Chapter 2
Product Management Team

Formalizing and Structuring the Responsibilities and Makeup of the Product Management Team

2.1 Introduction

The role of a product manager is challenging, complex, and often misunderstood. Across the high-tech industry, the product manager title is used in many ways to describe drastically different duties and responsibilities. Diverse interpretations regarding the role of the product manager have created for some an untenable situation where they struggle to define their own role.

Properly defining and structuring the roles and responsibilities of the product management team will enable the team members to be more efficient and productive; leading to better revenues and higher-quality products that meet customer needs.

This chapter explores the challenges faced by modern high-tech product managers and proposes a solution to formalize and structure the responsibilities and makeup of the product management team.

2.2 Your Role

Job titles are important and the role one plays in an organization is often identified by one’s job title. In most cases, job titles allow an observer to construe the role and scope of responsibilities associated with a specific job title, but often this is not the case when it comes to the world of product management. The myriad of interpretations and diversity that surround product management job titles, especially the product manager title, make it very difficult to ascertain which roles and responsibilities are associated with a specific product management job title.

Ask several product managers what their responsibilities are and you will get a variety of answers and descriptions. This situation can reach a point where several product managers working at the same company and department provide very different perspectives on their position.
Many people mistakenly accept a definition that presumes that product management is a collective term used to describe the broad sum of diverse activities performed in the interest of delivering a particular product to market. Such a broad definition, used by many companies today, is the root cause of much grief and problems because it lacks the professional focus needed to be successful, and allows virtually any product-related task to be assigned to the product manager.

2.3 Jack of All Roles, Master of None

It is challenging for humans to multitask activities, and that is why people prefer to focus on a sole task or sequentially perform a few select tasks. The inherent difficulty of multitasking hinges principally on humans’ limited ability to maintain a high level of cerebral focus when confronted with a multitude of dynamically changing issues. To a lesser degree, fatigue and lack of resources (primarily time) are also contributing factors to multitasking hardships.

According to the prevailing (yet erroneous) definition of product management as outlined earlier, it is clear that the nature of performing product management activities is the epitome of multitasking diverse tasks. Multitasking product management assignments is particularly challenging because it requires a multitude of complimentary or differential skills. In addition, the multitasking of these assignments becomes profoundly more complex when product managers have several products to manage.

Such a broad colloquial definition of the product management profession is the result of individual and industry interpretations. These free interpretations invariably led to the ever-familiar challenges that the majority of product managers encounter daily. These challenges can be caused by a combination of the following: ambiguous role definition, imbalanced relationships with other departments, overlapping responsibilities, an overwhelming volume of activities, a lack of processes, poorly defined processes, no definitive methodology, and a shortage of uniform work tools in the profession.

The overall perceived obstacle the typical product manager encounters is the permeating lack of professional focus. One can be adequate at many things but it is difficult to excel at many. This is the reason many product managers view themselves as trapped in a never-ending juggling routine. Having too many tasks to juggle eventually leads to tasks being dropped and the outcome is poor overall performance by the product manager, which is not beneficial for the company.

Ostensibly, the title of product manager has proven itself more harmful than helpful. Other official and unofficial product management title variations, such as product CEO or product champion or product executive, have failed because they are often accompanied by a blurred and wide-scoped job description that describes or implies the product manager being the owner and as a result, responsible for the commercial success of the product. Being labeled or treated as a product CEO can
be a daunting situation, since it nearly always means operating without the authority and resources available to a corporate CEO.

When a job title has an overly broad set of diverse activities (roles and responsibilities) associated with it, there is a high probability that performing to the expectations of that job title will result in failure. Obviously a semantic change is needed and this change is based on the well-known fact that being professional means being focused on a particular domain or discipline.

2.4 Breaking It Down

The two main disciplines that reside in the product management domain are product planning and product marketing. Product planning and product marketing are very different but due to the collaborative nature of these two disciplines, some companies erroneously perceive them as being one discipline, which they call product management. Done carefully, it is very possible to functionally divide the majority of activities within the product management domain into two distinct disciplines (functions), product planning and product marketing, and yet retain the required synergy between those two disciplines.

Accordingly, product management is correctly defined as an occupational domain which contains two professional disciplines: product planning and product marketing. A slightly more expanded definition is that product management is an occupational domain that is based on general management techniques that are focused on product planning and product marketing activities. The product planning and product marketing disciplines focus on the users’ and buyers’ needs. Therefore, the product management domain resides solely in the “Problem Space”, and the engineering domain resides in the “Solution Space”.

Product planning is the ongoing process of identifying and articulating market requirements that define a product’s feature set. Product marketing is an outbound activity aimed at generating product awareness, differentiation, and demand. Product planning and product marketing are different and distinct professional disciplines because they foster different roles and different quality goals.

With these understandings in mind, it is easy to address the respective tasks of product planning and product marketing as belonging to the roles of a product planner and a product marketer. Whether these two roles are handled by two individuals or performed by one person is irrelevant. Indeed there are cases where one person, or two people sitting in one room, or different departments that collaborate; assume both disciplines. The point is that there is now a clear and unambiguous link between the job title and the job responsibilities.

It should also be clear that the disciplines of product planning and product marketing are inextricably linked because companies design product functionality for the user and market the product’s value to the buyer. To clarify this point, an intuitive example of this supposition is a child’s toy. The parent is the buyer and is interested that the toy is safe to use, will help the child grow smarter, keep the child
occupied, and be reasonably priced. Product value is therefore marketed to the buyer, the parent. The child only cares about product functionality such as: is the toy fun and engaging, visually pleasing, and will it do what he/she wants. The toy’s functionality is designed for the user, the child, and not for the buyer. The same approach is taken with high-tech products where buyers are often not the users, and this approach means distinct product management roles that separately analyze and address buyer and user needs.

The recent fast-paced growth of high-tech industries and shifting interpretations of product management have created skewed responsibility sets for product managers. The already problematic broad definition of product management was further complicated when tactical activities were added to a product manager’s job definition.

Tactical activities are assignments, usually self-contained and specific, that fulfill short-term business needs, such as delivering a presentation, writing collateral material, or assisting a salesperson. Such assignments are time consuming and demand a disproportionate allocation of individual resources (mental focus, time and physical effort), relative to their overall importance. By monopolizing the scope of work, tactical activities detract from product managers’ ability to fulfill their assigned strategic responsibilities.

A strategic mission is one that aims to establish and plan the overall and long-term course of action a company should engage in to achieve corporate objectives. The strategic mission for the product marketer would primarily involve evaluating market opportunities and writing market plans that address these market opportunities. For the product planner, it is identifying market needs to deliver winning products that help a company become a market leader, market follower, or an innovator.

2.5 Roles and Goals

Executive managers have very clear work goals that primarily center on achieving corporate profitability. Software developers, for example, also know what they aim for, and that usually is generating a lean and efficient programming code.

However, many product managers provide widely different answers when asked to convey the goal(s) of their job. They often find it quite difficult to provide a definitive answer, with this situation obviously stemming from an overly broad and task-oriented (not goal-oriented) job description. By breaking down the product management domain to its disciplines, it becomes feasible to clearly define the roles and goals of each discipline.

The product planner determines and defines product functionality by virtue of writing the market requirements, and therefore the prime goal is to have product buyers and users who are satisfied with the product. This satisfaction level means contentment with the product’s ability to solve business or consumer problems and
satisfy needs, and being satisfied with the non-tangible aspects of product ownership such as service, price, warranty, status, or prestige.

The product marketer’s goal is to have a satisfied sales force. This goal is somewhat indirect to the marketing actions being performed, but is an excellent predictor of how effective the product marketer’s actions are in generating awareness, differentiation, and demand for the product. Salespeople have a relatively easy job when product marketers perform their roles well. The market environment, created by the actions of the product marketer, leads to a very favorable situation where the market buys the product as opposed to the salespeople actively selling the product.

Salespeople are very happy when the product sells itself, which really means that the sales cycle is minimal or reduced because of quality marketing actions initiated by product marketers. In short, product planning’s quality goal is satisfied customers; product marketing’s quality goal is a satisfied sales force.

After defining the strategic roles of the key disciplines within the product management domain, there is a need for a cooperative scheme, a team concept, to maximize the effectiveness of these strategic roles through collaboration, and complement them with outbound tactical support functions. Product management is not accomplished successfully by one person, but by a product management team who fulfill various roles and functions.

### 2.6 Blackblot Product Management Team Model

The product management team is a task group, comprised of four distinct roles, which organizationally reside in the product management department. The four roles in the “Blackblot Product Management Team Model” are the product planner, product marketer, sales engineer, and marketing communications (MarCom) manager. These four roles are the basic providers of the planning, deliverables, and actions that guide the inbound oriented product definition and the outbound marketing efforts (Fig. 2.1).
The primary responsibility of the product planner is to constantly research the market and identify market needs, which are later translated into market requirements that in turn will foster new products or new features to existing products. The product planner prepares the documents that profoundly impact the product’s success. These documents include the “Market Requirements Document” (MRD), product use cases, product roadmap, and the pricing model.

The primary responsibility of the product marketer is to analyze product-oriented business opportunities, formulate plans that evaluate those business opportunities, and plan and guide the subsequent marketing efforts. For example, the product marketer prepares the product business case and following approval, writes the market plan.

The sales engineer is primarily responsible for outbound product-centric activities, such as pre-sale support and product demonstrations. Sales engineers, relying on their technical skills, help customers understand how the product delivers the necessary value and functionality that address the customers’ business or consumer problem.

The sales engineer’s other objective is to provide critical input to product planners on customer needs and problems. Sales engineers often operate under titles such as product evangelist, technical evangelist, technical sales support, pre-sale engineer, outbound product manager, or technical product manager; yet regardless of the title they all perform a relatively similar set of tasks.

The MarCom manager is primarily responsible for creating interest and memorable presence through the conception and copywriting of all collateral material, advertising, direct response mail, web, and other types of communications media. This person is also tasked with maintaining a consistent image and positioning in the target market, according to messages and directives provided by the product marketer.

The product management team is managed by the director of products or vice president of product management who provides overall product vision, product and market strategies, and team leadership. Other titles are sometimes used to designate this leadership position, such as director of product management or Chief Products Officer (CPO), in order to indicate the encompassing nature of this role. This position is responsible for balancing corporate goals with long-term market trends and opportunities, and for directing, establishing, maintaining, and planning the overall policies and strategies for the product management department. The director of products role creates and manages the overall product management process and oversees its effective execution (Table 2.1).

2.7 Odd Couple(s)

In startup companies it is common to see one individual assume all four roles listed in the “Blackblot Product Management Team Model”. That person will do market planning, deliver product demonstrations, formulate market requirements, and write collateral material.
It is obvious that product manager is a title assigned to a person who performs a single role or a combination of the four roles listed in the “Blackblot Product Management Team Model”. At some point in time, usually as the company grows, the roles are delegated to other individuals who specialize in the role assigned to them. However, for a wide variety of reasons and reasoning, it is quite common to see two roles coupled together in order to define a position that is entrusted to one person.

Frequently the product planner and sales engineer roles are combined into one position in which the person is charged with doing product demonstrations and providing pre-sale support because he/she is also defining the product, and thus has more expertise and in-depth product knowledge than the average salesperson.

Another possibility is the product marketer and MarCom manager combination, where this individual does all tasks that upper management may perceive to be marketing. This usually consists of actual market planning, writing copyright, and managing advertising.

A very prevalent situation in high-tech industries, such as the software development industry, is the combining of the product marketer and product planner roles. Corporate job descriptions for open positions that prefer candidates with a technical undergraduate degree and an MBA with an emphasis in marketing are a clear indication that the company views the position as a combination of the two roles.

It does make sense to a certain level to have the product marketer and product planner roles cooperate with each other. Product success hinges on understanding customer behavior and the business aspects of the industry in order to build value into a product. Complementing that ability is in-depth product knowledge, which is used to plan marketing actions that deliver meaningful messages about the product. The problem is that both of these roles (or capabilities) are strategic and demand expertise that can only be achieved by professional focus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Expertise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product planner</td>
<td>Identify and articulate market requirements</td>
<td>Satisfied product buyers and users</td>
<td>Market expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(strategic role)</td>
<td>Generate awareness, differentiation and demand</td>
<td>Satisfied sales force</td>
<td>Marketing expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product marketer</td>
<td>Outbound product-centric activities, i.e., pre-sale support and product demos</td>
<td>Customer knowledge of product value and functionality</td>
<td>Advocacy expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(strategic role)</td>
<td>Conception and copywriting of all collateral material</td>
<td>Consistent image and positioning in the target market</td>
<td>Media expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales engineer</td>
<td>Balancing corporate goals with long-term market trends and opportunities</td>
<td>Successful formulation and execution of the product and market strategies</td>
<td>Strategy and process expert</td>
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<tr>
<td>(tactical role)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MarCom manager</td>
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<td>(tactical role)</td>
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<td>Director of products</td>
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<td>(strategic role)</td>
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In addition, people come from different educational or professional backgrounds and therefore naturally gravitate toward their comfort zone; eventually causing one of two roles to receive more attention than the other. Under performing, or in the worst case scenario not performing some of the product management team roles, may dramatically impede the product’s chances of marketplace success.

### 2.8 Roles and Activities

Any of the various couplings of roles, as previously outlined, can create workflow obstacles for the following conceptual reasons. Having one person simultaneously perform both strategic and tactical roles and activities, such as with the product marketer and MarCom manager combination, is very inefficient because tactical activities will always monopolize the person’s time and demand increasingly more effort. On the other hand, having one individual perform two strategic roles, as with the product marketer and product planner combination, can be equally debilitating since each role demands an acute learning curve and full devotion.

It is acknowledged that the joining of roles is justifiable under a variety of circumstances; such as budget limitations, personnel quotas, company or department formulation, and product complexity. However, role coupling should always be regarded as a temporary or evolutionary measure – not as a permanent arrangement.

### 2.9 Solution

Product management is an encompassing domain of disciplines. Acknowledging that fact leads to the realization that it is extremely hard and often impossible to specialize and excel at performing all product management tasks. This is because being multi-faceted and multi-disciplined often results in lack of professional focus.

Adding to the situational difficulty is the expansive view of a product manager’s job description that leads to product managers being assigned tactical activities, most of which result because others simply do not want to do them. Tactical activities significantly impair the product manager’s ability to perform crucial strategic tasks.

In some companies, the product marketing manager and product manager are interchangeable titles as they both relate to the same function and individual. This inconsistency further causes functional problems within companies and across industries.

This problematic reality is not planned and is seldom the result of malicious intent. It is just that some companies believe in the laissez-faire approach where internal politics and forces shape corporate processes, responsibilities, and even the organizational structure. There is some advantage to having role ambiguity because it allows individuals to be proactive and define their role as they want it to be.
People can work within the ambiguity and chart their way to a desired job description. Unfortunately, more often than not, the fast-paced structured world of high-tech is not supportive of this approach because there is just too much inherent ambiguity or variance associated with the title of product manager. Therefore, the solution is to abolish the title product manager from the corporate lexicon and use the clearer, more understandable and uniform titles of product planner and product marketer.

As a result of such action, a different organizational approach is required. Under the charge of the vice president or director of product management, is the corporate product management department that holds product management teams. Each team, whether real or virtual, holds four roles (as described in the “Blackblot Product Management Team Model”) with the intent of having these roles eventually assigned to four separate individuals.

Tactical activities and logistics formerly imposed on the product manager will now go to the program manager or release manager, thus relieving those in product management from the tactical overload they routinely experience. The program manager, a role outside product management, is essentially the project manager for the entire product delivery project, and is tasked with applying a suitable product delivery process that ensures deliverables from all contributing corporate functions. The release manager, also a role outside product management, is responsible for handling all logistical and operational matters that pertain to the delivery of the product.

Properly defining and structuring the roles and responsibilities of the product management team will enable the team members to be more efficient and productive. This most likely will lead to better products, better marketing and higher revenues.

2.10 Summary

Product management is a domain, not a role, which changes and evolves with the organization. It is a multi-faceted and multi-disciplined domain and there will always be a certain level of ambiguity involved with product management, but applying a proper product management team concept and structure, with well-defined roles and responsibilities, can significantly mitigate that ambiguity. This act is crucial whether the company is building or rebuilding the corporate product management function.

As a result of the team restructuring and the redefinition of roles, the newly attained occupational focus helps build professional expertise. The product planner can now devote time and effort to excel as a market expert and problem-teller, whose role is to perform customer advocacy better than everyone else in the company, while backing assertions with quantitative market/customer data. The product marketer is now focused on becoming a marketing expert, perfecting corporate competency in using tools and executing techniques, processes and
tasks that promote winning products in the target market. All this decreases departmental rivalry and allows the engineers to develop their professional expertise as technology experts and problem-solvers.

Doing the right things and doing things right, especially in the early stages of company inception, will help those in product management to professionally grow and contribute fully according to their potential. Undoubtedly, companies will also benefit because now members of the product management team will be able to generate long-term value for their company by focusing more on strategy formulation.

The final deduction is that those involved in product management must be provided with clear job descriptions (roles, responsibilities and goals) as well as focused goals and objectives. All talk and effort can prove quite futile without this basic premise.
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