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January 8, 2016

The Product vs. Project vs. Program Manager Role Confusion

by Ellen Chisa

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"PM" is a confusing abbreviation. It can refer to (at least) three distinct roles: the Product Manager, the Project Manager, and the Program Manager. These roles all have different histories and slightly different responsibilities. But you wouldn't know it based on some job descriptions out there. And if you are interviewing for one of these roles, it's easy to think you know what the job is about — only to be wrong. Very wrong.

I have held the Program Manager title at Microsoft as well as the Product Manager title at Kickstarter. I currently work as Director of Product at Lola Travel. I have also seen friends in all three roles at different organizations get lost as they tried to discern what they should be doing.

These roles are not universal. The titles mean different things at different organizations. Still, experience — my own and that of my colleagues — has taught me that some distinctions are fairly universal.

Here is how I break the three roles down:

Product Manager
The Product Manager title comes from another historical idea – the Consumer Product Goods (CPG) role of "Brand Manager". Brand Managers were responsible for the success of a given product line. Their work in this context was so successful that when the software market expanded in the 80s, tech firms recruited brand managers to oversee products. They knew that brand managers' deep sense of product knowledge and ownership could carry over from consumer to technology — and it did.

Today's Product Managers have a similar holistic focus. **We own the success of a product throughout its whole lifecycle**. Product Managers are responsible for sitting at the intersection of Design, Technology, and Business. This involves figuring out what to build based on customer needs and making sure it gets shipped. Since the scope of this role is more broad, detail-level product specifications are sacrificed sometimes. The result is that engineers might make more decisions about specific features, like error cases.

Since people are trained in a specific discipline before getting into Product Management, they are often stronger in one area but know enough of the others (Engineering, Marketing, etc.) to get by. Strong Product Management teams have a variety of backgrounds. This allows the team to have an expert in each area and a close relationship with adjacent teams. Ultimately, Product Managers pitch in wherever is needed to increase the likelihood of success.

Project Manager
Project Managers are responsible for execution. They are removed from the "What do we build?" question so they can focus on, "How do we build it?" They live in the world

of budgets and schedules. In Agile development processes, the Project Manager is often called the Scrum Master.

The Project Manager is responsible for breaking work down. **They think about how to take a large-scale project and turn it into manageable tasks**. For those manageable tasks, they help coordinate work estimates (via Fibonacci, T-shirt sizing, planning poker, or another estimation process). Once the work is scheduled, they make sure things stay on track and figure out mediations if they go wrong. The Project Management Institute offers classes and certifications for Project Managers, including the PMP.

This role is most valuable in large companies, or with projects that include a lot of dependencies. In many small companies, there is usually no dedicated Project Manager. When that occurs, the Program Manager, Product Manager, and/or Technical Lead often fill the gap. The Project Manager's success can be evaluated based on how close to on time and on/under budget the project was finished.

Program Manager
Program Manager is the most common title in Seattle. It first came into use when Jabe Blumenthal, an Excel team member in the early days of Microsoft, took it on. He realized that the programmers were spending a ton of time writing code, but no one was balancing customer needs with marketing requests. He decided to use the Program Manager title to fill that gap. He viewed himself as the voice of the customer and started writing functional specifications. **Due to its origin, the Program Manager role is nearly always technical and relates to programming**.

Program Manager specifications often have more detail than Product Manager specifications. You can often think of them as technical Product Managers. Program Managers are likely to get a little closer to how things are implemented. They are also more likely to manage details, like how to handle error cases. Since the Program Manager typically lives in Engineering, they are also often insulated from the financial and services sides of the company.

Instead, they are a core piece of the Engineering team. They often rely on other teams to get advice on the competitive landscape and other external forces. While they are still a central point of contact, their interactions with other roles (like Product Planners) are less frequent than with Engineers. The Program Manager's success is evaluated based on if reliable and usable software is delivered for the release.

> ❝ *I do not mean to imply that these roles are sequential. The Project and Program Managers are experts in ways that a Product Manager cannot be due to scope. Your own milage may vary, and each company has slightly different ways of dividing the workload.* ❞

It is crucial to clarify what each role means at each specific organization — before you accept one of them. So, if you are interviewing for one of these roles and don't understand the job description, ask.

Use the info. above as your baseline, and ask how it applies (or not) to the job at hand. Knowing the basics will get you closer to the one that's the best fit for you.

This is a guest post by Ellen Chisa. If you are looking to be a great product manager or owner, create brilliant strategy, and build visual product roadmaps — start a free trial of Aha!

Ellen Chisa is Director of Product Management and Design at Lola Travel. She also teaches Product Management for Olin College and General Assembly. She attended Harvard Business School and was a Product Manager at Kickstarter and Program Manager at Microsoft. She writes on her personal blog and plays pinball in her spare time. To read more of her writing, follow her on Twitter.

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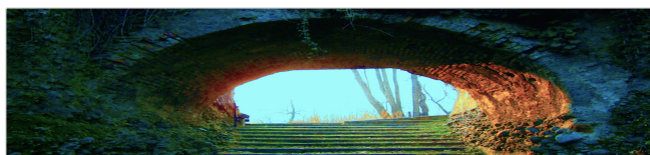
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Comments

Carson Marston
January 11, 2016 at 1:17 pm

Great description of what a product manager is and I like the history lesson!

Keith Brown
January 11, 2016 at 1:49 pm

Thank you for the feedback Carson. Glad you enjoyed the post!

Seth Shaman
January 12, 2016 at 10:10 am

Excellent article! A title is just a title, but without knowledge of the role the ambiguity is only increased. Through my experience, I am constantly shocked at how many agencies "classify" these roles without real understanding of the defined terms of the role itself. Removing the barrier of the defined role allows one to work within their dedicated silo, which is what we should all strive for anyway. Cheers for a great perspective!

Keith Brown
January 12, 2016 at 11:15 am

Thanks Seth!

Mark
January 12, 2016 at 11:16 am

I think these are great, but another one I think a lot of companies get confused on is the difference between a Product Manager and a Product Owner. I find a lot of companies hiring Product Managers, but really they want a Product Owner since it's almost completely within Dev and writing specifications. With the above descriptions I wonder how also a Product Owner is different from a Program Manager.

I have also seen Program Manager's be used to describe a Product Manager with multiple Products they are overseeing. Another term I've seen is Portfolio Product Manager.

So many terms that are used so differently company to company. Wish people would get on the same page. 😁

Keith Brown
January 12, 2016 at 11:48 am

Thanks for the feedback Mark. And yes, many of these roles change depending on the company.

Steve Cordonnier
January 12, 2016 at 12:24 pm

I like the description of the product manager and the project manager but I'm not sure the history mentioned behind the program manager lines up with my experience. I believe program manager was used for decades within the federal government before Excel was even envisioned by Microsoft. Case in point, I was a program manager for the Department of Energy in the 1980's and I know it was used for decades prior to my arrival. My role was to manage entire programs within the DOE that encompassed many smaller projects and efforts. If you are speaking only about the use of the term in the software industry then that's a subset of the entire use of the term. The use of product manager, project manager and program manager terms transcends the software industry.

Keith Brown
January 12, 2016 at 1:40 pm

Thanks for the comment Steve. That is a great point and I appreciate you sharing your unique insight into the program manager role you held at the DOE.

Chris K Davis
January 12, 2016 at 1:44 pm

Great post!

Alex Popoff
January 12, 2016 at 2:35 pm

Good Post,

Similar to the DOE example, In the Aerospace industry, Program Managers manage entire programs that encompassed many smaller projects and efforts.

Lately, in the SW industry it seems the Technical Product Manager is very similar to the Program Manager. The TPM not only ensures the product is right for the target business or user, but also gets involved the " how to design " details .

Rachel Wentink
January 13, 2016 at 8:36 am

Good Post! I agree, it feels as though every organization has its own interpretation of these titles.

To Mark's comment, at Tivoli/IBM a Product Line Manager led a Product Management team for multiple products. It may correspond to the Program Manager or Portfolio Product Manager titles he mentioned.

Jeff Pinegar
January 13, 2016 at 12:44 pm

I think this nails project managers and product managers but misses the mark on program managers. I like PMI's view on this. A Program Manager manages programs and a program is defined as a group of related projects (managed by project managers), subprograms, and activities managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually. Programs may include elements of related work outside the scope of the discrete projects in the program.

Nick Ehle
January 15, 2016 at 10:06 am

Product Marketing is another "PM" role that is not well understood. Maybe a future post!

Keith Brown
January 15, 2016 at 12:40 pm

Thanks Nick. That is another often misunderstood role, and some companies have Product Managers that handle both inbound and outbound responsibilities (meaning they do a lot of product marketing too).

Whitney Doyle
November 28, 2016 at 12:25 pm

This is a great blog post, the description of the three function's roles and responsibilities is spot on! I've never heard of the Program Manager being more involved in the engineering details before. Most larger places I've worked at had Program Managers that managed complex projects at a higher level, basically overseeing all of the related Projects that were part of that larger initiative. The role outlined in this blog, I've seen at companies small and large having the title "Product Owner" if using Agile dev processes or if a waterfall shop, "Technical Project Manager" or "Business Analyst" were the common titles.

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