



# THE ART & SCIENCE

When Joe Zadeh showed up for his interview with a Silicon Valley startup and found a loft apartment, he thought he must be in the wrong place.

Fresh from defending a dissertation for his bioengineering PhD at the California Institute of Technology in 2010, Zadeh was eager to join a startup. He'd spent a few months as a software engineer with Mint.com until it was acquired by Intuit, a large company he'd never even heard of.

Preferring to stay in an entrepreneurial environment, he began looking for opportunities with new ventures and soon heard about Airbnb, an online marketplace for accommodations. "The first thing I saw on the website was a Frank Lloyd Wright house that cost less to rent than staying at a hotel," he remembers. "That blew my mind."

Intrigued, Zadeh arrived at the company's headquarters, the founders' aforementioned loft apartment. During the interview, he saw a letter hanging on the wall and realized he was in exactly the right place. The letter was from an Airbnb host in New York who had turned to the organization to help rent out the family's house after the financial crisis of 2008.

"The letter was thanking Airbnb for saving their home," Zadeh says. "Until then, I hadn't realized how powerful an economic force Airbnb could be."

He accepted the job, becoming the organization's third engineer and ninth employee. Today, as VP of product, he leads large product management initiatives for the company. Watching the company grow from obscurity into an internationally recognized brand has been humbling. "Seven years ago no one had heard of us, and people were shocked that strangers would stay in each other's homes," he says. "Now Airbnb is becoming a verb and a household name."

## BALANCING ART AND SCIENCE

Success hasn't changed the spirit of the company, which Zadeh says remains the same today as when he joined in 2010. Early on, when everyone worked together in the loft, he was given the nickname Joebot to distinguish him from founder Joe Gebbia.

"The feeling of energy and excitement we had in those days is still there," he says. "The culture of the company is even stronger today than it was back then."

With his hands-on style, Zadeh is involved in all aspects of product management across the organization, from technology to marketing to operations. "Product managers are like quarterbacks for really small cross-disciplinary pods made up of engineers, designers, data scientists, and researchers," he explains. "Each pod focuses on some important problem or feature for the platform."

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AIRBNB’S VP OF PRODUCT **JOE ZADEH** (’03)

HAS USED DESIGN THINKING TO

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TO GLOBAL BRAND RECOGNITION.

# OF DESIGN

Zadeh draws on what he learned at Northwestern as a computer science undergraduate to encourage teamwork across departments. “McCormick has always been great at fostering cross-disciplinary work,” he says. “That’s the hallmark of what I do—bringing together many different disciplines, including those that aren’t technical, to create something powerful.”

True to his ethos of “art and science,” Zadeh encourages his teams first to look for inspiration in stories, the humanities, and their imaginations—things that are intangible or unmeasurable. He then urges them to use science to find solutions to problems and validate them.

“Some companies are good at just the art, others just the science,” he shares. “I would love for Airbnb to be the company that really gets the two in ideal balance.”

## SIMPLE AND INTUITIVE

Zadeh’s love of computers started when his dad brought home an IBM XT when he was eight years old and taught him how to program in BASIC. Throughout his childhood, he programmed for fun. When it came time for college, however, he chose pre-med at Northwestern.

Struggling with the memorization required, Zadeh didn’t really enjoy his studies until he took Professor Larry Birnbaum’s introductory computer science course. “I loved the content, the project work, and the fact that you didn’t really have to memorize anything—you either understood the concepts, or you didn’t,” he remembers.

Zadeh soon shifted his focus to computer science. He remembers EDC: Engineering Design and Communication (now called DTC: Design Thinking and Communication) as his favorite course and the one he uses most in his day-to-day life. “It taught me the fundamentals of design and was one of the first classes that really taught how to collaborate with other disciplines,” he says.

His coursework led him to a realization that computers and biology follow similar principals. Inspired by the idea of “writing programs” with biology, he chose to pursue a PhD in bioengineering. It was while building a web app for his synthetic biology research that the idea of product design captured his imagination.

“I loved making really complicated things simple and intuitive,” he remembers. “Great design does that. No matter how great your technology, if people can’t use it, it doesn’t matter.”

That love of design led Zadeh to where he is today, expanding Airbnb’s products to include trips where hosts can monetize their personal passions by offering experiences to travelers. It’s been an exciting journey, one that will lead him back to Northwestern. He has been invited to speak at the 2017 engineering undergraduate commencement ceremony to share the lessons he’s learned along the way with the engineering leaders of the future.

“One thing I find really inspiring is McCormick’s focus on Whole-Brain Engineering,” he says. “I think it will lead to a generation of amazing technology leaders.”

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