and I to do our best work.

It seems like you have a fastidious way of structuring what you do to achieve your goals. What is one of the best things you've implemented that has moved your career forward?

There can be an urge to “do it all,” so I have found consistent success through discipline and patience. It takes discipline to focus on a few vital items and patience to cultivate the outcomes from that discipline.

By accepting rejection as part of the process and a form of progress, I’m able to focus on the elements within my control. Earlier in my career, I was an Account Development Representative, aka ADR. Anyone who has done outbound selling can attest to the fortitude it builds when you get rejected all day in different ways and rally for the next call. So, I focused on the elements I controlled – my preparation, the minimum number of connections I would make each day, and consistently following up.

I also apply this discipline and patience to new opportunities, whether I’m actively looking or if I get tapped on the shoulder. First, I ask “Am I running towards something? Or, running away?”

Having an honest conversation is critical because I didn’t want to run away from a bad situation to something that is as bad

(or worse) and further my frustrations and stifle my confidence.

There is a great quote by the late, great Dr. Martin Luther King, “If you can’t fly, run. If you can’t run, walk. If you can’t walk, crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.” Having a good system allows me to focus and celebrate the progress that is within my control. When you can track your progress and keep yourself accountable, you can celebrate the progress in knowing that you’re doing everything you can to move yourself forward. And the harder you work the luckier you’ll seem to get!

Did you ever feel like you were stuck in your career or struggled to get to the next level and how did you overcome it?

Over the years, I would often be the “only” in the room - only woman, only person of color, noticeably younger, etc. To add insult to injury, I’d also see peers with negative customer feedback and dishonest behaviors getting promoted because of their personal relationships with powerful executives.

For years, I leaned into my work ethic to unstick myself until I finally realized I was playing by the wrong set of rules. Hard work and effort worked in school but was not enough in this corporate world. After recognizing the limits of my environment, I went back to my systems and frameworks to establish a clear vision of what good looks like and found a better fit with a hyper-growth startup.

Instead of contorting myself into organizations that weren’t aligned



to my values, I was engaged and inspired to leverage and amplify my strengths and energy to do my best work. With the Great Resignation and the evolution of the future of work, companies will need to meet a rising bar where more employees are asking the question, “Is it me or is this company not a good fit?”

Many people wait to be recognized and plucked from obscurity for their next, best job. How did you get “found”? Was it the right place at the right time? How did you get “in the line of sight” for your VP jobs?

There are different ways this can happen based on - Who knows you? Do they know what problems you can tackle? Are they in the rooms where these opportunities come up?

To improve your chances to be considered, make your own luck through consistent engagement with your industry (preparation + opportunity). By showing up for my team, various communities, and openly sharing the lessons I’ve learned, I created connections that feel more organic and less transactional.

Another unexpected avenue based on consistent engagement is previous direct reports. I’ve had people refer me when their company was looking for a new leader because they wanted to work for me again. Folks will often look to senior leaders for opportunities, but this 360 technique is a highly effective method to add to your approach.

You are the first person in this series that has brought up a 360-degree perspective of having a previous direct report think of you when an opportunity comes up. There could be an exciting job out there where you get to work with people you previously mentored, guided, and coached.



One thing you've done beautifully is carve a path of thought leadership around yourself by building a website that served as a hub of information for people in your budding field.

Surprisingly, my decision to build the PictureCS website was not with the goal of being a thought leader. I started it because I had a need and that's why it resonated with others looking to better understand Customer Success too. Analyzing what people tried, what worked, and what didn't was a time-consuming endeavor and I wanted to make it easier for others by sharing what I was learning in a visual, concise format. I had fun doing it!

I still remember the excitement I felt when a Customer Success leader (in Canada) told me they printed out every single one of the infographics and had it on their office wall for their teams to reference. In following my philosophy of staying curious, growing, being generous, this website developed its own energy and created meaningful relationships for me with the customer success and customer experience industry.

What are some of the surprising experiences that informed where you are today which people might not expect to hear?

Growing up, I saw my parents and their friends carve different paths to success and realized there wasn't “one way” to get there. But everyone who made it worked

tirelessly with a single-minded focus on reaching their goals. This commitment became part of my core and influenced my decisions including the amount of work I took on while I was a full-time student pursuing my Computer Engineering degree.

With supportive parents who helped where they could, I was able to double-down with determination and managed four part-time jobs. Between classes M-F, I worked in the IT department and was a campus ambassador for Nortel networks. After work and on the weekends, I had my job in retail and Saturday mornings I worked as a dental office assistant. Juggling those experiences is not something I would recommend for everybody, but it informed how I wanted to work, taught me about boundaries and ruthless prioritization, and helped me get to where I am today.

Do you feel like you created a “pull strategy”?

Instead of a pull strategy, I aim to create a flywheel of opportunities for myself and others. At this point, I am introduced to more opportunities than I can, or would want to, explore so I look to make introductions where it makes sense.

In addition to connecting my network to opportunities, I’m also intentional about making personal connections by sending cards to thank the dozens of people for the direct and positive impact they’ve had on me during the year. While it takes hours to customize each one, it was important for me to do that. Even if I don’t hear back, I do it because I want to them to know the ripple effect of their effort and it might be the bright spot in their



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Are you are widely known for something?

It depends on who you ask because I lead with curiosity and, as a result, have a broad network with different experiences with me. Primarily, I would say I’m known for the work I do with Customer Experience and Customer Success to drive revenue and optimize a growth strategy. On a personal level, I’ve consistently operated as someone who is trusted, respected, and credible. Internally, I’m seen as a strong ideation partner who brings extensive experience into each conversation and follows through with execution. Externally, some folks know me from the work I’ve done with TEDx, others know me from the advisory work I do on the board of Women in Cloud.

I like how you broke that down into two buckets. You are known for your functional and technical expertise as well as with your brand as a human being - as a person who adds value no matter what sphere you're operating in - whether that's TEDx or whether that's in your company.

What is your philosophy about networking?

Networking can have a negative connotation, but I approach it through a lens of learning, meeting, and connecting with people. A strategy I use at any networking event is to shift my goal from meeting people to connecting as many people together as possible. With this approach, I can engage without feeling as self-conscious, be a better listener, and enjoy the event more.

With the pandemic, networking has also evolved to virtual settings and can be an extension of your brand and reputation. At the core, networking is about building relationships. Send a note to tell someone to keep up the good work, engage on interesting posts, and offer support where you can. Often, this only takes a couple of minutes to create these points of connection. Kindness and caring don't cost anything and gives us a chance to add positivity to spaces that can only be better for it.

Often times, people are afraid to “toot their own horns” and put their successes and thought leadership out there. How does a person get over their fear of what others will think? Don't we need social proof of our successes?

There's a saying, “When a tree falls in the woods and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?” When it comes to hard work as the foundation to success, your results matter when they are recognized and valued by others.

So, to get promoted, you must promote yourself first. Talk about your successes in your organization and don't stop there. Share them with your network, with your industry, and cross-functionally.

Social media shifted how people perceive self-promotion, especially younger generations. While it may always feel awkward for me to ask for votes or nominations, I can invest my time across multiple channels and communities. I discuss how I've approached situations or challenges, what I would have done differently, and learn how others are finding better ways. We are all on a shared journey.

Did you have role models, mentors, or sponsors to help you along the way?

Absolutely! I have an amazing mosaic of mentors, sponsors, coaches, hype squad, advisors ... you name it! My wide-ranging and diverse network has inspired me in different ways from serving as a sanity check to providing life-changing intros. Too often, I see assumptions around mentors and sponsors narrowly defined as a formal arrangement. My personal board of advisors range from informal relationships, formal agreements, or paid engagements. There are even some role models I've never met, but I follow them on social media, listen to their podcasts, and read their books.





Furthermore, I don't expect any role model, mentor, or sponsor to be a "magic pill" or "fairy godmother" to help me up a ladder because my journey has felt more like climbing a muddy hill. The power, for me, in these relationships is that they have been the helping hand to get me back on my feet and keep it moving. They've reminded me of who I am and who I am meant to become.

What are some of the biggest barriers you've faced when it comes to uncovering unadvertised jobs? What are ways companies can develop practices to ensure diverse candidate pools at the leadership level when so many are obtained from relationships?

Breaking in has been the hardest part and I haven't found anyone who feels like they've figured it out. Even with more companies looking to improve diversity, there is still a significant obstacle to connecting with the leaders who have access and influence in the rooms where opportunities are created. After years of exercising discipline and patience to move the needle, this investment has recently paid off where these influencers are speaking my name when opportunities come up. But if they didn't know me, they couldn't do that.

Any leader tasked with building a team is in a position to do things differently. As a VP of Customer Experience in the cybersecurity space, I've built an exceptional team where more than 60% are people of color and we have over 50% women. When you compare these figures to the tech or cybersecurity benchmarks, there is a large gap – and it required focused effort. During the recruiting process, I pushed myself and my recruiting team to fill our pipeline with diversity of thought and experiences with a propensity for innovation. We didn't compromise on the quality of the people we hired.

As challenges like The Great Resignation created additional pressures for teams to frantically fill roles at a heightened pace in an even hotter market, the desire to stick with a familiar path is strong. However, The Great Resignation also presents a unique moment where there are more people (of all backgrounds) willing to explore a change. This is also when continuous networking can accelerate hiring. Actively engaging with others in and around your industry leads to meeting more people - which broadens the nets we cast. Inviting my network to combine our efforts to surface a diverse set of candidates has been a great partnership and how I was able to double a team and fill 80% of the open roles within two quarters.

You unlocked your recent opportunities by intentionally reaching out to decision makers and building relationships within the investment community. Would you tell me about that?

A ship's bridge is the captain's control center because it is the position with the best view and access. It was a friend (and sponsor) who shared her strategy of connecting directly with investors instead of individual companies. By doing this, I'm able to amplify my efforts through the hubs of influence where critical hiring decisions are being discussed. Her connection did not lead to a good fit, but when I started asking more of the folks in my network for similar connections, they turned out to be great learnings and introductions to fruitful opportunities.

It can certainly be intimidating to reach out to the folks in these positions, but I found that most saw the value of making a connection and I always offered an "out" if it did not make sense. Getting the first intro is likely the hardest part and at the end of each conversation, I would ask, "Who else could benefit from a conversation like this?" These conversations would also give us a chance to learn about shared interests and experiences outside of work that led to personal connections. By adopting a nonstandard approach, I stopped "spraying and praying with applications" and started hunting.

What are the common pitfalls or mistakes you see aspiring leaders make when it comes to career transitions?

A common pitfall for many, including aspiring leaders, is putting too much weight on what people will think about a career transition. Over the years, I've learned that no one thinks about us nearly as much as we think they might.

Deeply rooted in fear of rejection or judgment, the hesitation and worry about "being ready" can hold many people back particularly if they are comfortable. This is when I challenge myself by understanding the motivating "why" behind any move. Because, if you really want to do something, you'll find a way and if you don't

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There is a lot of talk about agility and adaptability. What are some of the new challenges associated with leading amidst a pandemic?

The biggest shift I've seen is the disparity between leadership styles. Those with a controlling style create a low trust environment and have seen their people move onto greener pastures. This hands-on approach may have worked when we were all in the same office, but there has been a noticeable change with employees choosing leaders who lead with trust and manage by creating the environments for their teams to do their best work.

Empathetic leaders have started separating themselves from the pack. Their teams choose to stay, grow, and thrive. The ability to attract (and keep) high performers is becoming an even larger competitive advantage.

On a final note, what are the three tips you would leave with a leadership level job seeker?

When it comes to leadership level jobs, **have a clear understanding of what energizes** you beyond the pay and title because you'll need to dig deep to tackle the meaningful challenges. The people who work with you will sense your energy and either be inspired or drained.

Next, **establish a scorecard and system** and track potential opportunities. You'll need a visual scorecard or tool to help check any biases, track your progress, and hold yourself accountable.

Lastly, **stay gracious and curious**. You never know where a great conversation could lead. Remember to appreciate everyone who is part of that journey. Show gratitude to those who took the time and chose to help you – whether they were a referral or the person who helped to schedule the interviews.

WHAT IS NEXT?

I'm thrilled to be joining the leading software growth investment firm - Insight Partners. As a VP of Customer Success, I'll be leveraging my 17+ years of experience across Sales, Account Management, Customer Success and Customer Experience to elevate this function internally and across Insight's portfolio companies.

Thank you, Ellie!

CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE



Gina Riley Consulting & creator of the CareerVelocity System™. She is a career transition coach who helps leaders customize their career stories to land jobs where they can leave a legacy. She is an Executive Search Consultant for Talence Group.



**CONTACT
GINA:**

ginarileyconsulting.com

 @ginariley