

From Seoul to Google: How a Semester in Korea Accelerated My Career

In the autumn of 2010, I flew to Seoul as a third-year business student from Europa-University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany. I had a scholarship, a course plan, and a vague sense that going to Asia would be good for my career. I had no idea how right that vague sense would turn out to be, or how specifically it would play out.

Korea in 2010 was not what I expected. I had studied international business. I understood that different markets operated at different speeds. But nothing in my coursework had prepared me for the specific quality of Seoul as a technology environment. Mobile internet infrastructure was ubiquitous and fast in a way that still felt ahead of its time. Digital payment infrastructure was years ahead of what existed in Germany. The city's relationship with technology was not aspirational, it was already settled. Koreans were not waiting for a digital future. They were living in one. I remember sitting on the Seoul subway and watching every person around me navigate apps, payments, and messaging on devices that felt a generation ahead of what I had at home. For a 22-year-old business student encountering this at scale for the first time, it was genuinely eye-opening.

That environment shaped how I approached my course selection at Sookmyung Women's University. I enrolled in the maximum 21 credits across seven courses. The obvious business choices were there: Advertising and Promotion Strategy, Geo-Politics and Geo-Economics, Entrepreneurship and New Ventures, New Product Development Strategy. But I also enrolled in Computer Networks, a third-year Computer Science course. For someone with no technical background, this was an unusual call. I made it because Seoul had made me curious about the infrastructure underneath the technology I was seeing everywhere around me. I wanted to understand how it actually worked.

That course, more than any other, changed the trajectory of what I was capable of professionally. I did not come out of it as a software engineer. But I came out of it with a working mental model of how networked systems are built and how they fail. More than that, it sparked a genuine interest in computer science that I had not expected and would not let go of. For a business student heading into the technology industry, that turned out to be a significant differentiator. In every subsequent role, I could talk to engineers on their terms. I could read a technical specification without nodding blankly. I could make product and UX decisions that were grounded in how systems actually operated, not just how they appeared to users. That ability, rare in people with a business background, opened doors that would otherwise have stayed closed.

Entrepreneurship and New Ventures reinforced the direction. The course covered the full cycle of building a company: opportunity recognition, problem solving, strategic planning, financial planning, small business marketing. The lecturers brought in real cases and real founders. The context was practical in a way that equivalent courses at my home university were not. New Product Development Strategy pushed further into how markets evolve and how you bring something genuinely new into them. The frameworks I encountered there were ones I had not seen before and would return to repeatedly in the years that followed.

By the time I left Seoul, I had developed something I would not have been able to name precisely at the time but can articulate clearly now: a product mindset, embedded in a technical context, shaped by an environment where technology was already the baseline rather than the frontier. I finished my Bachelor's at Viadrina in 2011, graduating in the top 10% with a grade of 1.5. But the skills and way of thinking I brought back from Seoul were already pointing me in a specific direction.

In December 2011, I joined test.io as employee number one. test.io was a Berlin-based startup delivering crowdsourced software quality assurance to CTOs, product managers, and QA teams. The role suited exactly what I had been building in Seoul: the ability to work across business, product, and technical contexts in a fast-moving environment. Joining as the first employee meant owning operations, customer relationships, and product thinking from day one. That combination of business credibility and technical grounding was precisely what the semester in Korea had produced.

In 2013, before moving to Google, I completed a Design Thinking certification at HPI D-School, the Hasso-Plattner-Institut in Potsdam, one of the most rigorous design thinking programs in Europe. It was a deliberate step, building on the product and user-centered direction I had been moving in since Seoul.

From there I joined Google in September 2013. Over the next four years I ran UX research across several of Google's most widely used products. I ran research projects for Google Play Developer Console, working on features used by millions of developers globally. I ran research projects for Google Community Forums and Google Groups, where findings from usability studies, surveys, and click-tests fed into product design decisions on desktop and mobile. I ran UX research projects for Inbox by Gmail's Trips feature. Later, as Technical UX Manager in Google's Ad Technologies division, I guided Google's priority clients in travel and retail on mobile web UX and page speed optimization, working at C-level on a daily basis.

It was during those Google years that the interest in computer science first sparked by that single course at Sookmyung grew into something I needed to pursue properly. Alongside my work at Google, I completed an M.Sc. in Computer Science and Cognitive Science at University College Dublin, graduating with First Class Honours in 2016. Seoul had made computer science feel accessible to a business student. The master's degree was where that idea fully took hold.

After Google I spent a year at Workday as Lead UX/Product Designer, where I introduced the Google Design Sprint to a product used by enterprise teams at companies including Slack, Thomson Reuters, and Rolls-Royce. I co-founded Pathmonk, an AI-driven SaaS startup focused on website intelligence and conversion optimization. We bootstrapped until closing a 1.5 million euro VC investment and went on to onboard more than 500 B2B customers in the United States. From 2018 to 2025, I owned the full customer insight function across UX, CX, and sales.

I was recently asked to trace back where the product and technical instincts that drove my career actually came from. The answer is not a single moment. But if I had to point to the semester that set the direction, it is the one I spent at Sookmyung Women's University in Seoul in 2010. Korea was running faster than Europe in almost every dimension that matters in the technology industry. Landing in that environment as a student, with enough time to actually absorb it and course credits that pushed me into technical and entrepreneurial territory I would not have explored otherwise, gave me a head start that kept compounding.

Without ASEM-DUO, I would still have finished my business degree. I might have ended up in consulting or a corporate strategy role, following the path most of my Viadrina peers followed. Seoul redirected that. Not dramatically, not overnight, but durably. Every significant career step I have taken since traces back, in some way, to the thinking I started doing in that city in 2010.

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