

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

EXPERTISE IN PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

**By Steve Johnson
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1.

LOOK BEYOND THE TACTICAL

Product managers are overwhelmed with too many responsibilities that require too many areas of expertise. How do product leaders organize product management for the best results?

Some say that product management is a business function while others say it is primarily technical.

Wikipedia defines product management as “the combination of product development and product marketing.” The agile community says product management represents the business and the market to the product team. Some teams use product management and product marketing to mean the same thing; others say they’re very different.

At a consumer software company, the marketing team contacted the product manager, asking for screen images of the current release. (Remember, this is a consumer product.) The product manager suggested the marketing team take their own damn screen shots, thank you very much, but the marketers complained, “Oh, we don’t know how to use the product.”

(Really? The marketing team doesn’t know the product? The product was designed for consumers. In fact, the majority of users are school-age consumers. Yet the marketing folks can’t use it? Sounds to me like they need to hire some new marketers.)

At another software company, the product manager was writing product specifications, running beta programs, and acting as project manager. She was too busy with the development team to spend any time with the rest of the

company. So new product releases were announced to the company like this: “The new build goes live tonight.”

(Not much of a launch, eh?)

And then chaos ensued as sales people wanted to know how the marketing group was going to inform the customers before the next workday. And of course the marketing people didn’t know anything about the new release either; they got notified at the same time as the sales people did. At 5:00pm. On a Friday. Before a holiday.

A little marketing, a little business, a little technical support, a lot of project scheduling—what should a product manager be doing?

2.

AVOID THE “EVERYTHING” ROLE

*“Be the company’s go-to resource for the product.”
The typical definition of product management simply
covers too much. And product managers are
stretched way too thin.*

Product managers are expected to be business and financial experts, product experts, domain and industry experts, promotional experts, and more.

I led a panel at an agile development conference while “industry experts” discussed the role of the product manager. I was shocked—and the audience was too—that none of the experts on the panel could agree on the parameters of the role. One said “business leader,” another said “project manager.” One said, “The product manager’s job is to do everything that nobody else wants to do.”

(Yikes!)

Product managers have an impossible goal. To be all things to all people. To be strategic and tactical. To be involved in both planning and execution. To be expert in every aspect of the product.

Product managers become experts based on their previous job experiences and as a result of their daily interactions with colleagues and clients. They’re expert on features and futures, expert on what buyers and users are

saying about the technology, and expert on the markets and industries that they serve.

Many in your organization need that expertise.

And that's where all the emergencies come from.

Developers and engineers lack knowledge about the market and the users so they want a product manager to answer their questions. Marketing professionals lack knowledge about the product and its technology so they want a product manager to answer their questions. Sales people lack knowledge about the product and the industry so they want a product manager to answer their questions.

That's why product management is spread so thin. Too much to do; not enough time.

And that's also why the role of product management is so confusing for most companies. What is the role? Product expert? Market expert? Both? Something else?

A brief history of product management

In recent years, we've seen new definitions for old titles and many new titles being created. We've got product managers, product marketing managers, product owners, business analysts, product strategists, product line managers, and portfolio managers.

Back in the early 1980s, I joined a company in Dallas. This was my first vendor experience and it was one of the best-run software companies I would ever encounter, something I didn't appreciate until years later. This company had a very clear job description for those who performed business planning for a single product. The title: product manager.

Now jump to the late 1980s. In his seminal tech marketing book *Crossing the Chasm*, Geoffrey Moore recommended two separate product management titles:

A product manager is responsible for ensuring that a product gets created, tested, and shipped on schedule and meeting specifications. It is a highly internally-focused job, bridging the marketing and development

organizations, and requiring a high degree of technical competence and project management experience.

A product marketing manager is responsible for bringing the product to the marketplace and to the distribution organization. It is a highly externally-focused job.

(Sounds like a pretty good clarification of product management and product marketing.)

In 1995, Ken Schwaber and Jeff Sutherland formalized the Scrum development methodology. And with it came yet another product management title: product owner.

The Product Owner represents the stakeholders and is the voice of the customer. He or she is accountable for ensuring that the team delivers value to the business. Scrum teams should have one Product Owner.

What is the difference between a product manager and a product owner? And what about product marketing manager? After all, they all have 'product' in the name so we assume they must be related.

But when implementing agile development methods, formerly business-focused product managers often become technology-focused product owners.

And we see the product marketing manager filling the strategic void left when traditional product managers become technical product owners.

What should you expect from your product management team?

3.

FOUR TYPES OF EXPERTISE

There are four types of skills needed to define and deliver products to market. Product managers attempt to support the team with all four types of knowledge but it's rare to find all of these capabilities in a single person.

A vice president at a bank created a method for detecting fraud. He was recruited by a vendor to develop a product based around his domain expertise. But because he also had market expertise of the industry—he'd been a bank vice president after all—the sales team hounded him for sales calls. The sales people said, "I need you to come talk about banking issues with my buyers." For nine months he was the darling of the sales people... until the day he resigned. His goal was not to be the guy who could "talk bank" to help generate sales of other products; his goal was to protect banks from fraud using his algorithm.

Technology expertise

Technology expertise is about how the product works. From their daily interactions, product managers pick up a deep understanding of product and technical capabilities; they achieve this by playing with the product, by discussing it with customers and developers, by reading and reading and reading. For a technology expert, the product almost becomes their personal hobby. They think of themselves as product experts.

Typical titles: product manager, product owner, technical product manager, business analyst.

Market expertise

Market expertise is a focus on geographic or vertical markets, either by country or by industry. They know how business is done in that market. They know the major players,

and the jargon or colloquialisms of the market. Market experts know the buyer's journey and they often define themselves by the market they serve: "I'm a banker" or "I support BRIC."

Typical titles: industry manager, product marketing manager, field marketing manager.

Domain expertise

Domain expertise is about the discipline your product supports, such as security, fraud detection, or education. Domain experts know (and often define) the standards for the discipline and can explain the latest thinking in that area. They understand the problems that your product endeavors to solve, regardless of the market or industry. And for a domain expert, your product is merely one way of addressing the problems of their specialty. Domain experts define themselves not by the product but by their topic area.

Typical titles: product scientist, principal product manager.

Business expertise

Business expertise is where your traditional business leader or MBA graduate brings strength. These experts know the mechanics of business and can apply that knowledge to your product decisions. A business-oriented expert knows how to use research to determine product feasibility and can determine how the product generates profit with lots of financial analysis to back it up. Ideally these business skills need to be combined with one of the other skills or provided as a support role for the other areas of expertise.

Typical titles: product strategist, product leader, portfolio manager.

You can now see why product managers struggle in some areas and breeze through others. Most of us understand these four product management skill sets inherently and we also realize that it's difficult to find one person with all four skills.

And it explains the difficulty you and your colleagues sometimes have when connecting with customers. The sales people who don't know the industry jargon or the marketers

who seem insensitive to the customs of different countries or the developers who don't understand why a capability is critical to customers.

Consider the requests you're getting from development, marketing, sales, customer support, partners, and so on and determine the best way to support them. Without distracting product management from the work your company needs them to do.

Think about the skills you have and the skills you need for your organization. Determine which expertise is needed to accurately support these requests.

4.

ORGANIZING EXPERTISE

When organizing teams, you want to align the different areas of expertise with the needs of your business. Rather than organizing teams around products, I recommend a product management team organized around a portfolio of products, ideally with staffing in all four areas of expertise.

We'll want one domain expert for your specialized discipline and at least one business expert. We'll also need one or more technology experts devoted to each product or major component in your portfolio. The person with the most management experience, often the business expert, should lead the team. Seems logical enough.

And now it gets tricky. For the ideal product management team, you'll want to supplement this core set of experts with an expert for each of the markets you serve. That's right: a product marketing manager or market expert for each major geographic area and for each vertical industry—at least the ones you care about.

At first this seems to be a large group of people but don't worry; you'll find many product managers have more than one area of expertise.

What's scary isn't the number of skills described; what's really scary is how many teams are attempting to build products without the four types of expertise.

The confusion of titles and roles is a problem for most organizations. We all have pre-conceived notions of what a product manager should do. Instead of thinking “do whatever it takes,” let’s identify the activities and artifacts that are the responsibility of your team members. And make sure your team has the skills necessary to succeed in the job.

Four types of expertise. Every team needs all four and it’s unlikely you’ll find them in one person.

Create a team of experts designed to serve your product and company needs.

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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.

Steve's book, ***Turn Ideas Into Products***, describes a nimble planning process from idea to market. Learn more at <http://www.under10consulting.com/books>

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