

Merziyah Poonawala

ABOUT

I'm a product manager who thrives on untangling complex problems, finding clarity in ambiguity, and translating user insights into impactful products. Over my career, I've built and launched enterprise software, delivered 6+ MVPs to validate product-market fit, and advised founders in refining their visions. I've worked on B2B and B2C products across industries like healthcare, government, beauty, and sports. I'm passionate about understanding users, their environments, and how technology can create meaningful and joyful experiences in their workflows.

Background

I began as a software engineer but quickly realized my strengths lay in connecting technical solutions with user needs. Positioned as the tech liaison on a major project, I dove deep with customers, asking "why" at every turn to understand their challenges and translate their needs into actionable insights for our engineering team. This role led to my transition into project management, where I managed software implementation schedules, workflow analysis, user training, and launches.

As I supported client after client, I noticed a recurring issue: custom feature requests for similar problems were complicating our product unnecessarily. I took the initiative to streamline requests, challenge assumptions, and push teams to focus on the real challenges behind customer demands. This marked my shift to product management, where I became the company's first PM.

Honing my PM skills I saw real value in agile software development and joined an agile software agency where I worked alongside brilliant engineers and designers, embracing agile principles and adopting an experimental mindset to tailor processes for team success. I also worked closely with business leaders, guiding products from ideation to market. Under tight deadlines, I learned to balance user needs with business and technical constraints, ensuring impactful, user-centric solutions.

My product principles are:

- **Get clear on the why:** Every project starts with understanding the problem we're solving and its business impact.
- **Validate the problem and the user:** I prioritize research to ensure we're solving the right problem for the right audience.
- **Build lean and ship early:** Incremental releases drive user feedback and product refinement.

- **Be kind. Be transparent. Communicate:** Collaboration is key, and I lead with empathy and clarity to foster trust and teamwork.
-

Offer

- Ideation and workshops to uncover problem space and solution
- User research
- Partnering with design and engineering to build sustainable solutions

WORK EXAMPLES

GameChanger: Building a Web Platform for Youth Sports Management

The Problem: A Mobile-First Misstep

GameChanger, a youth sports management platform, faced a critical crossroads: Coaches were abandoning the platform due to the lack of a web interface, jeopardizing user retention during the busiest recruitment season. They needed a solution—fast.

GameChanger had launched a new mobile-first app to replace its legacy solution. While the app excelled on mobile—rated best in class for baseball and basketball scoring and team management—the lack of a web interface turned out to be a dealbreaker for users. Tasks such as data entry and viewing statistical tables were painful on mobile devices. Users threatened to leave for competitors that offered both web and mobile capabilities. In their push to embrace a mobile-first future, the company overlooked the enduring value of desktop access for many users.

The Challenge: Tight Deadline and High Stakes

GameChanger faced a dual challenge:

1. Build a functional web version of their mobile app.
2. Launch the web app within three months to leverage Spring recruitment—the busiest season—or risk losing users to competitors.

The Approach: User-Centric Roadmap Development

I was brought in to lead the development of the web platform, delivering the first version in three months in time for Spring registration—when the largest cohort of users chooses the app they will use to manage their teams for the rest of the season.

Understanding the Users

I conducted detailed interviews with GameChanger's primary personas: high school coaches, college coaches, and travel team coaches. These conversations uncovered key insights:

- Mobile-only access was inefficient for detailed data entry and reviewing large statistical tables, especially for sports like baseball.
- Team management activities were part of a coach's daily job and were often done during work hours at a desktop. Using a phone not only slowed them down but also appeared unprofessional in workplace settings. At home, many preferred the efficiency and comfort of desktop use.
- Data entry and game and statistics analysis were primarily conducted in office settings, reinforcing the need for a robust web interface.

Crafting the Roadmap

Using these insights, I created a year-long roadmap. It prioritized team registration data entry to meet the first deadline while balancing essential features with those best suited for desktop use due to user workflows and environments.

1. **Phase 1: Core Data Entry for Spring Registration**
 - Team roster creation
 - Team schedule creation
2. **Phase 2: Statistics Viewing**
 - Displaying comprehensive stats tables
3. **Phase 3: Additional Functionality**
 - Gradual roll-out of features aligned with team management activities best suited for desktop use

This roadmap addressed the immediate needs of the Spring registration period while allowing for iterative development and user feedback.

The Execution: Team Collaboration and Technical Solutions

I led a cross-functional team of six engineers, one designer, and a QA tester. I fostered an environment of shared ownership, empowering the team to surface potential risks and solutions.

Together, we tackled several challenges:

- **User-Centered Design:** Conducting multiple rounds of user interviews:
 - Exploratory interviews to define initial requirements
 - Assumption-validation sessions during development
 - Townhall feedback sessions post-launch
- **API Dependencies:** Collaborating with the platform team to build and modify APIs for web functionality
- **Tech Debt:** Improving test coverage and resolving long-standing technical issues to ensure a seamless experience

The Outcome: A User-Acclaimed Web App

The web app was launched on schedule, addressing the most critical user needs in time for Spring recruitment. Over the year, it became a standard part of a coach's team management workflow.

- **Increased Adoption:** Web app usage doubled within the first year, signaling strong user satisfaction.
- **Reduced Churn:** User retention stabilized as coaches found the platform better suited to their workflows. Support tickets reduced by 30% following the web interface launch.
- **Team Morale:** The product team was engaged, motivated, and empowered throughout the process, enabling open discussions to build the right product.
- **Future Growth:** The web platform laid the foundation for online video streaming capabilities, opening the door to providing additional value to coaches, players, and their families.

Tools Used

- Shortcut app, Figma, Zoom, Miro,

Walmart

Vault Beauty Case Study

Background

Courtney Summers, a professional makeup artist, sought to launch a beauty and lifestyle mobile app addressing a problem close to her heart. During her maternity leave, she noticed a gap in the market: clients and fellow artists struggled to find reliable stylists who could deliver the right look. This gap inspired the creation of Vault Beauty, a platform connecting clients with trusted beauty professionals.

The Challenge

For both clients and artists, beauty services are deeply personal. The right stylist doesn't just provide a service; they play a role in shaping confidence, self-expression, and how individuals present themselves to the world. A bad experience can be disheartening, while the right connection can be transformative. Yet, finding trusted recommendations or referrals is often a frustrating and unreliable process.

Courtney had a vision but needed expertise to shape the product, understand the market, and ensure its success. My role was to design and build the first version of Vault Beauty as a native iOS app. The key challenges included:

- Understanding the dual needs of clients and artists in a two-sided marketplace.
- Prioritizing features to deliver a compelling MVP within six months.
- Identifying the right target audience to maximize adoption and usage.

My Approach

1. Understanding the Market

I began by mapping out the user journey for both artists and clients, creating a user story map to visualize their interactions. This approach ensured we built broad functionality, allowing both sides to achieve their goals and engage meaningfully with the product.

2. User Research

I conducted extensive interviews with users on both sides of the marketplace. Key insights included:

- **Client Segments:** Identified diverse client types, motivations, budgets, and search behaviors.
- **Artist Profiles:** Discovered different categories of artists, including those serving salons, premium clients, and professional industries like advertising and media.

These findings highlighted a stronger use case among professionals in media and advertising rather than the originally targeted 30-year-old stay-at-home moms. Professionals had recurring needs for beauty services outside their usual networks and valued exclusivity. This insight guided a pivot in our target audience and product vision.

3. Building the MVP

With a clear focus, I collaborated with Courtney, two offshore engineers, and a designer to build the MVP. Key milestones included:

- **Milestone 1:** Released a simple artist search interface with test data.
- **Milestone 2:** Built out artist profiles, enabling artists to showcase their work.

- **Milestone 3:** Built out capabilities for artists to enter their own profile data.
- **Milestone 4:** Added images and reviews to search results.

Throughout the process, we worked in regular sprints, ensuring consistent progress and updates.

4. Prioritizing Features

We emphasized:

- Client search functionality to simplify finding the right stylist.
- Artist profile tools to help them showcase their work effectively.
- Features fostering exclusivity for professional artists, such as advanced search filters and curated recommendations.

Results

Vault Beauty launched successfully, achieving over 500 sign-ups in its initial phase. Key outcomes included:

- **For Artists:** A dedicated platform to showcase their work, moving beyond generic platforms like Yelp or Facebook groups.
- **For Clients:** A tailored tool to find the right stylists using specific search criteria, reviews, and visual portfolios.

Metrics tracked post-launch:

- Profiles created and completed (defined as having contact info, 4+ photos, and 5+ services).
- Searches conducted.
- Sessions booked via the app.

Lessons Learned

When I first started the project, I didn't have a deep understanding of the users for this product, and it wasn't something I could rely on personal experience for. Talking to users and digging into their behaviors and motivations made me realize how important it is to take an objective view to clearly understand users and their pain points. This process not only shaped the product but also deepened my appreciation for how much insights can transform a vision into something truly impactful.

Tools Used

- Trello, Jira, Miro, Zoom, InVision

NovoPath - Hemepath

Other

- Cross-border invoicing and payment management
- Payment platform for CFB
- Subscriptions for Elias

PERSONAL

- Books I've loved/currently reading
- Articles reading
- Current Workout plans
- Recent hikes
- Currently learning

CONTACT ME

- Offer?
- Ask?