

JONAH LAU: LEAVING A LEGACY

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As the son of a man who helped to define one of the most famous skylines in the world, it is understandable that former lawyer, turned software developer and product manager, Jonah Lau also felt the same desire to make his mark on the world.

Former lawyer, turned software developer and product manager, Jonah Lau was born in Hong Kong and spent most of his time there with his family, between stints in Toronto, Canada in his early childhood and London studying for his undergraduate degree.

His father is a recognised architect in Hong Kong, and “designed quite a few iconic skyscrapers” in the city. As the son of a man who helped to define one of the most famous skylines in the world, it is understandable that Jonah also felt the same desire to make his mark on the world.

His father’s achievements certainly make him proud, but “you still feel there’s something to live up to,” he says.

“There’s nothing more inspiring than seeing your own creation actually standing there physically for the world to see. I don’t think there are many professions where you’re able to do that, but architecture is one of them.”

For his own legacy, Jonah was initially drawn to law. The attraction was twofold. To begin with it is in the family – he has three uncles who are lawyers – but also he says he has always thrived in cerebrally charged environments.

“Being exposed to the law through my uncles, doing legal work with them and seeing the kinds of problems they encounter day to day made me realise that law was an area that would intellectually stimulate and challenge me.”

He wasn’t wrong. Jonah spent four years with Herbert Smith Freehills in Hong Kong working on IPOs, M&As and private equity deals, before leaving at the end of 2013. Shortly after this he had his career watershed moment and changed track completely – applying to do a web development boot camp in New York.

One of just 20 people selected from over 200 applicants, Jonah says his decision to apply was a considered one, prompted by his realisation that intellectual stimulus alone is not the only thing that drives him, he needs to produce things too. Perhaps not the skyscrapers of the Hong Kong skyline, but something tangible and useful.

“I realised my core passion in addition to solving problems was to build things that would help people and impact their lives in a positive way.

“Which is why I decided to go into coding. I felt mobile apps and new digital services were taking over the world and the most direct way to be a part of developing these products was to learn how to actually build them through coding.”

He has never looked back, finding software development an endlessly inspiring and rewarding pursuit. “It is a never-ending quest to keep learning and improving yourself. At the same time, coding gives me a way to fulfil that thirst to solve problems, something that the law also gave me.”

What he found was his experience at Herbert Smith Freehills had prepared him for his new career in unexpected ways.

“The main thing I took away from the experience was the ability to be commercially aware, but at the same time be prudent and risk conscious enough to see a couple of steps ahead,” he says.

“The second takeaway from my time at the firm was the ability to really pay attention to the details in my day-to-day work. Even now I feel like I was really spoiled at Herbert Smith Freehills. I was working with people who really cared about the quality of work they were delivering. They really did proofread everything, really thought twice about any advice they were giving to the client. That has left a lasting impression on me.”

Jonah has recently stepped away from a successful but stressful foray into the world of start-ups with a marketing analytics platform called Clickful – designed to be “super easy to use, approachable and able to deliver cost-effective results for a small-business owner”. How did he find the entrepreneurial space?

“When we started, we had nothing but passion,” he recalls. “It was almost like setting sail when the boat is half finished and you are building the boat as you go along.”

Currently, he is the product manager at Crypto.com, which means instead of spending most of his day programming, he is working with engineers and the company’s various business units, such as marketing, sales, operations and design to deliver a successful product.

The product he is managing could lead to a major breakthrough in terms of inspiring trust in the cryptocurrency space, thanks to its association with a long-established brand. “We have a VISA credit card that is linked to a mobile app, which is a cryptocurrency wallet. You can load up your Bitcoin onto this wallet and spend it anywhere that supports VISA.

“It solves the problem of people not being able to spend cryptocurrencies in the real world in an easy way,” says Jonah.

The company has recently reached its 100,000th VISA card reservation, and Jonah is part of the small team integral to making that happen.

“I am the guy in the shadows trying to pull the strings and make people do what is best for the product. People skills really come into play here.

“In my role, I often have to communicate with internal clients who do not have the same level of technical expertise that I do when it comes to coding software engineering. So, my skillset that I picked up at HSF has really allowed me to shine there.”

Does he ever miss the law? “Sometimes,” he admits. “At Herbert Smith Freehills especially, you are working with some of the brightest people in the legal industry and lawyers by definition are already pretty smart people. But if you're taking the cream of the crop and bringing them together in the same office, then you're bound to have a winning combination. The moment you leave that kind of bubble, the chances of being able to work with such a high concentration of brilliant people are lower. So, that's something that I miss.”