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Working Geek: After startup stint, Ari Steinberg leads Airbnb’s operations in Seattle

BY LISA STIFFLER on February 2, 2019 at 12:20 pm

Airbnb’s Ari Steinberg dons an orca costume, the office mascot, to interview their Chief Operating Officer Belinda Johnson at the company’s Seattle office opening. Steinberg, director of engineering, leads the Seattle team, as well as Airbnb’s support products engineering team. (Airbnb Photo)

Ari Steinberg wanted to start a company when he graduated from Stanford University with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in computer science.

He tried to convince his three college roommates to join him. But one by one, they took jobs at Facebook. He ultimately followed suit, starting at the social media company in 2006, two years after it launched.
Steinberg worked at Facebook as an engineer in the San Francisco Bay Area, and then moved to Seattle in 2010 to open the social media giant's first remote engineering office, growing the team to 150 employees.

But the position eventually lost its luster, and Steinberg decided to go all-in on entrepreneurship.

In 2012, he founded a Seattle-based travel planning startup called Vamo, which raised some $1.6 million in venture capital. He loved the chance to build something that he wanted to use himself, and the ability to quickly and easily implement software changes. The product helped people plan trips, particularly international travel, that incorporated multiple cities and modes of travel.

Steinberg was a passionate traveler and “an obsessive optimizer and planner,” he said. But that took time and patience. “I wanted to make it easier for people to do that.”

Airbnb bought Vamo in 2015, and it was back to San Francisco for a brief stint. Then Steinberg had the chance to again create a Seattle outpost, building an office for Airbnb.

“I have really enjoyed being a part of the smaller community of Seattle offices that is a little more startup-like,” Steinberg said. “I am really proud of the team culture in Airbnb’s Seattle office right now. Employees play much more active roles in making this a fun place to work than they tend to at larger companies and offices where employees tend to be more passive.”

Seattle has proven a great fit for Steinberg and his wife, Daniela Witten, whom he met at Stanford and began dating at the end of their freshman year. Witten is now a professor in the University of Washington's Department of Statistics.

Steinberg is Airbnb's director of Engineering and leads the Seattle office as well as the company's Support Products Engineering Team. The Vamo product is not a feature offered by Airbnb, and Steinberg doesn't know of another Vamo-like app currently in existence.

“I have two kids and a third is on the way, so I'm not doing those big international trips anymore,” he said. But when more elaborate travel comes up, “I do regret that the tool doesn't exist.”

Steinberg doesn't, however, seem to miss Facebook much.

Given the company's ongoing struggles with bad publicity around data sharing and the platform being hijacked for political misinformation campaigns, what initiatives might Steinberg suggest if back there in a leadership role?

"Some of the biggest challenges they face are related to human nature," he said, and difficult to engineer solutions for. He's not sure what the fixes would look like.
“I’d rather not dwell on it,” he said. “I’m happy to not think about that anymore.”

We caught up with Steinberg for this Working Geek, a regular GeekWire feature (https://www.geekwire.com/working-geek/). Continue reading for his answers to our questionnaire.

**Current location:** I’ve been based in Seattle since moving here to start Facebook’s office in 2010, except for a six-month stint in San Francisco in 2015 when I joined Airbnb.

**Computers and mobile devices:** I use a Mac laptop and iPhone. I try to avoid the temptation to churn through them too frequently so both are about 3 years old at this point.

**Favorite apps, cloud services and software tools:** I am a very heavy user of Google Apps. As a manager, I very rarely get to write code so occasionally I wind up scratching that itch by making overly fancy javascript-enhanced Google Sheets for planning. I’m sad that Google Inbox is going away as I really loved the tight integration of tasks and emails.

**Describe your workspace. Why does it work for you?** Standing desk with just a power cable and some photos of my family. I don’t spend all that much time at my desk so it’s nice to keep it simple.

I love the Airbnb offices overall. They are beautifully designed and have a nice mix of desk space, lots of casual seating areas (great for unscheduled meetings), “caves” for one-on-ones or dialing into meetings over video conference, and larger rooms designed to replicate some really cool Airbnb listings. And the large atriums in the middle help avoid the claustrophobic feeling of some other offices.
Your best advice for managing everyday work and life? Set clear boundaries and try to hold yourself to them. If you want to do something, block off time on your calendar for it. Then when that time comes, actually do the thing you wanted to do. This can apply to anything from writing code to eating dinner with your family.

Your preferred social network? How do you use it for business/work? Having spent almost seven years at Facebook, it's a little embarrassing to admit, but I'm really not very active on any social networks. Of course, I have accounts on all of them and scan through the email notifications but otherwise I never really find myself getting all that sucked in.

Current number of unanswered emails in your inbox? There are six that need a response. And a few thousand more on the side.

Number of appointments/meetings on your calendar this week? Kind of an intense week: 33 appointments.... in only three work days! (I'm going on vacation.) That's a bit higher than average, though this time of year does tend to get pretty busy.

How do you run meetings? Each recurring meeting gets its own document shared to all participants. The agenda for the upcoming meeting is at the top, and notes from past meetings underneath that. No slides unless it's a large audience.

Everyday work uniform? Jeans and an MTailor custom fit button-down shirt (https://www.mtailor.com/) (my brother-in-law's company!).

How do you make time for family? I leave work at 5 p.m. each day and don't take out a phone or computer til the kids are down at 7:30 p.m. Weekends I'm mostly disconnected too, except a couple of hours during nap times dealing with household logistics. Date nights with my wife after the kids go down, as often as possible.

Best stress reliever? How do you unplug? I love outdoor activities. Skiing in winter, paddleboarding in summer. Also, I have gotten back into playing the piano recently.

What are you listening to? Mostly podcasts (during commutes). Heavyweight is a fun one.

Daily reads? Favorite sites and newsletters? Every morning I spend 30 minutes going through the daily New York Times email digest. I am pretty religious about it. Then I avoid distractions the rest of the day. I'm usually a little late to the party on breaking news and memes.

Book on your nightstand (or e-reader)? My daughter is starting to learn to read so our house is full of "Step into Reading" books wherever you look. Their Paw Patrol series is currently in heavy rotation.

Night owl or early riser? I aim for 10 p.m.- 6 a.m. though usually wind up pushing it closer to 11 p.m.

Where do you get your best ideas? I tend to do day trips to Airbnb HQ in San Francisco a couple of times a month. On the 6 a.m. flight down I usually sleep, but those two hours on the way back are easily my most productive two hours of the day. **"If you want to do something, block off time on your calendar for it. Then when that time comes, actually do the thing you wanted to do. This can apply to anything from writing code to eating dinner with your family."**
week. The whole trip makes for a long day, but I find it invigorating to get so much done in under 24 hours.

Whose work style would you want to learn more about or emulate? My wife. I have known her for almost half my life but I still can’t figure out how she stays so on top of everything.

GeekWire contributor Lisa Stiffler is a reporter, editor and Northwest native who nearly two decades ago swapped a lab coat for a reporter’s notebook. Covers local efforts to use technology to solve environmental, health, societal and other do-gooder challenges. Follow @lisa_stiffler (https://twitter.com/intent/user?screen_name=lisa_stiffler) and email lisa@geekwire.com (mailto:lisa@geekwire.com).


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