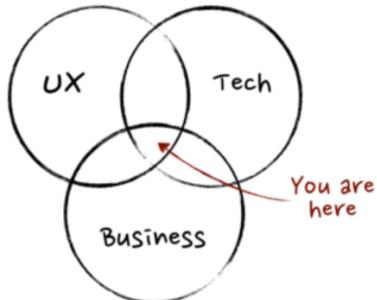


What, exactly, is a Product Manager?

BY MARTIN ERIKSSON ON OCTOBER 5, 2011

I often get asked what a product manager is. What do they do? Where do they come from? How do you get into [product management](#)? Why do they like [sharpies](#) so much?

In his book [Inspired](#), Marty Cagan describes the job of the product manager as "to discover a product that is valuable, usable and feasible". Similarly, I've always defined product management as the intersection between business, technology, and user experience (hint – only a product manager would define themselves in a [Venn diagram](#)). A good product manager must be experienced in at least one, passionate about all three, and conversant with practitioners in all.



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Business

Product Management is above all else a business function, focused on maximising business value from a product. Product Managers should be obsessed with optimising a product to achieve the business goals while maximising return on investment. Sorry, this does mean that you are a suit—but you don't have to wear one.

Technology

There's no point defining what to build if you don't know how it will get built. This doesn't mean a Product Manager needs to sit down and code. However, understanding the technology stack and level of effort involved is crucial to making the right decisions. This is even more important in an Agile world where Product Managers spend more time daily with the development team than with anyone else inside the business.

User Experience

Last but not least the Product Manager is the voice of the user inside the business and must be passionate about the user experience. Again this doesn't mean being a pixel pusher but you do need to be out there testing the product, talking to users and getting that feedback first hand—especially in a start-up.

Manage what exactly?

Why do you need this breadth of skills? Because the role itself is incredibly broad and varied and you'll be using them every day.

Vision

It starts with setting a vision for the product. This requires you to research, research, and research some more your market, your customer, and the problem they have that you're trying to solve. You have to assimilate huge amounts of information—feedback from clients, quantitative data from your web analytics, research reports, market trends and statistics. You need to know everything about your market and your customer, and then mix all that information with a healthy dose of creativity to define a vision for your product.

Once you have a vision, you have to spread the word in your business. Get dogmatic, evangelical even, about the utopia that is your product. If you can't get passionate about it, you're in the wrong job or you didn't come up with a very good vision. Your success, and that of your product, relies on every team member. From sales to a developer, understanding that vision and being at least a little bit passionate about it as well is important.

Build a roadmap

And then you switch gears again and start building an actionable plan to reach that vision. A roadmap of incremental improvements and [iterative](#) development that take you step by faltering step closer to that final vision. This is when all that hard work preaching the good word pays off. Your team throw themselves into coming up with better designs, better code, and better solutions to the customers' problem.

Detail, detail, detail

Now we get really detail-oriented. As you work day in, day out with the development team as a product owner—defining and iterating the product as you go, solving problems as they pop up, and closely managing scope so you can get the product out on time.

The product is finally out there and suddenly you're spending your days

poring over data again. You're constantly looking at how customers use the product, talking to them about the product, and generally eating, sleeping and breathing the product. Did you solve the right problem? Do your users get the product? Will they pay for the product?

And then you do it all over again. And these days it's not a waterfall process. You're not doing this step by step, you're doing this for a dozen products or features at any one time, switching from strategy to tactics in the blink of an eye.

Sound tough?

Sure it's a tough job but it's just about the most fun you can have with your clothes on—certainly the most fun you're going to get paid to do. You get to define the very essence of a product, design solutions to your customers' problems, work with everyone in the business and play a very large part in your business's success. We're the unsung heroes of the tech world—or at least we'd like to think so...

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About

Martin Eriksson

Martin Eriksson has 25+ years experience building world-class online products in both corporate and start-up environments for global brands such as Monster, Financial Times, Huddle, and Covestor. He is the Founder of ProductTank, the Co-Founder and Curator of Mind the Product, and a Product Partner at leading venture capital fund EQT Ventures. He is also the author of the best-seller *Product Leadership, How Top Product Leaders Launch Great Products and Build Successful Teams* (O'Reilly, 2017).



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Name



Gemma Angelina • 9 years ago

Thanks for the insightful description. Do you have any suggestions for aspiring product managers? Most positions I have looked up require a minimum of 3-5 years experience as a product manager. I have a software engineering background and would like to cross-over. What are some great ways to get product manager relevant experience to prepare for a position?

94 ▲ | ▼ 2 ▶ Reply ▶ Share ▶



Paola G. Wolowitz → Gemma Angelina • 6 years ago

I would start off by becoming a CSM.

67 ▲ | ▼ ▶ Reply ▶ Share ▶



nowtejas → Paola G. Wolowitz • 5 years ago • edited

CSM ? or CSPO? I would say CSPO gives a much more detailed insight into what a product owner / manager would need to know :)

^ | ▼ ▶ Reply ▶ Share ▶



Tom McAuliffe → Gemma Angelina • 5 years ago

As an engineer, you've been working "from the inside out."

As a PM, you will have to reverse this perspective and work from "the outside in" (markets, competitors, customers).

You have also likely worked in the "present." Now you will have to work in the "future."

Your sales people and customers may be of limited value in this regard.

Tom McAuliffe

Former top-ranked GE Prod. Mgr.

1 ▲ | ▼ ▶ Reply ▶ Share ▶



Daniel Zacarias → Gemma Angelina • 6 years ago

Hi Gemma,

Did you manage to make the transition?

1 ▲ | ▼ ▶ Reply ▶ Share ▶



Gemma Angelina → Daniel Zacarias • 6 years ago

Hi Daniel, I didn't. Thanks for asking :) I actually didn't even realize you

Hii Daniel, I did! Thanks for asking :) I actually didn't even realize you had commented here until a co-worker me who is trying to make a similar switch saw the discussion below this post. I decided to write about some of the things I did to become a product manager here <http://bit.ly/1HkBsbM>. MindTheProduct has been extremely helpful in my journey!

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Miguel Graziotin** → Gemma Angelina · 5 years ago
10 months later I was about to ask the same question Daniel did, thanks Gemma and Daniel for this!

^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **rizale** → Gemma Angelina · 6 years ago
I love the post! Thanks. this will help me to plan on how to become a product manager :)

^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Daniel Zacarias** → Gemma Angelina · 6 years ago
Really glad for you! Nice list of resources you got there :-) ·

^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Peter Steinberg** · 10 years ago
1. Pretty dead on conceptually but I'd add a few more circles of varying size to that diagram: Design, Customer Service, Marketing, (sometimes QA) and the CEO. In my experience every one of these camps, no matter how they're grouped, has a voice that needs to be heard.

2. I generally describe the job to a layman as an architect and general contractor all rolled into one. Imagine building a house if the homeowner, city planning department, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, tilemen, painters, landscapers... if they all showed up at once and tried to collaborate without anyone leading on the vision (the architect) and then leading on the execution (the general contractor). You'd... eventually end up with... something but without those leading and coordinating roles it would be a triple loss: take longer, cost more, and not fulfill the original goals.

3. Finally, I usually call the roll "Product *Development* Manager". In my mind, a Product Manager manages (babysits) something that's mostly built or done. A Product Development Manager is part of building something new.

46 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **jonathan blackwell** · 7 years ago · edited
Love a Venn Diagram! Thanks [@Martin Eriksson](#) for the indirect invitation to create my own ;) Thanks also for your kind responses to posted comments.

I've designed this illustration based on a decade of experience... I find the Product Manager to be influential in UX, UI, Business and Build aspects of work with each overlap as its own potential competitive advantage.

Working well between UX and UI makes Good Design. UI and Build relationships create a Design/Build approach. Build and Business working together create Innovation. The UX and Business overlap is where it's at, as value is created based on Client Focus [@kfriedson](#)!

The PM actively works in each pairing to elevate the business with effective teams in circles that otherwise rarely directly overlap. The two-way arrows are important as a good PM should be in constant supportive dialogue with all.

Does anyone else reading this find that in their personal life they also act as a bridge between social groups? I've been like that all my life and only recently have I figured out it's my competitive advantage in the workplace...

see more

42 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Katelyn Friedson** · 10 years ago
I must say first that I love and respect the fact that you value product management, and have actually taken the time to do all of us in this field justice, by posting a blog on what the role of a PM actually is.

Product Management and people's incredible misunderstanding or apathy for the role is the bain of my existence. I often try to educate others, but find that most do not care, or still do not understand.

And while I also love the venn diagram (the simpler we can describe product

management to people the better), I have to disagree with a major (and a few minor) notions you make about the role of a PM.

As many have probably mentioned, the role varies across organizations. That sole fact bothers me. In my opinion, the role of a PM shouldn't change so drastically from one company to another so that it results in confusion about the role. Some Engineers are faster than others, some are more strategic. Designers are designers- whether they work at a bakery, startup or financial institution. So why the special treatment? Some product managers are more technical where as others are more strategic, but this is no different from cases I've described above.

[see more](#)

44 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



Martin Eriksson Mod Katelyn Friedson 10 years ago

Thanks for taking the time to comment and sorry you think I missed the mark but bane of your existence? Makes me sound like a Bond villain...

I agree that Product Management is an unnecessarily fluid concept, but I think some variance between product managers can only be expected in such a broad, generalist role. The core is the same - bridging business, technology, and the user experience, but the day to day focus is different depending on the team, the company and the product.

Speaking of that core - I agree that knowing your market is absolutely essential, which is why the first paragraph describing product management is all about market research. I think I find market knowledge so fundamental to both the business and UX circles that I just didn't call it out separately. I also use UX in its widest sense to mean the overall user experience and customer engagement, so maybe that venn circle should simply be the customer.

21 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



Himanshu Tiwari Mod Martin Eriksson 5 years ago • edited

Hi Marin,

I have got an opportunity to work with one startup company in ERP product as a Product Manager! As i have never worked as a product manager before and had experience as an ERP consultant for more than 4 years, i m thinking whether i should take this opportunity or not? As a fresher in Product management what should be my minimum remuneration in INR? What could be my challenges as a product manager? How should i prepare my self to deliver the best? Is it going to be a good career path for me?

Thanks in advance

Himanshu

[^](#) [v](#) • Reply • Share >



Yemi Mod Martin Eriksson 6 years ago

Just what I thought when I read Katelyn's comment. You have replied well Martin. Knowing the market can be regarded as a day-to-day task and can be embedded more into UX as well as Business. PM is too broad a subject in definition and execution to include its guts in a diagram.

[^](#) [v](#) • Reply • Share >



AlCowpwn Mod Katelyn Friedson 7 years ago

Are you serious? While I appreciate the effort you put into your reply, brevity would be a fantastic quality to have. My take on "Tech" is that Martin means "Engineering", the really technical people (and less business savvy but still have a basic idea of what a business is). While I mostly agree with your last paragraph, I don't see a "WHY".

6 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Tyson_Q Mod Katelyn Friedson 6 years ago

Epic rant.

[1](#) [^](#) [v](#) • Reply • Share >



Allan H 10 years ago

Do you think a Product Manager exists more to:

- support Sales (by providing them tools and knowledge, as well as firefighting customer problems to give them more time to sell)
- or
- direct them (by communicating the product's business goals and defining the

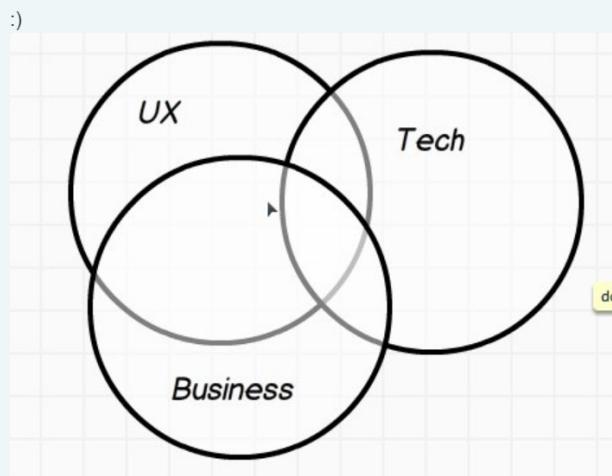
target customers)
18 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Pete** → Allan H · 6 years ago
Neither. A good PM works with his sales team to understand the needs of the market and then figures out how to get those features into an existing product or new product. More about collaboration than support or directing.
1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **kentzhu** · 10 years ago · edited
1年以前，我写了一篇博客并画了一张图（<http://www.ikent.me/blog/3019>）
我认为，PM应该同时关注产品设计、工程技术、市场运营。
PM在做一个产品的同时需要从这3个方面入手，力求达到一个平衡点。在团队里，PM总是那个寻求满意解的人，而不是最优解的。
今天看到阁下这篇文章，发现观点出奇的一致，感到非常的荣幸，幸会幸会！
27 ^ | v · 1 · Reply · Share >

 **Vjeste** · 10 years ago
A key requirement for the Product Manager is that he/she define the need, market potential, competitive environment, manufacturability, and above all, profitability. Over the past 30+ years, I have seen sales people ask for a product with features that made the product extremely complex and difficult to produce resulting in very high cost. We all have heard the phrase, "everything but the kitchen sink". The Product Manager has to have very good understanding of what key features need to be included without exceeding targets for the cost and profit margins. He has to take a firm stand against the tendency to add bells and whistles just because someone promises truckload of orders if we have it.
15 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Aesthetic Grace** · 9 years ago
Great stuff. Good perspective.
As time goes on, smart businesses are recognizing that 'Business' needs (ie business requirements) are aligning more and more with user needs. This is causing a major shift in Product development away from "Business Requirements" and toward "User Stories". Might be splitting hairs here, but as time goes on, I think it's looking more like this:



11 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Mathy** → Aesthetic Grace · 7 years ago
Yes the UX will be overwhelmed by business, however it means that the UX would be considered in business, so the knowledge of business would include that portion and the role would not be different to that extent.
^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Bruce McCarthy** · 10 years ago
Great summary, well told. The venn diagram is particularly apt (as is the comment on PM's fondness for them).

I created a product manager persona based on data from multiple surveys from places like Pragmatic Marketing: <http://www.userdriven.org/b...> I wonder if you see your idea of a PM there?

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **Rahul Dighe** · 10 years ago · edited
I am a Product Manager at a startup. I work on the product strategy, feature prioritization, and user research. I also manage the product backlog and work closely with the engineering team to ensure we are building the right product for our users.



It's unfortunate the question gets asked but needless to say being Product Number 1 at company always means someone asks you this question or it's to your benefit as to what you actually do.

I would always describe it with a slight slant - I would define product manager as a intersection of

- > User - what the user wants ?
- > Tech - what we can actually build?
- > Marketing - what we can actually sell?

12 ^ | v 2 • Reply • Share >



Apcampos22 • 9 years ago

Your image is worth a thousand words! Great succinct definition too.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Evan Quinn • 9 years ago

Showing my age here because you seldom find these in automobiles anymore, but I started in product management in the 1980s, and often thought this was a good metaphor: PMs are the distributors, as in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wik...> - from R&D to marketing to channel to customer to supply chain to communications to delivery to reinvention to business management - the spiritual, informational and motivational guide for all involved. More metaphors: head of the octopus, point guard on basketball team.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Erica Louise • 5 years ago

A product Manager is best described here: <https://blog.zipboard.co/wh...>

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Martin Eriksson Mod → Erica Louise • 5 years ago

Stole my venn diagram...

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Sheetal Achalkar • 9 years ago

No wonder the most confused lot of the industry is tech recruitment group, and no wonder I have to keep modifying my resume! But can't blame the recruiters- they come across same roles with myriad titles or myriad roles for the same title, depending on what the company they are recruiting for decides to call the role. Neither are the companies to blame cos IT is an ever-changing ever-evolving industry. If the company is a start-up there is hardly ever a separate "product manager" role; it is (naturally) only once budgets expand and companies grow that they form distinct UX, Tech and BA roles, and then finally Product Management.

My two cents- Product Management is about building & managing relationships between a) teams, b) between clients & company, c) between product itself and its consumer; for all of which communication is the key. And in order to communicate, the Product Manager has to "speak" UX, Tech, BA, and maybe even QA, sales & training for example.

In short, the Venn diagram totally hits the nail on the head.

But how does it solve the problem created by this confusion when it comes to hiring or applying for Product Manager roles- how does someone like me with a checkerboard of tech/ UX/ BA titles merge em all successfully on a resume so that it gets through to hiring managers? Change titles of previous roles??

13 ^ | v 8 • Reply • Share >



JeffT • 7 years ago

Thanks Martin. I'm just now considering a move from business manager to product manager and find this very insightful as a perspective, and it seems to describe the type of role I would rather play, and the strategy-based skillset I believe I have. I see some other people have re-described your VEN, but I believe they may be missing a bit of the point. You have simplified many elements into the core foundations that define what must come together for any product to be successful.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Soumit Banerjee • 8 years ago

Awesome write-up and JIT for me :) was rummaging about in my brain to come up with a definitive term for what I'd love to do after my MBA. Your words connected the dots beautifully! So I would love to be a product manager in the tech world soon one day.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Robert Freedman • 10 years ago



Thanks for the article. In the Venn diagram, I think there could be 5-7-9+ circles with the intersection in the middle called Product Manager! Ultimately, a PM's day job varies significantly depending on product type, organization stage and product stage, but all PMs have a common primary task: to be the voice of the product.

In terms of product type, at a semiconductor company, the PM is deep in the numbers -- NM die size, expected yields, competitive performance analysis, etc. At a mobile app company, the PM plays with competitors' apps and monitors Gizmodo. These two PMs have different skillsets and spend their days differently.

In terms of company stage, early product is built by founders and engineers, typically with no PM. Somewhere along the way, an official PM is anointed. If it's consumer, the UI team, devs and other stakeholders in the organization probably have as much knowledge of the product as the PM from Day 1. If it's B2B, the PM may have the most business knowledge initially, but good devs, sales, PSO and others will quickly come up to knowledge parity with the PM.

In terms of product stage, V1 may be out the door with no PM and V2 may be PM "coordinated." But we often see a V3 that is the big update to fix those V1 legacy

[see more](#)

3 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



PF PM → Robert Freedman • 6 years ago

Something like this would be on plane with what i feel is a decent definition of what i see the venn diagram looking like ...



1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Jacque Wolfgang → PF PM • 5 years ago

That is absolutley the best!!! I always refer to my desk as the deli line- take a number and dependant upon your order I would pull a hat off the wall... meaning sometimes I was the insperation speaker, the designer, the firefighter, the police, the crossing guard, the teacher, the manager, the janitor.. and many more

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Benir Koran'ache • 6 years ago

The best training for a kick arse Product Manager is: Creative Direction, Design Direction and Project Manager with #SCRUM/#AGILE training. These posts are the synthesis of the modern billet of Product Manager. (as all bring real-time products to market) @creativemf

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Aen • 8 years ago • edited

The diagram is wrong. A PM isn't all three. [http://aen.writeonpure.com/....](http://aen.writeonpure.com/) Other than that great article.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Martin Eriksson Mod → Aen • 8 years ago

I didn't say they are all three, just sit in the middle of those three. Having said that the best product managers have hands on experience in two or even all three areas.

6 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Suraj Pardeshi → Martin Eriksson • 6 years ago

"Just adding one new feature to a product more than doubles the potential for complexity" is as similar to adding hell lot of obscurity to the definition by adding more circles just for the sake of it. Once a

the definition by adding more circles just for the sake of it. Once a PM comes across this then the brevity with clear cut understanding in the Venn Dia is best suited for the definition. People with clarity comes up with clear ideas so as to define the terms.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



T.K. · 10 years ago

Martin, this is almost spot on with my perspective on what a Product Manager does. The only difference is that I would expand upon UX to also include customer/market objectives/desires, i.e. bringing in an external perspective.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Tamsin · 10 years ago

Great post. How about marketing, where does that fit? Many product management roles include a healthy portion of marketing strategy and planning, if not execution.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Nerd · 10 years ago

Basically you can not write a line of code, get a bunch of "nerds" to write it for you and make much more money than them. You can get away with having practically zero real knowledge about software and make it big in the software industry.

Not to mention you get invited to all the parties and much higher social value. You truly deserve the all company paid business trip to Europe where you present to customers what you "innovated".

Oh and after the product is made, you can go ahead proclaiming after what a great innovator you are. The nerds just wrote the code, the IDEA was yours. Oh what a true visionary innovator you are.

3 ^ | v · 3 · Reply · Share ›



Charles → Nerd · 9 years ago

Looks like you're a bit frustrated. Coding is not everything. Are you talking to legal to see that the company won't get sued? Are you sitting with Finance to create the business cases? Are you reading contracts, NDA's, T&C's and EULA's until your eyes hurt? Are you training customer service and Sales? Are you creating & powerpoints about what the product does and how it fares and presenting in front of the board/senior management? Are you discussing marketing strategies? Are you doing market research, organising workshops with customers and analysing findings so that you can understand what your customers really want? Are you talking to providers? Are you supposed to know at any point in time what your competition is doing? Are you devising price strategies? Etc. etc.

No, I think not.

26 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Martin Eriksson → Nerd · 10 years ago

Dude! Sounds like you need a new product manager!

All kidding aside I believe the product manager's core function is to prioritise and define the problems to solve - it's up to the team as a whole to come up with the best solution to that problem. But that's another blog post...

And yes, whoever designs it gets the credit. And no, I'm usually the one stuck back in the office while the founders are out partying ;-)

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Anonymous → Nerd · 10 years ago

In my engineering career, I've had a fair share of run-ins with bad product managers, but I think you are underestimating what they do, especially the politics and the planning. Of course each project is a joint effort, but the person coordinating the various aspects of it is naturally going to get recognition.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



JeffT → Nerd · 7 years ago

I think finding a company that knows everyone is important and should be made to feel valuable to the organization should be your priority. Some do. And by the way, there is actually a lot of value to the sales and customer interaction elements, as well as research, communication and strategic management that make up the profession, and makes it possible for the work to be financed. Generally, that skillset is not found in a code-writer, who would likely hate the politics, business, and social skills that actually are work. When you get down to it, that just seems like 'blav'.



Kaytee ➔ Nerd • 7 years ago

Nerd,

It's always sad when there are inequities in valuing all facets of a team effort. In an ideal world, I feel all contributors should be appreciated.

I used to work in the "tech" sector as a scientist in the Pharma Industry where the "business" and "UX/customer" groups were upheld on a much higher pedestal. I later branched out into project/program/product management. While it is true that there are a lot of customer-facing activities + the perks that go with it, my workload + hours vs. salary is far lower than the folks in dev.

Sigh While I love what I do, it's tough when your contributions aren't valued as much as other functional areas.

Martin,

Thank you for your article. It brings much needed insight to what seems to be an often misunderstood role. Although it's been a function of mine for a

mind the PRODUCT

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