≡

Agile / Backlogs

The product backlog: your ultimate to-do list

A healthy product backlog is much like a healthy human: groomed, organized, and living in the open.

BY DAN RADIGAN

A well-prioritized agile backlog not only makes release and iteration planning easier, it broadcasts all the things your team intends to spend time on—including internal work that the customer will never notice. This helps set expectations with stakeholders and other teams, especially when they bring additional work to you, and makes engineering time a fixed asset.

What is a product backlog?

A product backlog is a prioritized list of work for the development team that is derived from the roadmap and its requirements. The most important items are shown at the top of the product backlog so the team knows what to deliver first. The development team doesn't work through the backlog at the product owner's pace and the product owner isn't pushing work to the

> PRO TIP:
>
> Keep everything in one issue tracker–don't use multiple systems to track bugs, requirements, and engineering work items. If it's work for the development team, keep it in a single backlog.

Start with the two "R"s

A team's roadmap and requirements provide the foundation for the product backlog. Roadmap initiatives break down into several epics, and each epic will have several requirements and user stories. Let's take a look at the roadmap for a ficticious product called Teams in Space.
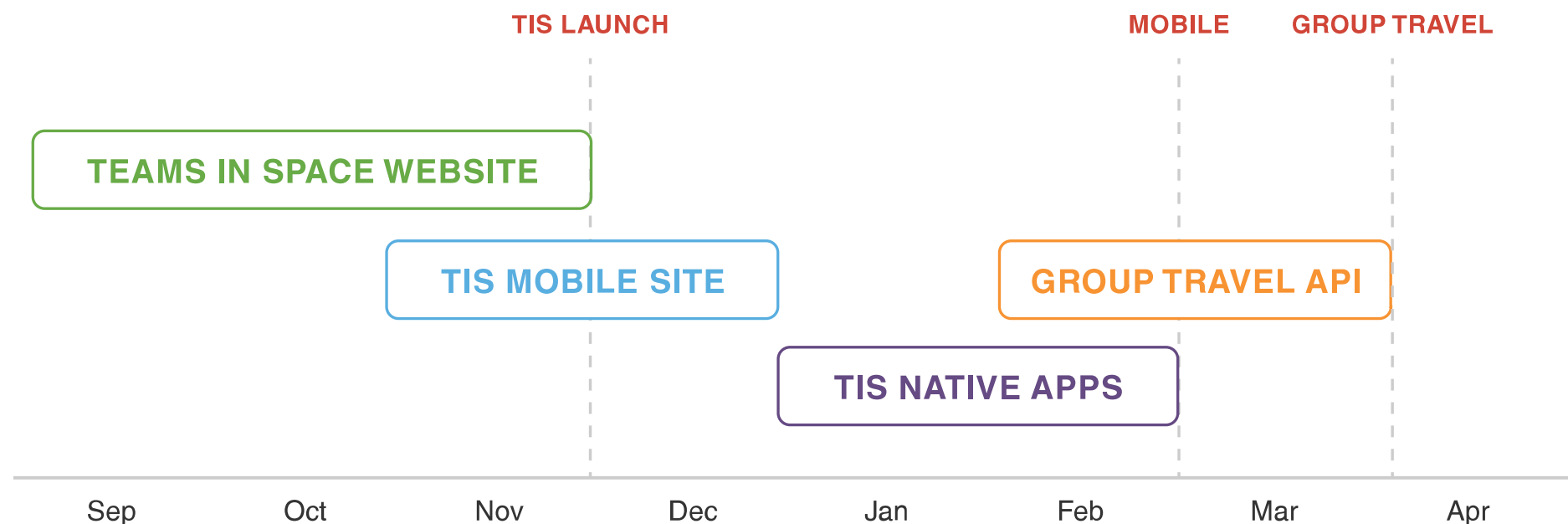
epics.

User management

- Create an account
- Stored payment info
- Linked family profiles
- Travel preferences

Travel reservations

- Book space travel
- Book a hotel
- Book rental space
- Book group tickets

Promos and offers

- Percentage discounts
- Companion flies free
- Customer loyalty
- Family discounts

The product owner then organizes each of the user stories into a single list for the development team. The product owner may choose to deliver a complete epic first (left). Or, it may be more

Single epic
User management

Multi epic
Release 1.0

Create an account

Stored payment info

Linked family profiles

Travel preferences

Create an account

Stored payment info

Book space travel

Family discounts

What may influence a product owner's prioritization?

- Customer priority

- Urgency of getting feedback

While the product owner is tasked with prioritizing the backlog, it's not done in a vacuum. Effective product owners seek input and feedback from customers, designers, and the development team to optimize everyone's workload and the product delivery.

Keeping the backlog healthy

Once the product backlog is built, it's important to regularly maintain it to keep pace with the program. Product owners should review the backlog before each iteration planning meeting to ensure prioritization is correct and feedback from the last iteration has been incorporated. Regular review of the backlog is often called "backlog grooming" in agile circles(some use the term backlog refinement).

Once the backlog gets larger, product owners need to group the backlog into near-term and long-term items. Near-term items need to be fully fleshed out before they are labeled as such. This means complete user stories have been drawn up, collaboration with design and development has been sorted out, and estimates from development have been made. Longer term items can remain a bit vague, though it's a good idea to get a rough estimate from the development team to help prioritize them. The key word here is "rough": estimates will change once the team fully understands and begins work on those longer term items.

The backlog serves as the connection between the product owner and the development team. The product owner is free to re-prioritize work in the backlog at any time due to customer

> PRO TIP:
>
> Once the backlog grows beyond the team's long term capacity, it's okay to close issues the team will never get to. Flag those issues with a specific resolution like "out of scope" in the team's issue tracker to use for research later.

Anti-patterns to watch for

- The product owner prioritizes the backlog at the start of the project, but doesn't adjust it as feedback rolls in from developers and stakeholders.

- The team limits items on the backlog to those that are customer-facing.

- The backlog is kept as a document stored locally and shared infrequently, preventing interested parties from getting updates.

How do product backlogs keep the team agile?

Savvy product owners rigorously groom their program's product backlog, making it a reliable and sharable outline of the work items for a project.

> Backlogs prompt debates and choices that keep a program healthy–not everything can be top priority.

prioritization ensuring everyone shares the same mindset on the program.

The product backlog also serves as the foundation for iteration planning. All work items should be included in the backlog: user stories, bugs, design changes, technical debt, customer requests, action items from the retrospective, etc. This ensures everyone's work items are included in the overall discussion for each iteration. Team members can then make trade-offs with the product owner before starting an iteration with complete knowledge of everything that needs to be done.

> **PRO TIP:**
>
> Product owners dictate the priority of work items in the backlog, while the development team dictates the velocity through the backlog. This can be a tenuous relationship for new product owners who want to "push" work to the team. Learn more in our article about work-in-progress limits and flow.

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

DAN RADIGAN

Agile has had a huge impact on me both professionally and personally as I've learned the best experiences are agile, both in code and in life. You'll often find me at the intersection of technology, photography, and motorcycling. Find me on Twitter! @danradigan

TUTORIAL

Create an agile board in Jira Software

Find out how to create agile boards in Jira with this step by step guide

Try this tutorial ➔

ARTICLE

Three steps to better sprint reviews

Agile Topics

Agile project management

Scrum

Kanban

Design

Software development

Product management

Teams

Agile at scale

DevOps

Sign up for more agile articles and tutorials.

Email

email@example.com

Subscribe

Up Next
Sprint reviews →