

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

WHEN THE PRODUCT IS YOU

**By Steve Johnson
Under10 Consulting**

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1.

HAVE YOU BEEN OUT THERE LATELY?

Are you looking? Maybe you're disenchanted with your role. Or you're ready to move up to the next level. Or you're just looking for a new challenge.

Or, alas, maybe you've been laid off. For some (perhaps most), getting laid-off comes as a complete surprise—which, let's be honest, is a poor reflection of the manager's abilities. You should always know where you stand in the company or else your manager is not doing his or her job. That said, if you don't know how you're perceived by your boss and your executives, that's probably bad. Make every effort to repair the relationship but it may be time to start looking around.

Hunting for that perfect job is both easier and harder than ever before. You don't have to be restricted to your nearest big city... but other candidates don't either. Networking is easier but, alas, everyone's network is bigger than before.

No matter your situation, I suggest you go on a job interview at least once a year—even if you're not looking. You may find a great new opportunity or you may find that you really have a pretty good gig with your current employer. Either way, it's good to experience the process so it's not so frightening when you start looking seriously.

A typical approach is to update your resume and LinkedIn page, and then start emailing resumes to everyone you know. However, "spray and pray" is never the best strategy.

HERE'S THE KEY:

Employers do not hire you because you need a job; employers hire you to solve their problems.

And that's good news. As a product manager or marketer, you're already expert in defining and delivering products.

Stop thinking about job hunting as a mysterious concept; it's just product definition and delivery. You know this stuff.

YOU ARE THE PRODUCT.

How do you develop and deliver a product when the product is you? The same way you'd develop and deliver any other product or service: Choose a target market. Assess your skills. Develop a unique value proposition. Work the funnel from leads to presentation to close.

Sound familiar?

2.

CHOOSE A TARGET MARKET

Many product management job postings have requirements that seem impossible to meet. They are seeking someone with years of experience in product management... with a similar product... built on similar technology... in a similar domain... serving a similar market.

They're looking for a unicorn.

Or maybe they're looking for a **Purple Squirrel**.

Recruiters this term when they're asked to find the perfect candidate, preferably local, with a technical undergrad plus an MBA, with experience in business and technology as well as domain and industry expertise...

...who will work for peanuts.

That's why it's important to figure out what is ideal for you before you start looking at job postings. Choose your target market.

Before you start looking at job postings, figure out what is ideal for you and your skills.

Review your last few jobs and think about which you preferred and why.

What kind of work do you prefer? What are the activities that you love? Which do you hate? After all, people tend to work better on things they like doing.

What kind of teams do you prefer? Would you say you work better with the sales and marketing people or the

developers and support team? Do you enjoy working with technical folks or with customer-facing folks?

What kind of companies do you prefer? Think about company size. In a big company, product managers tend to be specialized; in a small one, a product manager gets involved in many different aspects from customer discovery to defining strategy to writing marketing copy and supporting individual sales people.

If you've only worked for large companies, it may be time to try a startup to see if you like a broader set of responsibilities.

If a startup doesn't appeal to you, an independent business unit within a larger company may be the ideal middle ground between large and small.

What type of domain areas do you prefer? Beyond company size, think about specialties. Are you interested in location-based products? Fascinated by new directions in data sciences? Companies innovating in your area of interest are good targets for you.

Think about your past...

What would you do again?

3.

ASSESS YOUR SKILLS USING ASPIRE

It's often difficult to find inspiration when you're staring at a blank resume page. "What makes me special? What can I do that few others can?"

It's strange really; many of us assume that anybody can do what we do. But—no kidding—**you're unique**. No one else has your experience, your skills, or your interests.

But what aspects should you showcase on your resume?

Use the ASPIRE model to guide you—to help you find those capabilities that make you you.

Authority

What is your reputation?

Do your colleagues come to you when they need a breakthrough idea? Are you the kind of person who gets things done? What are you known for?

Consider getting some former and existing colleagues to give you kudos on your LinkedIn profile under the sections for **Skills & Endorsements** and **Recommendations**. And you might be surprised how others see you—perhaps more clearly than you see yourself.

Systems

Are you a power-user of specific systems or methods?

Do you know Jira and Tableau? Have you set up a web site? Implemented new methods for product marketing or management? Maybe you have certifications in product management, marketing, or data sciences. (These should also be in your LinkedIn profile under **Licenses & Certifications**)

Passion

What type of work excites you?

What is your “why”? What type of work would you do if money wasn't an issue?

Passion is what keeps you working past suppertime and keeps you pressing on when you get frustrated.

Innovation

Have you created something that is uniquely yours?

Did you invent a method, approach, or some other thinking tool? Maybe you've created a prioritization method or a new adaptation of a business model canvas. Maybe you've got an index to all the good blogs out there (such as the fine articles on the [Under10 blog](#)).

What's something you've done that shows you're a creative thinker?

Research

What topic areas have you researched extensively?

Are you current on the latest thinking in your specialty area?

Expertise

In what areas are you a proven master?

What's your skill level in popular methods and frameworks such as Scrum, WSJF, and Jobs to be Done? Do you have experience with customer discovery and win/loss interviews?

Use the ASPIRE worksheet at the end of this document to identify your own skills and capabilities. What do you know? What can you do? You'll need to articulate these before you're ready to create your personal “positioning.”

4.

DEVELOP YOUR UNIQUE VALUE PROP

As with a product, you'll want to be able to explain your unique value proposition. What makes you you? How are you different from all the other candidates?

The ASPIRE worksheet helps you find your unique abilities and competencies. Now we need to define your positioning.

Many product managers are familiar with the vision statement format created by Regis McKenna and popularized in Geoff Moore's book, *Crossing the Chasm*:

For [target customer]
Who [statement of need or opportunity]
The [product name] is a [product category]
with [statement of key benefit, a compelling reason to buy]
Unlike [primary competitive alternative or approach]
Our product [statement of primary differentiation]

Using insights from ASPIRE, adapt this format to the Product You. Here's an example:

For [software vendors in Virginia focused on education]
Who [are creating a new product management team]
I am a [technology product manager]
with [years of experience as a product manager in education]
Unlike [former teachers]
I have [teaching experience as well as product management expertise]

This structure is a little stilted but with some wordsmithing it might make a nice summary paragraph at the top of your resume. Also use what you've learned about yourself to clean up your LinkedIn info.

This “personal positioning” should be the top-most thing on your LinkedIn profile.

5.

WORK THE FUNNEL

Searching for a job can be fun and often frustrating but remember, it's something you already know how to do if you're a product manager or marketer.

And now, you're the product.

Target a specific type of company and role.

Profile your ASPIRE skills to guide your positioning.

Use your skills and positioning to build a resume and cover letter that sells!

Don't worry; you've got this.

After all, it's just product management.

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please tweet about it.

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ASPIRE WORKSHEET

Authority	What is your reputation? What are you known for?
Systems	Are you a power-user of specific systems?
Passion	What is your “why”? What type of work excites you?
Innovation	Have you created a method, approach, or work product that is uniquely yours?
Research	What topic areas have you researched extensively? Are you current on the latest thinking in your specialty?
Expertise	In what areas are you a proven master?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Johnson is an author, speaker, and product coach focused on implementing modern methods that move products quickly from idea to market. His approach is based on the belief that minimal process and simple templates result in a nimble product team.

Steve's work experience includes technical, sales, and marketing management positions at companies specializing in technology-based products. His market and technical savvy allowed him to rise rapidly through the ranks from product manager to the executive suite. In his career, he has launched dozens of products.

Steve was a long-time instructor at Pragmatic Institute and co-creator of the popular QuartzOpen framework.

Nowadays, Steve works as coach and advisor, helping teams implement best practices in product management and marketing.



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