



Fruits of Mentorship: How Veronica Abreu and Jennifer Lam Inspired Each Other and Airbnb

Career Development



Mentoring relationships are everywhere in Silicon Valley, but we have never seen one as dynamic and inspiring as the one between Veronica Abreu and Jennifer Lam. Abreu, who is currently chief privacy officer at Square, worked at Airbnb for four years, building out its product counseling, privacy, cybersecurity, and IP legal functions. Lam, who is currently senior counsel at Airbnb, was her first hire and a trusted report for over three years. I sat down with the two lawyers to discuss their dynamic relationship and how it shaped Airbnb — and each other.

The dream team forms

Abreu calls Lam her “first — and best — hire.” When Lam came to Airbnb in May 2014, she “hit the ground sprinting to not only take the lead as product counsel for host operations, but was also a key partner in helping lead legal support for Airbnb’s 2014 rebrand,” says Abreu. Even after leaving Airbnb, Abreu sings Lam’s praises. “Over the years, Jenn has touched multiple parts of Airbnb’s product, both front and back end,” she reflects. “Given her skills in working with engineers and product, she has been instrumental in leading Airbnb’s GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) efforts.”

Before Airbnb, Lam was the product and intellectual property counsel at Zynga, creator of online games, such as Words with Friends. “I worked on a full-range of legal issues related to launching online games, including content regulation, product development, privacy, and promotions,” Lam explains.



Abreu insists that Lam’s background makes her well suited for her current role, however different it may be. “She has the well-rounded background that is essential to top performance as a privacy and product attorney in tech,” Abreu says.



On the same page

Part of what makes Abreu and Lam’s relationship so effective is that they share a vision of how to succeed in their roles. “Product and privacy counseling, to my view, function best when they are highly strategic functions,” Abreu explains. “It is essential that one has a deep understanding both of the technology and how the work fits into the company’s — and product team’s — overall strategy. Within that context, we can best tailor our privacy, cybersecurity, and product counseling advice to achieve compliance in a way that is well suited to the business and technologies at hand.”

Lam agrees, adding that “a basic understanding of technology, especially information security, is crucial to being effective privacy and product counsel. It helps me appreciate the business and technological constraints that Airbnb operates under.”

This shared vision helped ensure that the two lawyers could effectively advise the company. “Jenn has excelled at this by always looking several steps ahead and advising accordingly,” Abreu explains. Lam adds:

“I view myself as a partner to the business team — we are all trying to solve the same problem. Sometimes, saying ‘no’ may be necessary, especially in an environment where we are pushing the boundaries of technology, social norms, and existing law. However, offering alternative solutions and options is important in the partnership dynamic and it’s where I feel I add the most value.”

A positive environment

Although Abreu is no longer with Airbnb, she acknowledges that mentoring Lam enriched her time with the company. “I’m glad I had the opportunity to build a strong team that can succeed me at Airbnb,” she says. “Watching Jenn grow and blossom during her three first years to take on greater and greater responsibilities has been rewarding.”

At the same time, Lam also appreciated the opportunity to truly contribute to Airbnb because of how Abreu empowered her in her role. “One of my favorite things about working at a fast-paced and innovative company like Airbnb is the ability to be creative,” she beams. “There are so many gray areas in privacy law. With the GDPR deadline approaching, and the uncertainty within the industry about how to operationalize and interpret the law, I get to help write Airbnb’s privacy story. It’s very exciting!”

Growing the company, growing professionally

Abreu and Lam’s relationship is unique in that they maintained the mentorship relationship while scaling legal on a relatively massive scale. A high-growth company is a great place to grow as a person and as a professional, but it requires employees who truly care about the company — not just its hype.

“When building a team, I highly value collaborative players who prioritize the company’s best interest and goals,” says Abreu. “This is important at any company, but essential at a high growth environment where one’s role by necessity changes every six months.” She continues:

“At the end of the day, the top performers who get rewarded tend to be those who develop a reputation for excellent work, high adaptability, collaborative approach that helps their peers and colleagues do their best work, and high business acumen. Each of these attributes require an ability to look beyond one’s personal goals and optimize for that which will make the company succeed at scale.”

Lam, empowered by Abreu’s leadership, fulfilled this goal by always thinking about how to do more with less. “I enjoy thinking of ways to leverage tools and how legal can empower internal business partners,” Lam explains. “This doesn’t necessarily mean helping them make their own legal decisions, but to help them identify problems so they know when to involve legal, and can design with legal in mind.”

Working together to achieve more

Abreu and Lam’s relationship is based on mutual respect and appreciation. Abreu was a great leader who empowered Lam and led both women to grow Airbnb. “Veronica brings a diverse background of

legal issues from her prior roles,” Lam praises. “Through her extensive experience, she’s been able to help identify and spot issues that may not be immediately apparent. It’s one of the ways we’ve been able to get ahead of certain issues, and has positively impacted the way we work with our internal business groups.”

Lam’s appreciation for Abreu’s approach enabled the women to “tag team” as legal counsel. “She keeps the business’ goals in mind. Veronica and I worked effectively together as we have similar approaches. So we were often able to tag team to provide seamless legal counseling,” explained Lam.

At the same time, by maintaining this dynamic mentorship and constantly impressing Abreu, Lam was able to prove herself and earn opportunities to grow, such as her current GDPR leadership. “Jenn is a unicorn that can scale with a rapidly expanding company and can take on various new roles,” Abreu notes. “It is no coincidence we’ve entrusted her with GDPR compliance.” She continues:

“Jenn’s greatest strength — and she has many — is her adaptability and growth mentality. I have always been impressed that I can entrust her with the most innovative projects that involve completely new and cutting edge legal issues. She digs in, does not drop a single ball, learns both the novel legal issues and the technology inside and out, and knocks it out of the park.”

Although the “dream team” of Abreu and Lam is no longer at Airbnb, the effects of their dynamic mentorship relationship live on at the company. “Through Veronica’s leadership, Airbnb has been able to build a legal product and privacy program at Airbnb that’s seen by internal teams as collaborative and business-centric,” explains Lam. “Her efforts have laid the groundwork and paved the way for me as I continue to build the privacy program.”

Ultimately, Abreu and Lam’s story is an excellent example of a mentorship relationship that goes beyond the usual to truly enrich both mentor and mentee — and the company lucky enough to have both of them.

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