How To Succeed as a

Modern Product Manager

by **airfocus**

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Why an ultimate guide to product managers?

What is the connection between the CEO of Slack, Stewart Butterfield, the CEO of Youtube, Susan Wojcicki, the CEO of Alphabet & Google, Sundar Pichai, and the former CEO of Yahoo, Marissa Mayor?

The products that these companies offer are staples in the day-to-day life of users and customers all over the world.

The connection between all of them is that they were all product managers in their career before becoming CEOs.

Similar to how product management is often misunderstood, product managers are misunderstood just the same. Though there are many resources available on this topic some of them only cover specific aspects of the role and others do not go into much depth.

We wrote the Ultimate Guide to Product Management to shed light on what product management was, its history, the value it brings to software companies, while briefly speaking about those who carry out this function, product managers.

This detailed and comprehensive guide will save you time and trouble of searching and combing through the many resources available on this topic.

Here are some of the many topics that will be covered in this detailed guide:

- What is a product manager
- What are product managers responsible for
- Who do product managers work with
- What are the differences between a good and bad product managers
- What tools do product managers rely on in their day-to-day activities
- How to get a product management job
- How to level up your product skills
- ... and more

Let’s begin!

What Is a Product Manager?

01

Product management is the practice of defining the "what" and "why" for the solutions that companies build, solutions that are meant to solve customer problems. The individuals that carry out this practice are known as product managers.

To do this effectively product managers have various skills, resources, tools, and stakeholders that they rely on.

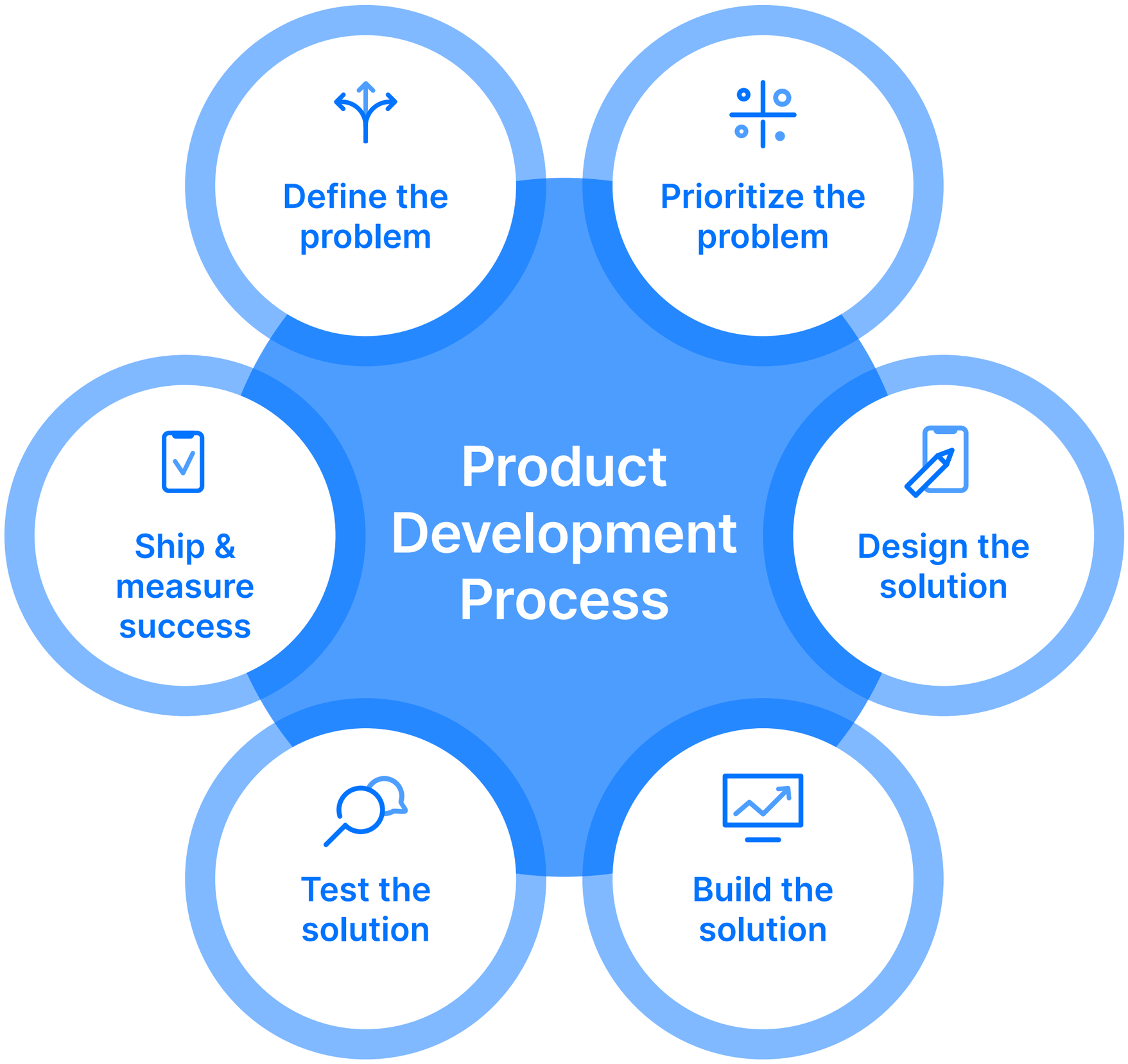
A product manager is the champion of their customer in their business.

They regularly interface with customers to understand their request and then measure and prioritize them based on the value provided (to customers and their business) and the associated effort.

Once an item has been prioritized they work through the product development process to design, build, test, launch, and iterate on the product post launch.

The product development process is the process that all products go through. Product managers follow this process to take a solution from problem definition, to launch, and multiple activities post launch.

Though defined in a few different ways the **product development process** generally involves the following stages:



Every action that a product manager takes surrounding a product will fall into one of these 6 stages.

So to recap before moving forward, **product managers define solutions that solve customer and business problems, enable their business to teach its goals, and work with their stakeholders to achieve success.**

The 3 key responsibilities of product manager's

We spoke about the responsibilities of a product manager in our article What Exactly Are a Product Manager's Responsibilities?. When diving into this topic however it's important to note that everything that a product manager does can be categorized into the following 3.

1

Remaining customer focused

Customer empathy is one of the most important traits that product managers need to have.

Product managers need to be able to place themselves into the shoes of their customers to understand their pain points.

Along with knowing who their customers are (name, age, aspirations, budget, etc.) they can articulate the key problems that they face, why solving these problems are important, and how their customers plan to grow with the product.

Product managers also maintain a close relationship with their customers because they rely on them to succeed in their role.

As product managers work through the product development process customers assist them with:

- Research and discovery: do we understand the problem correctly?
- Validating their work: are we on the right track?
- Gathering feedback: is this actually assisting customers with accomplishing their goals?

2

Making data driven decisions

Product managers rely on qualitative and quantitative data to make decisions that will drive customer and business impact.

Data is heavily relied upon because it provides clarity on what is happening and what the next course of action should be.

While product managers are responsible for defining the “what” and the “why” of the solutions that they build with their teams, they can do this with clarity and confidence when they have access to data.

How does a product manager decide whether they should spend time fixing a set of bugs vs. working on a minor enhancement for a customer? With data.

Product managers also rely on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure the success of their work. A KPI is used to evaluate whether a product is reaching its goals or not.

One important thing to note is that product managers are often graded by whether they meet their target KPIs.

However, accomplishing this is a team effort. This means that if KPIs are missed it may not be 100% the product manager’s fault, other stakeholders are involved in product and business success.

3

Managing stakeholders

A stakeholder is anyone who has direct or indirect influence on a product.

Internal stakeholders are the individuals inside of a company. For example members of the senior management team, designers, and developers.

External stakeholders are those who can influence the product however they do not work within the company. These include customers, industry analysts, trade unions, and development agencies.

Stakeholder management is not limited to knowing who your key stakeholders are and their roles, it includes everything that is required to work effectively with them to reach product and business success.

This includes influencing stakeholders and enabling them to perform their jobs to the best of their abilities.

When key stakeholders are happy and enabled to perform their jobs then this increases the likelihood of the product reaching its goals, and in turn the company reaching its goals.

The characteristics of a good product manager

Product managers have many responsibilities that are heavily relied upon by their company, customers, and teams. However, what are the key traits that distinguish a good product manager from a bad product manager?

Good product managers have the following traits.

Strategic

Product management includes both strategy and delivery.

Product managers begin by determining the “what” and “why” and then work with their teams to determine the how. However even as a solution is built and released, strategy is still involved in every step of the process (for example answering the question which feature should be released first and why?).

Strategy is understanding where you are and determining where you want to go and the steps to get there. While in the process understanding your surroundings, the resources that are available, and your capabilities.

And to add to this, a rock solid understanding of why it is important to reach the specific destination and how it impacts your product and business.

Good product managers are strategic. They understand what needs to be done, how to validate their assumptions, and how their work impacts their customers, business, and industry overall.

Product managers have various rituals, frameworks, and tools that they use including the customer value proposition canvas, competitive analysis, Five Whys, and more to define product strategy.

By no means are we making the claim that product delivery is easy or not important. However **strategy is where strong product managers shine.**

As a product manager advances in their career more of their attention will focus on strategy (for the overall product line and company) and less on delivery.

Strong interpersonal skills

A good product manager is a great communicator and has strong interpersonal skills.

Writing and oratory skills are vital skills for product managers because they are used in multiple settings and scenarios.

For example:

- Writing release notes
- Writing product documentation
- Presenting the product roadmap to customers
- Demoing an enhancement to your product team

Communication is one interpersonal skill. Other interpersonal skills include empathy, listening, conflict management, negotiation, teamwork and leadership.

7 Interpersonal Skills in Product Management

Product managers act as the glue that holds their various departments together.

They are relied upon by the majority of the departments in their company (senior management, design, development, sales, and marketing).

Along with fielding requests from sometimes irate customers, a product manager also has to navigate through internal requests, concerns, and the competing priorities of the stakeholders within their company.

Only a product manager with great listening skills, the ability to resolve conflicts, influence others, and communicate effectively can listen to and work with teammates to ensure that everyone is aligned on one mission and are working towards the same goals.

Can see the forest and the trees

Product managers are constantly required to context switch.

In one moment they may be speaking to a customer about a specific problem that they are facing, and then soon after meet with their customer success team to address how they can better enable them for success.

This can then be followed up with a session to update the product roadmap to communicate how it will evolve for the remainder of the year to ensure that they remain competitive.

With the various stakeholders that they work with, the multiple solutions (products, enhancements, and features) they build and support, good product managers have a deep detailed view of their product but simultaneously maintain a bird's eye view on everything that surrounds their product and company.

This bird's eye view includes what is happening in the industry that they operate within.

A competent product manager is aware of the growth rate of their market, the new entrants, the laggards, the opinions of industry analysts, and extremely important, competitor activity.

This is one of the key questions that product managers in senior roles are always trying to answer: how does our work impact the company and how do we ensure that this assists the company and our various departments with reaching their goals?

Technical

Did you know that most product managers don't know how to code? In fact, only 5% of product managers know how to.

Product managers do not have to know how to code, but a good product manager is technical.

In 8 Skills You Need to Be A Successful Product Manager we mentioned that product managers need to be able to navigate technical discussions with their team.

They have a good understanding of how software and technology works. So much so that they can have technical discussions with their development team and their development team can include them in discussions surrounding technical trade-offs.

Developers involve product managers in discussions about technical trade-offs because these trade-offs may affect the customer experience, which product managers are responsible for.

Though most product managers do not have to know how to code there are some that do have deeper and comprehensive knowledge of how software and technology works.

These individuals are known as Technical Product Managers (TPMs). But hold tight, we'll discuss them shortly.

Reliable team players

Good product managers are reliable team players. This means two things:

1

Team members trust and rely on them

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Product managers are relied upon by multiple team members within their company.

Designers rely on product managers to specify design requirements. Developers rely on product managers to provide clear specifications on what needs to be built and the intended outcome. Senior management relies on product managers to keep them informed on what is being worked on, progress, and if KPIs are being met.

Product managers work closely with multi-disciplinary teams to build and launch products.

Good product managers enable their key stakeholders by supporting them with the tools, communication, and resources that they need to succeed.

This can involve:

- Spending additional time with developers to answer their questions

- Training the sales team on how to use a new product and its various features

- Assisting the marketing team with drafting marketing communication

- Joining a customer support call to appease an irate customer and assure them that their main issues are being prioritized

- Spending additional time with members of the senior management team to clarify the progress of key roadmap objectives

Which leads to the next point.

2

Team members enjoy working with them

As software companies grow it is standard practice to increase the development, design, and sales headcount.

In the very early days of a startup the founder of the company initially carries the role and responsibilities of a product manager.

It may be hard to believe but a software company can survive without a product manager (however this does not mean that it will thrive).

However software companies can not go without developers, designers, and a sales and marketing team.

Being that product managers interface with multiple stakeholders and act as the glue between various departments, **good product managers work well with and are generally liked by their team.**

They bring their unique personality to work, care about their team members, and enable them to perform their best work.

Leaders

Leaders set a vision, chart a course, and can rally others around them with inspiration, motivation, and effectiveness to achieve stated goals.

They identify problems and then roll up their sleeves to solve them, not waiting on others to find a solution.

Leaders train and support others and help them grow. They enable those around them to do their best work, mentor others, and grow others to be leaders.

They are kind to those they interact with but are also assertive when needed.

Good product managers are leaders. And it is necessary for them to be because they shoulder the concerns of their customers.

Customers trust product managers to deliver what they need to make their lives easier.

And their company trusts them to chart the course that will allow them to continue serving their customers while also ensuring that their business continues to grow and reach stated goals.

Great storytellers

Great product managers are great storytellers. **It's not so much what you say, but how you say it.**

Storytelling is an activity that product managers are constantly engaged in and should never tire of.

What they communicate and the way they communicate has a direct effect on the results that they receive.

Informing a customer that they will not receive a requested feature anytime soon because they don't pay enough for your product will yield a far worse response than informing them that their request is being deprioritized for the time being as your company focuses on other items which will benefit them (and other customers in the long run). Followed by a walkthrough of the roadmap.

The characteristics of a bad product manager

It goes without saying that bad product managers do and have the opposite traits of everything mentioned above. However here are some additional characteristics of bad product managers.

Ascribes blame

A bad product manager ascribes blame when things don't go as expected.

Rather than acting as a leader and focusing on what went wrong and how to address it they fixate their attention on who made the mistake.

Even worse when they are at fault for an error they find a scapegoat to take the heat.

Good product managers focus on the problem at hand, not necessarily the person.

Passive

A bad product manager does not take initiative.

Bad product managers don't take the necessary steps to do what needs to be done to drive their roadmap forward, reach company goals, delight customers, and enable their team and company for success.

Bad product managers let things happen as they may and are primarily reactive. They also wait for instructions to be given to them before they make a move.

Being passive is extremely detrimental in the tech industry because events are fast paced and multiple events can happen in a short amount of time.

Good product managers always try to ensure that they are taking the right actions to stay ahead of their competition.

A “yes” man

Bad product managers take orders and directives and implement them immediately.

Good product managers assess directives and determine if they may make sense for the product and business, and (respectfully) challenge requests and redirectives. Even if these requests come from senior leadership.

Product managers utilize the disciplines of product management, gather inputs from their stakeholders, work to understand the reasoning behind inputs, and then make informed decisions on what to act upon.

This is opposed to being a “yes” man and immediately acting upon a request.

Contrary to popular belief the customer is not **always** right.

Clueless

Adding to the above, bad product managers are not aware of what is happening with their product or their surroundings.

This includes how customers are using their product, the key challenges they face, their product’s KPIs, the next major item that needs to be validated before it makes it onto the roadmap, and more.

A product manager manages a product.

Good product managers manage their products to the best of their ability as they are the ones who are ultimately responsible for the product.

While other stakeholders may also play a role in a product’s failure, a good product manager takes the necessary steps to assess and mitigate risks to reach success.

A bad product manager however would not even be aware of the risks involved.

Check out Good Product Manager/
Bad Product Manager by Ben Horowitz,
Co-founder of Andreessen Horowitz, one of the most notable Silicon Valley based venture capital firms, where he speaks further on this topic.

The traits of an effective product manager

- **Customer obsession**

Continuously working with them to gather feedback to prioritize and inform future steps

- **Technical**

An understanding of how software and technology works

- **Stakeholder manager**

Work with these stakeholders to understand their needs and concerns

- **Data-driven decision making**

Data is always collected and utilized when making decisions

- **Effective prioritization**

Taking multiple inputs and effectively prioritize when and why work gets done

- **Strategy**

Aware of what the main goals for their business are and can tie their product strategy and work directly to the business goals

The traits of an un-effective product manager

- **Project management**

Effective product management is not project management

- **Defining the “how” for the team**

Product managers define the “what” and “why”. As for the “how” this is defined by their team members

- **Taking orders**

Immediately implementing orders from stakeholders is not how product management is done

- **(Solely) data analysis**

Data analysis is an important skill however product management involves much more

A day and week in the life of a product manager

Each day in the life of a product manager may differ based on the specific stage of the product development process that their product is in.

For a product in its early days of infancy a product manager may spend a large amount of their day speaking with customers to understand their problems, prioritizing the problems to solve, performing market research and competitive analysis, and testing and validating hypotheses.

Typically however, a product manager's day begins with a standup meeting with their team.

In this meeting each member of the team discusses what they worked on the previous day, what they plan on working on that day, and very importantly, if they need help or are blocked on something.

This standup gives the team awareness of what their team members are working on and insight into who needs their help.

Thereafter a product manager may have another standup meeting specifically with their product team. Product team here refers to the other product managers at their company.

No two days may be the same for a product manager. This is one of the things that make being a product manager a fun job.

Some of the various activities that a product manager will do in a day include:

- Writing user stories and acceptance criteria for their development team

- Joining a customer success coach on a call with a customer to walk them through the product roadmap

- Running usability tests with customers with assistance from their design team

- Updating their product roadmap and communicating these updates with their team

- Testing a new feature to ensure that it meets acceptance criteria prior to release

- Crafting release notes for the latest version of their product

- Holding a meeting with their management team to update them on the progress of key roadmap initiatives

- ... and a lot more

Product managers see more routine in their weekly schedule.

On a weekly basis some of the recurring meetings and tasks that a product manager may have include:

1. Sprint planning with their team
2. Meeting with their product team to share updates, successes, and concerns
3. Business review meeting with the managers of their business to share updates, risks, and mitigation plans
4. Meeting with the customer support team to understand the critical issues that customers are facing and the plans and timeline for resolution
5. 1:1's (whether with their superior, those they manage, or both)
6. Product demonstrations to present the latest product updates to their company
7. ... and more

Tools that product managers rely on

There are various tools that product managers use to perform their day-to-day tasks.

Product managers rely on other products such as airfocus for product management, Mixpanel for analytics, and Figma for prototyping.

However frameworks are also tools that product managers rely on.

Some of the tools that are relied upon by product teams are specific to product managers alone while others are utilized by the product team (product managers, product designers, and data analysts).

Here's a quick list of some of the tools and frameworks that product managers rely on. Check out the airfocus glossary to learn more about these various tools and frameworks.

Product Management:

- airfocus

Product strategy:

- OKRs
- Customer Value Proposition Canvas
- HEART

Prioritization frameworks:

- Kano
- Impact/effort matrix
- MoSCoW

Project/task management:

- JIRA
- Trello
- Pivotal Tracker

Analytics:

- Google Analytics
- Mixpanel
- Amplitude

Prototyping:

- Figma
- InVision Studio
- Miro

Customer feedback:

- Pendo
- Canny
- Intercom

Stakeholder communication:

- Slack
- Microsoft Teams
- Mattermost

The Makeup of a Product Management Team

A product team is not a team of solely product managers.

Rather a product team is a cross-functional team of key members who define the product and actively work towards its success.
A product team normally consists of the following individuals:

Product manager

Responsible for defining the “what” and “why” of the product and ensuring that customers continue to obtain value from the offered solutions and it continues to assist the business with reaching its goals.

Product designer

Steve Jobs is quoted as saying “design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works”.

A product designer is responsible for the overall look and feel of the product.

They not only determine the visual aspects of the product (colors, font, spacing, branding elements, and more) but also assist with performing customer research and other user experience activities to ensure that the right problems are prioritized and being solved for customers.

A product designer is someone who is skilled at user experience and user interface design.

In some teams these roles are fulfilled by separate people. Nonetheless they are members of the product team and work in tandem with their team to ensure that customers and users are offered the best experience via the product’s design.

Read more about product designers here.

Product analysts

Product analytics is the process of gathering and applying key data with the goal of determining how and why users engage with a product.

Product analysts perform this function and work closely with their product team to provide them with product data and also decipher this data sharing information such as:

- What are the most popular components of the product
- The length of time it takes users to perform a specific function
- How user engagement is affected by certain actions
- ... and more.

They also assist with identifying gaps in customer experience, leverage opportunities for growth, and ultimately improve the product with verifiable data.

Product marketing manager (PMM)

Though the title is similar to that of a product manager, a product marketing manager is a more specialized marketing role that attends to the product.

Along with dealing with customer relations and gathering customer feedback, product marketing managers also ensure that companies have the right documentation, processes, and communication strategies for product launches (among other responsibilities).

Read more about product marketing managers here.

Who do product managers report to?

One of the factors that make being a product manager difficult at times is the multiple stakeholders that rely on them.

When it comes to the chain of command within a business a product manager would report to their head of the product team, the Chief Product Officer (CPO) for example.

And the CPO reports to the CEO (similar to how the heads of other departments do).

However product managers also report to other stakeholders in their business. Reporting here means providing them with information that their teams need to be enabled for success, not that these

stakeholders can make hiring or firing decisions.

Who does a product manager lead?

We mentioned earlier in this guide that good product managers are leaders. But who exactly do they lead?

Product managers lead their entire company. Yes, you read that correctly.

Stakeholder management is one of the difficult aspects of product management. This is because **product managers manage products, not people.**

Being the champion of their customers they are the ones who distill their customer needs and determine what solutions to deliver, when, and with their team, how.

Development and design teams are critical to the success of a product. So are customer success, customer support, sales, and marketing.

All of these stakeholders do not report to a product manager directly, they have their own department leads that they report to.

However they do rely on product managers to set the product vision, mission, and lead the charge for offering the right solutions for the product to serve customer and business needs. And provide the needed communication and resources so that they are enabled.

Product Managers Compared to Other Roles (Clarifying Confusion)

Now that you have a better understanding of what product managers are, their many responsibilities, and how to distinguish good product managers from bad ones, let’s take a look at some comparable roles which product managers are often confused with.

The source of the confusion for these roles often lies in the fact that product managers are a jack of many trades and have responsibilities that overlap with those of the many other stakeholders that they work with.

Product manager vs. product owner

This is one role that ties closely to product management, especially because the two work closely together and the roles may overlap in a scrum team.

A product owner (PO) is a product manager in a scrum team.

Scrum is one of the most popular frameworks that software companies use to develop products.

Along with a set of key rituals that a scrum team must follow, scrum has defined rules, values, and tools that when followed lead to product delivery and continuous improvement in the product delivery process.

The main role of a product owner in a scrum team is to support their implementation team.

Their responsibilities center around:

- Working with the implementation team to execute the sprint goals
- Effectively prioritizing and maintaining the product backlog
- Providing needed documentation and resources for team members
- Working with their product manager to clarify requests
- Communicating progress to their company
- Addressing any issues that arise with their team during the development process

So what is the key difference between a product owner and a product manager?

A product manager defines the strategy for the product.

They understand the goals of their business, perform research on customers and the market, test and analyze competitor products, influence the stakeholders in their business towards a particular strategy, analyze their market, define the product, and more.

As a product manager performs these tasks the product owners that they work with support their implementation team with bringing the defined product to life.

Product owners keep the product manager informed of progress and also receive direction from the product manager in the case that revisions are needed based on constraints or other factors.

VS

Product manager

- A product manager defines the strategy for the product.
- Product managers understand the goals of the business
- Perform research on customers
- Test and analyze competitor products
- Convince stakeholders in their business towards a particular strategy
- Analyze their market,
- Define the product

Product owner

- Works with their implementation team to bring the defined product to life,
- Keeps the product manager informed of progress
- Receives direction from the product manager should the product definition need revision based on constraints.

Product manager vs. technical product manager

Product managers are not required to know how to code.

What's required of them is that they have a competent understanding of software and technology so that they can have technical discussions with their team.

When developers use terms such as API, database, backend, regression testing, a product manager is not clueless nor do they have to continuously ask "what does that mean?".

Product managers can perform their jobs well with a general understanding of software and technology. However there are cases where product managers need to have a deeper understanding of this field to define specific products and navigate deeper technical discussions with their team.

This role is fulfilled by Technical Product Managers (TPM). As the title defines, they are more "technical".

Technical product managers may have a degree or certification in computer science, have prior experience as a skilled software engineer, or both. Because of this they are able to have deeper discussions with their development team to define their more technical products and navigate deeper discussions surrounding the underlying technology of their product.

If needed they may even be able to jump into the codebase and code alongside their team. However this does not happen often.

When are technical product managers needed? Technical product managers are needed in cases where a product manager works more closely with their development team than the other departments in their company due to the makeup of their product.

Technical product managers are still product managers. So even if they can code, they will not (and should not) be spending much time writing code with their team.

They must continue to fulfill the other responsibilities of their role, though the majority of their time will be focused on technical aspects of their product and interfacing with their development team.

Product manager vs. product marketing manager

A Product Marketing Manager (PMM) is the person responsible for advertising the value of the product to the marketplace. When compared to a product manager a product marketing manager is very much consumer and market-focused.

A product marketing manager assists the product team and the company by assessing competitor products and conducting extensive research to see how the product is faring in the market.

They are also relied upon for communication strategies, all of the communication that centres around the product and how it is positioned in the market go through a product marketing manager.

If you have experience working at a small startup you understand that in a startup people wear multiple hats. In a startup, or a less differentiated organization, these two roles may overlap; a product manager will shoulder the responsibilities of a product manager and a product marketing manager.

Irrespective of how the roles are staffed in an organization both roles are integral to the success of a product.

Product manager vs. program manager

Program managers are highly skilled project managers with additional responsibilities.

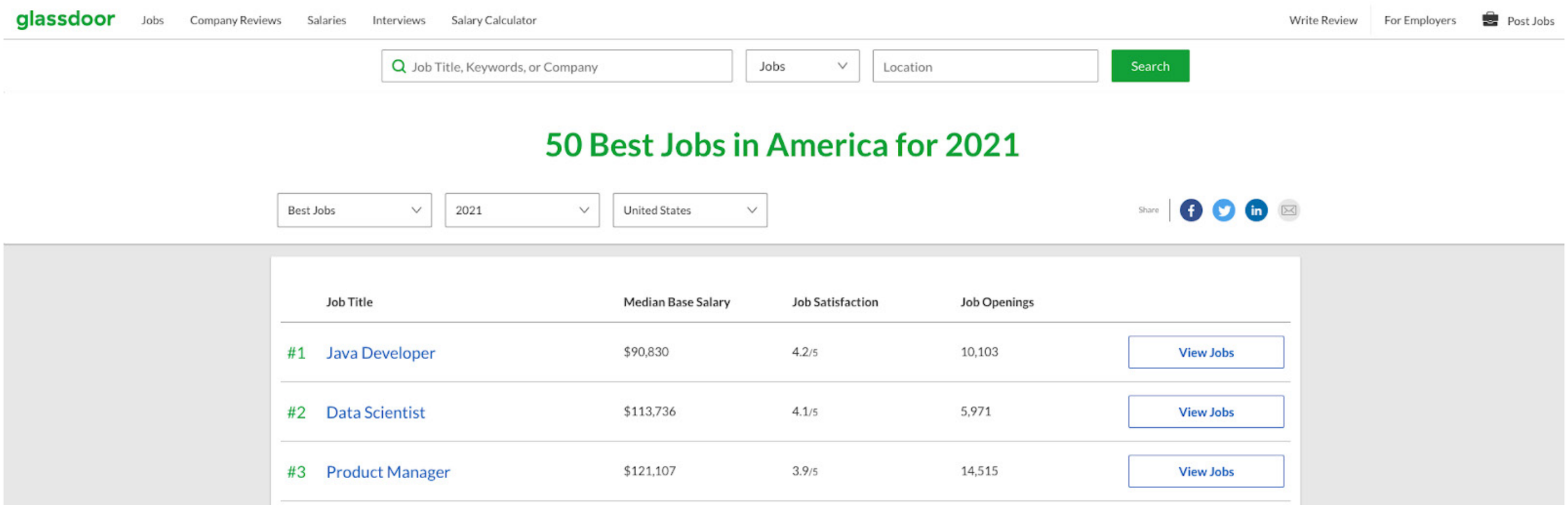
Rather than managing one project they are responsible for managing multiple projects while simultaneously working to improve their organization's processes, performance, and ensuring that their customers and key stakeholders are satisfied.

Product managers are concerned with strategy and delivery whereas program managers are mainly concerned with delivery.

One interesting thing to note is that the role "program manager" is used to describe product managers in some organizations. For example program managers at Microsoft are more akin to product managers than project managers.

When applying for any product management role make sure you read the job description carefully.

How To Become a Product Manager



Did you know that Glassdoor currently ranks product manager as the 3rd best job in America for 2021?

With the rising popularity in product management and increasing clarity into what this rewarding career path entails an increasing number of people are interested in this career path.

In the 4+ years that I have taught product management this is one of the most frequent questions that I get asked. “How do I become a product manager?”

One of the factors that makes becoming a product manager a difficult task is that there is no standard linear path to obtain a role. Becoming a product manager does not have as clear of a path as the path to become a doctor, accountant, or even a plumber.

A quick online search or a discussion with someone in one of these professions will shed light on the defined steps to take to reach the goal. And if you speak to a number of people in these professions their advised steps would be similar.

These steps would likely involve post-secondary school, additional courses thereafter, completing some exams (or obtaining a licence), some on the job training, and then success!

If you speak to 5 product managers at least 4 out of the 5 will have their own unique journey of how they obtained their first product role.

One product manager may have entered the role after completing their MBA. Another may have become a product manager after selling their successful startup to another company.

One of my past students landed their first product management role after years in the consulting industry, and another after being an experienced project manager in a tech company.

It goes without saying that for someone who wants to become a product manager there are key skills and experience that they should have under their belt. At the very least they should know the fundamentals of product management.

These fundamentals can be learned by taking courses (we will speak about this soon) and/or practical experience.

Here are 3 things that are needed for anyone who is interested in landing their first product role.

1

Strong conviction that this is the right role for you

As glamorous as product management may seem this role is not for everyone. Like any job this role has its ups and downs.

Some of the benefits of being a product manager are:

Product managers are not siloed into doing one specific task on a daily basis

As mentioned earlier no two days may always look the same for a product manager. This is one of the things that makes the job so rewarding for those who like variety.

While developers may spend their work hours writing code and the sales team speaking with prospective customers to reach their sales quota, fulfilling the responsibilities of a product manager allows product managers to meet and interact with multiple stakeholders and take part in every step of the design and development process.

It is a very rewarding experience defining a problem, working with the design and development team to bring it to life, and at the end viewing the delight on customer's faces as it makes their lives measurably easier.

Product managers hone and leverage multiple skills

Being a jack of many trades product managers leverage multiple skills to perform their job.

These skills include communication, stakeholder management, technical, problem solving, strategy, design, and more.

The benefit of this is that product managers are constantly learning and growing. And for those who like to continue to learn new things and sharpen their skills even further then there is always more to learn.

Experienced product managers can continue to learn further by diving deeper into the skills and disciplines of those who they work closely with.

Product managers are trained leaders

One of the reasons why there are many startup founders who transition into product management, and vice-versa, is due to the overlapping skills between product managers and entrepreneurs.

The work that product managers perform to find a need in a market, understand a problem, define a solution, rally their team around a mission, prioritize, and acquire resources that are needed to support the product trains product managers to be leaders.

These are comparable to the demands of startup founders and CEOs.

The strong interpersonal skills that product managers have equips them to become great leaders, especially should they ever decide to start their own company in the future.

With that being said it is important to understand the downsides of the role as well.

While product managers are valued in their organizations and heavily relied upon the job can also be very demanding and stressful.

The most stressful period for product managers generally falls around the launch of a critical product or release.

Another major downside of being a product manager is that product managers have no authority.

This is crucial to understand because the entire company is involved in making a product successful.

While a product manager may define a great solution that is visually appealing, has a great user experience, and is technically sound, if the marketing team does not effectively communicate it's value and the sales team does not adequately sell the product, then the product has a higher chance of failing.

If the customer success team does not care about their customers enough to support them with the product and the customer support team does not speedily address customer issues, then the product has a higher chance of failing.

So how does a product manager get the stakeholders that they work with to roll up their sleeves and perform their responsibilities to the best of their abilities even though they have no authority over these stakeholders? Product managers accomplish this by influencing their stakeholders.

However this is easier said than done. And this is why good product managers have great interpersonal skills.

Speak with other product managers to understand the pros and cons of the role to determine if this is the right role for you.

2

Unrelenting resolve to achieve the goal

This is the definition of the word “grit”.

Because the path to become a product manager isn’t solely linear, meaning that if you perform a specific set of actions you are 100% guaranteed to obtain a product role, aspiring product managers need to take the necessary steps to obtain their first role.

They also need to be open to feedback and change their plans when needed.

Some of the actions that aspiring product managers should perform include:

- Attending meetups to learn and expand their professional network
- Directly reaching out to recruiters (or hiring managers) when applying for roles
- Sharing their resume with experienced product managers for critique
- Exploring job opportunities at startups and incubators
- Establishing an online presence to be competitive in the job market and to brand oneself effectively

The key challenge that many people face is landing their first product role.

Once they obtain their first role and gain some solid experience under their belt then they can continue to grow their professional career.

3

Build something

Anyone who wants to become a product manager should gain experience building something real.

One of the reasons why it is easier for project managers, product designers, consultants, and startup founders to transition into product management is because they have experience with strategy and/or delivery.

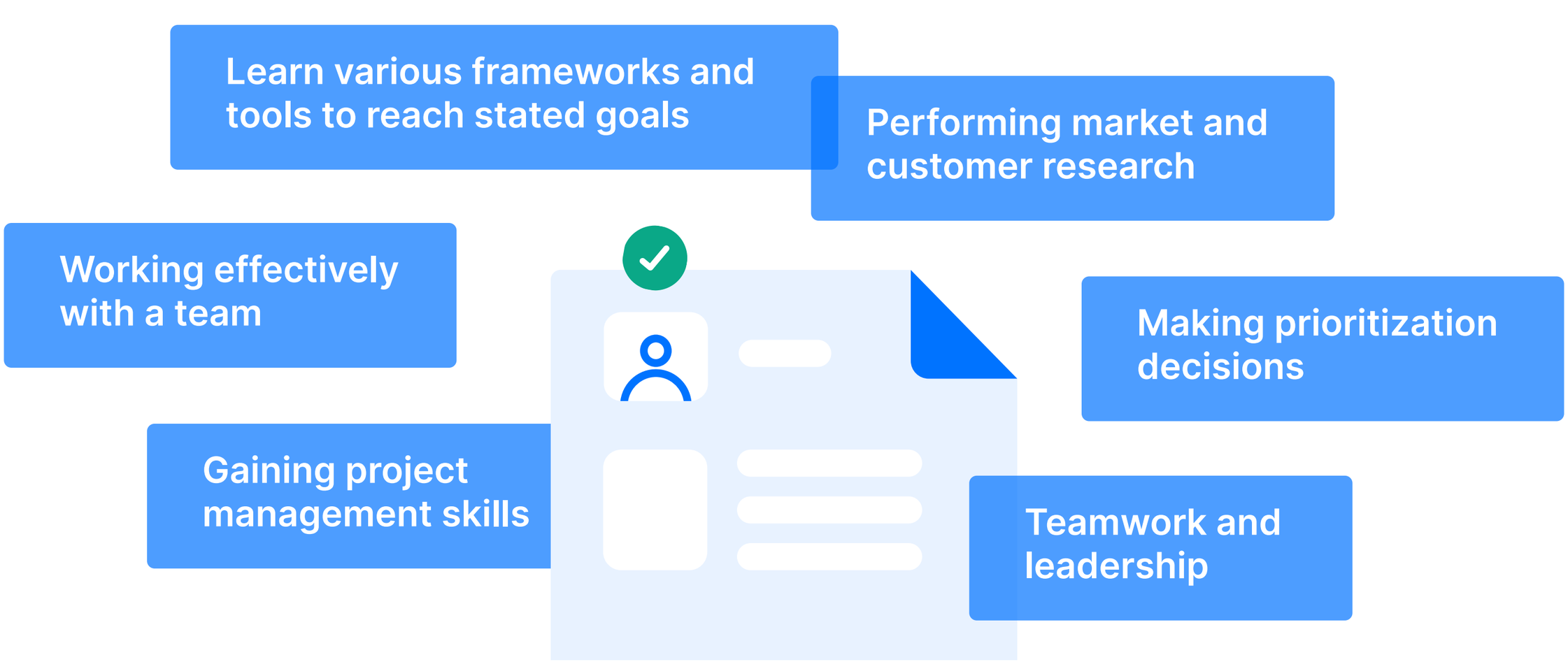
All of which are valuable skills that product managers leverage on a daily basis, and are questioned about in interviews.

You do not need to build the next Coinbase or Clubhouse.

Building something can range from building a new chrome extension that serves a market need, to defining a problem, validating it, designing it, and following the steps of the product development process to have a design prototype.

Even so much as having a defined deck on the problem that you are solving, the hypothesis to validate, goals to reach, target customers, key learnings from customer interviews, a design prototype, and a defined roadmap with OKRs is sufficient.

Building a Product Gives You Experience With:



Are product management courses (certifications and degrees) worth the time and investment?

When I started my product management career in 2013 there were a limited number of educational institutions that offered product management training.

Over time an increasing number of institutes have arrived on the scene to train product managers. And rightfully so, many of them are providing a beneficial service in training the next generation of skilled product managers that understand their responsibilities and can solve critical issues that companies and customers face.

There is no standard product management certificate for product managers.

Unlike the Project Management Professional Certification (PMP) that is accredited by the Project Management Institute or a Chartered Professional Accountant (CPA) certification which accredits and recognizes accountants in North America, there is no product management equivalent.

There are numerous places that aspiring product managers (and skilled product managers) can rely on for product management training.

Product Hall for example offers product management training for new and aspiring product managers.

Along with teaching the fundamentals of product management plus more, their program includes lessons from industry professionals to tie the knowledge gained to practical application and they offer lifetime 1:1 mentorship to students.

Co.Lab is another institute that not only provides product management training, but also pairs new and aspiring product managers with designers and developers to build real products and gain practical experience in the process.

Check out our list of the best product management certifications and courses in 2021.

Is the time and financial investment in a product management course with it?

The answer depends on your situation and goals.

For an aspiring product manager these courses are definitely beneficial.

Taking a product management course will not only teach you what you need to know about product management, but it will also enable you to build your network, gain experience building something real, and obtain guidance and assistance from industry professionals.

The awarded certifications from these institutes are also highly recognized in the software industry. It's possible that a member of the product team at a company that you apply for may have a certificate from one of these programs.

While it is possible to become a product manager without taking a product management course (people have successfully done it) the road may be longer.

And to be frank, obtaining product management certification communicates that at the very least you know the fundamentals of product management and can grow further into performing the role at hand.

Product management certification displays competence and can avoid a conversation.

For experienced product managers these certifications are a nice-to-have.

Taking them can assist an experienced product manager with growing in their role and complete any knowledge gaps that they may have missed if they took the route of learning while on the job.

Those who learned on the job likely made mistakes along the way (as we all do), read books, attended conferences, watched videos, etc. However they did not have any formal training in their career.

When completing a product management course you can learn additional frameworks, tools, techniques, and also connect with other experienced professionals that you can learn from.

There are no colleges or universities that offer undergraduate degree programs in product management. Given that product managers are a jack of all trades that use skills from various disciplines we don't see this happening in the near future.

However this may change as product management continues to evolve and rise in popularity.

What about MBAs?

Is an MBA needed to land a product management role?

MBA programs (on average) are 2-year programs and cost thousands of dollars. Some can cost more than $80k for the entire course.

In these 2 years students learn the ins and outs of managing a business while specializing in one of the main business disciplines (strategy, finance, marketing operations management, etc).

Some of the reasons that learners consider obtaining an MBA include transitioning to a different career path, advancing in their current company (all senior managers have MBAs and one may not progress without it), or gaining access to a reputable network of skilled business professionals.

Does someone need an MBA to become a product manager? No.

It's possible to become a product manager without obtaining an MBA.

Though you will come across many product managers who have an MBA you will also come across many who do not. And they continue to succeed in their careers.

If you are already considering obtaining an MBA for an alternative reason and you are interested in product management then it is a great asset to have.

Likewise, if you are already in a product role but may need an MBA to achieve a specific role within your company or to get a specific job at a preferred company where an MBA is required then pursuing one can be beneficial.

However pursuing an MBA for the sole goal of becoming a product manager is not advised.

It may be more beneficial to utilize your time taking a course at a product bootcamp and building a real product to gain practical experience. Practical experience that can be spoken about and leveraged into getting a product management job.

There are many product managers who are in senior roles and are performing well in their careers who do not have an MBA.

Product manager salaries

Product management is a financially rewarding role. Experienced product managers are generally paid handsomely, which is expected given the benefit that they bring to companies.

A product manager's salary will generally vary based on 3 factors:

1. Experience level
2. Location
3. Industry

Glassdoor, PayScale, and Linkedin are platforms that you can use to find product management salaries.

Glassdoor is a tool that job professionals rely on for finding jobs, company reviews, preparing for interviews, and career salaries.

Glassdoor reports that the average annual base salary for a product manager in the UNited States is $100,570 (this is in USD). With the lowest salary reported at $72,000 and the highest being $171,000.

The more experienced a product manager is and the higher up the career ladder they climb the more that they make in annual compensation

A Senior Product Manager earns an average of $142,233 annually while a Chief Product Officer earns an average of $193,005 annually, with $306,00 being the highest reported.

Product management is a financially rewarding career path.

The product manager’s resume

There is no standard template for a product manager’s resume.

Take a quick glance online at product manager resumes and you will notice that there are various formats and lengths. However there are some key things to keep in mind when crafting a resume for a product role.

1

The resume should reflect the roles and responsibilities of a product manager

Think of your past experiences and see how the roles and responsibilities that you held relates to the roles and responsibilities that product managers perform on a daily basis.

When have you managed stakeholders? When have you taken various requests and prioritized them with a framework? When have you worked with a team to build a product from beginning to end?

The supporting points under each job title from your work experience should reflect the strategy, delivery, and stakeholder management responsibilities of product managers.

2

The resume should not only be qualitative but quantitative as well

Product managers utilize data to make decisions and determine if they are on the right track.

Product managers know when a product is a success or a failure based on their KPIs. Product managers are also graded based on whether they reached their KPIs or not.

It goes without saying that data is vital for product managers.

When discussing your experience on your resume ensure that it is quantitative.

Discuss the work that you performed and the metrics that changed as a result.

It is a lot more powerful to state on a resume that you launched an enhancement for a product which resulted in maintaining 95% customer retention and led to an increase in sales for the quarter by 40%, than to simply state that you launched a product with a multidisciplinary team.

The resume needs to communicate numbers: dollars, percentages, ratios, and more. Data is important.

3

Obtain feedback

Feedback is vital because feedback leads to improvement.

Prior to submitting your resume for a job application share it with a mentor or a skilled product manager in your network for feedback.

They can provide beneficial feedback on areas that should be highlighted, condensed, or omitted in your resume.

Also ensure that your resume reflects the specific role that you are applying for. It may not be wise to use the exact same resume for every single role that you apply to.

Landing your first product role

The easiest way to find a product management role is from within your current company. If the opportunity is available.

This can be done by expressing your interest to your direct manager. In most cases companies are happy to support their team members with reaching their career goals and would rather have skilled talent in another department within the company rather than have them leave and join another company entirely.

With a supportive manager you can create a transition plan into a product role.

This transition plan may begin by taking a product management course with your company's learning education stipend, shadowing members of the product team to learn how they perform their roles, moving onto assisting them with minor tasks until you are able to fully transition into the team.

If transitioning into a product role from within a company is not possible then you need to have grit while taking the necessary steps to obtain a role elsewhere.

We will talk about where to find product management roles in the next section however another avenue to consider is an internship or an Associate Product Manager program (APM).

APMs are designed for individuals who are interested in product management and want to graduate into product management roles.

Google, Linkedin, and Uber are a few of the companies that offer an APM program.

Recognizing the growing interest in product management a number of notable software companies in Toronto partnered to create the APM Toronto program.

Even prior to applying for an internship, an APM program, or getting a cover letter and resume in front of a recruiter or hiring manager, you should to have knowledge of product management and some product management experience (build something).

This includes experience related to performing customer research, prioritizing features, managing design sprints, documenting product specifications, enabling stakeholders, utilizing project and product management tools, and more.

All of which can be obtained through taking a product management course at a notable bootcamp and/or building a product.

Finding Product Management Jobs

There are multiple platforms to find product management roles.

Some of the most common are Linkedin, Glassdoor, and AngelList.

These platforms are relied upon to find full-time roles in established or start-up companies. For freelance product management roles there are platforms such as Upwork, Toptal, and Hired.

One of the best ways to find a product role is via your personal network. It's standard for software companies to provide referral bonuses to their employees when they refer skilled talent to join their company.

In many cases employees will be the first to know when roles are available and hiring managers are more likely to lend an ear to their internal team members when they mention that they know skilled people in their network who can fulfill the available role.

Connecting with recruiters is another way to find a product role. Software companies heavily rely on recruiters to help them find skilled candidates.

Along with getting their assistance with modifying your cover letter and resume (if it is offered), they also provide candid feedback along each step of the interview process with the goal of helping you land the job.

Popular tech newsletters and online forums are another avenue to consider.

For example Ken Norton, a former product manager at Google and current product management coach, includes open product jobs in his monthly newsletter Bring the Donuts.

Hacker News, the social news website managed by Y Combinator that focuses on computer science and entrepreneurship, has a monthly thread titled "Ask HN: Who is hiring?" where techies share a long list of jobs available all over the world.

The product manager interview

A typical product manager interview has 3 common steps:

Step #1: Initial phone screen

This initial screening may be led by someone from the company's hiring team or a member of the product team.

The main purpose of this initial call is for them to get a better understanding of your experience, what you are looking for in your next role, and also give you an opportunity to ask any questions that you have.

You may also be asked about your expectations (for example the salary you expect).

This call is meant to generally see if your experience lines up with what the company is looking for and if they would like to bring you in for an in-person interview.

Step #2: In-person interview

The in-person interview can differ from company to company.

In some companies this in-person interview will be conducted by members of the product team, including a hiring manager of the product team. At times it may also involve meeting the members of other teams.

In this interview a head of the product team will go deeper into your experience. They will inquire about details related to what you have accomplished, how you worked with past teams, how you dealt with various scenarios, and ask additional behaviour based questions.

Other members of the product team will also receive chances to ask questions during this interview. You will also receive a chance to ask any questions that you have about the role, team, company, industry, and more.

Along with verifying that you are qualified for the role based on your past experience the hiring manager also assesses your presentation skills as well and to see if you are a fit for the team and the company.

Assuming that this is the case then you move onto the next step ... the infamous case study.

Step #3: Case study interview

Case studies are a staple of product management interviews. If you apply for a product role expect that there will be a case study to perform along the way.

Case studies are problems which candidates are given to assess their problem solving and communication skills.

A case study will contain some preliminary information to set the scenario and then follow up with a problem that you are required to solve. In many cases these case studies will centre around the industry of the company.

There is no one “right answer” to a case study interview. Hiring managers do not expect one specific response that determines whether you performed well or poorly.

Rather, the key thing when solving a case study is that you utilize a calculated approach to arrive at a solution that can be validated as you present your case study.

Strategic thinking skills, problems solving skills, and communication skills are also assessed during a case study presentation. How is the content of your slides? Are you making eye contact with the participants in the room as you speak? Are you speaking at a measurable pace and tone? Do you display confidence? Do you answer questions confidently?

It goes without saying that case studies need to be taken seriously and you need to practice.

Ensure that you utilize a framework to arrive at your proposed solution (defined thought process), perform real research on the industry (even if it is a hypothetical problem), anticipate the questions that you will be asked, and practice.

Post-case study

After the case study you may receive an offer whereby the salary negotiations will take place thereafter.

For some companies however there may be a final stage after the case study. This final stage is to meet with the managers of other departments, for example the CEO, VP of Technology, and VP of Customer Success.

Since product managers work so closely with these teams these managers may also want to meet candidates and share their feedback on whether they are the right fit for the role.

Common product manager interview questions

The more product manager interviews that you attend the more comfortable you will become with the process as a whole.

Over time you will notice that there is a similar format of the interviews along with the questions that are asked and the themes that are focused on.

Here's a list of some common product management questions that you may come across:

- What is your favorite product and why?
- What opportunity is this product not taking advantage of and how would you validate this?
- What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a product manager?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What do you think the most important skill for a product manager to have is?
- What is the most successful product that you have launched to date and why?
- Tell me about a time when you missed a KPI. What was the reason and what steps did you take thereafter?
- How would you prioritize work among a long list of requests from various stakeholders?
- How do you work with design and development teams?
- What do you dislike about product management?

Check out our Ultimate Guide to Hiring a Successful Product Manager (+17 Insanely Insightful Interview Questions) for more product management related questions to help you prepare for an interview.

Product Management Exercices is another great resource to not only find common product management questions asked at top tech firms (like Google, Facebook, and Amazon) but also see how other product managers would tackle the answers.

Working as a product manager in an agency

The roles and responsibility of a product manager may differ depending on whether they work in a product company vs. an agency.

airfocus is a product company.

The product team at airfocus listens closely to customer requests, prioritizes them, and continuously works to offer enhancements and improvements directly to users and customers to solve their needs.

IDEO however is an agency. Companies hire and rely on them and their staff to assist them with designing and building products to help them reach their business goals.

For example in 1980 Apple hired IDEO to build a mouse for their new computer “Apple Lisa”.

Companies may come to agencies with a defined scope of work (which can include design and/or development) or they may come with a problem that they need the agency’s help solving.

A product manager that works within a product company will receive a chance to practice all steps of the product development process.

From identifying and prioritizing problems all the way through designing and building the solution, to launching it, assessing it post launch, and continuing to improve it based on performance, customer feedback, and business goals.

A product manager that works within an agency however will only obtain limited experience with the steps of the product development process because their role is confined to assisting their clients with strategy, and/or delivery.

They will perform customer and market research for their client along with understanding the company's goals and objectives to answer their key questions and define what course of action they should take. Thereafter they will work with their development team to build the product and deliver it to their client.

Agencies are usually relied upon to solve a specific problem for a customer. Once the product is built it is handed to the client who is then responsible for managing the product thereafter.

Though some companies will engage with agencies to continue to evolve the product a product manager would most likely move onto their next engagement with another client.

Working within an agency gives product managers a chance to work on many solutions for various companies within various industries, allows product managers to improve their stakeholders management skills (since they work so closely with multiple clients), and improve their delivery skills in the process.

There are pros and cons to working as a product manager in a product company vs. an agency. However the experience gained in both is invaluable.

It is also not difficult for a product manager to transition from one to the other.

Freelance product management

Being a freelance product manager is akin to being a freelance developer.

A product manager works as a contractor assisting companies and individual clients with accomplishing their goals. Whatever these goals may be.

In many cases freelance product managers work on shorter term engagements.

Being that a freelance product manager is not a full-time employee, a large amount of their time will be spent speaking with prospective clients and going back and forth regarding the details of the engagement.

A large amount of their time will be spent trying to acquire their next project.

The nature of their product management work will vary from company to company. One company may require assistance building their MVP whereas another company may need help with performing market and customer research.

Working as a freelance product manager can be rewarding however to do this effectively it helps to have a wide professional network (for referrals) along with experience in sales and marketing (to add prospective clients to the funnel).

Freelance product management is not as common as freelance development. There is more demand in the software industry for freelance developers and designers than there are for freelance product managers.

Companies such as Gigster, Toptal, and Hired make being a freelance product manager much easier as they provide a marketplace that connects skilled freelancers with companies that need assistance.

5 Key Tips for New Product Managers

Here are some things to keep in mind if you are a new product manager.

1

Remain customer focused

A product manager is the champion of their customers.

As a product manager you are a captain of the ship. You are steering your company towards the actions and solutions that will serve your customers.

Always keep your customers top of mind.

Put yourself into the shoes of your customers (empathy) when making decisions and only proceed when you are able to articulate how your decisions will impact them and your company.

Lastly, remember that the solutions that you provide are for your customers and not for you. So build solutions that are easy for **them** to use and assist **them** in reaching their goals.

It’s not about what you as a product manager may want, it’s about what your customers need.

2

Focus on strategy

Product management involves strategy and delivery.

Entry level product managers spend more of their time on delivery and senior level product managers spend most of their time and resources on strategy.

Don’t get us wrong, delivery is extremely important. Defining a product and then working with multidisciplinary teams to launch it is not easy, and this is where many product managers shine.

However, if you want to continue to grow in your career and set yourself apart from the rest then you need to hone your problem solving and strategic thinking skills.

3

Get a mentor

A mentor is someone who has experience in a particular field and makes themselves available to advise and train others to grow and reach their goals.

When you have a mentor you have someone whom you can lean on for assistance.

You have someone who can provide practical advice based on their experience on the best course of action to take.

A mentor will help guide you through your career and help you grow professionally.

I benefited heavily from mentorship in the early days of my career and continue to do so.

4

Continue learning

Early on in your product management career you will naturally have limited experience as a product manager. This is expected.

As time progresses you will work further with your team and gain more hands-on experience in the role.

But don't limit yourself to hands-on experience, take advantage of the increasing amount of product management learning resources that are available to continue learning and finding new frameworks, tools, processes, and techniques to apply to your work.

airfocus provides numerous resources to help clarify product management and enable product managers to succeed in their roles. There are many eBooks, articles, and videos on various topics that you can leverage to sharpen your product management skills

5

Lean on your team

As the saying goes ‘teamwork makes the dreamwork”. Establish strong bonds with your team members and don’t try to accomplish everything alone.

Strong reliable close-knit teams build amazing products.

Rely on your team members when you need assistance. They will be happy to lend a hand.

And when they need help then spare some time to assist.

How to level up your product skills

Learning the fundamentals of product management is not difficult.

Once the fundamentals are put into practice a product manager will continue to work, learn, and refine their skills.

Product managers who want to grow and thrive in their careers should never cease levelling up their skills.

Here are some steps that can be taken to do this.

1

Read, and read often

There is a ton of available reading material for product managers. These readings include published books on product management, online articles, blogs, and newsletters.

The more you read the more you learn.

Reading will either reinforce your learning or teach you something new.

One way to determine what to read is to start by identifying your skill gaps and then reading material related to these skills. Or you can strengthen your current skills.

airfocus continues to publish beneficial resources for the product management community.

Start with the Product Digest, a weekly roundup of learnings to build better products,
curated in one place. Every week we select the top stories, tactics, tweets, and tools from thought-leaders to share with the product community.

2

Attend conferences

Conferences are a great way to learn from other experienced professionals, make connections, and expand your network.

When you attend a conference you will walk away with great stories from other experienced product managers on problems that

they faced and how they addressed them. Solutions that you can potentially apply to your work.

Enter with an open mind and leave with additional knowledge, inspiration, and connections.

Check out The Best Product Management Conferences of 2020 where we list a number of conferences that you may want to check out.

3

Take courses

If like many product managers you learnt and honed your skills while on the job then you may have some knowledge gaps.

Taking product management courses is a great way to level up your skills and gain exposure to additional tools, processes, and frameworks.

However don't limit yourself to solely product management courses. We also recommend that you ...

4

Learn other disciplines

As product managers work closely with stakeholders from other departments it is beneficial for them to gain further knowledge about other disciplines.

A competent product manager will have a good understanding of product design, software and development, data analytics, sales, marketing, project management, and more.

One way to level up your product skills is by diving even deeper into some of these disciplines.

Doing so will give you deeper insight into the tasks that your team members perform, and at the very least can improve your working relationship with them.

A product manager is a jack of many trades. Dive deeper into other trades to continue growing.

5

Consistently apply what you learn

Whatever path you decide to take to level up your product skills make sure to apply what you learn to your day-to-day job.

This will help ensure that the knowledge sticks and help you refine and decide which frameworks, tools, and processes you want to implement in your daily product practice.

While the fundamentals of product management are the same across companies, there is no one uniform way to perform product management.

Product managers tweak and modify popular frameworks, methodologies, and tools as needed to suit their specific needs.

To conclude

Product managers are a vital component of software companies due to the heavy responsibility that they carry.

Companies rely on them to decipher, distill, and deliver what customers need while at the same time ensuring that delivered solutions also achieve business goals.

Now that you have made it to the end of this detailed guide you should have a solid understanding of who product managers are, what they are responsible for, and how to distinguish between a good and bad product manager.

If you aspire to get into product management then you are now better prepared for your next interview. And if you are an experienced product manager you now have some additional resources to support your career and continue to thrive.

Check out the airfocus blog to learn more about product management and dive deeper into the topics mentioned in this guide. The blog is complete with knowledge, tools, and advice from our team based on what works and is used by experienced professionals in the industry.

About airfocus

airfocus offers a modern and modular product management platform. It provides a complete solution for product teams to manage and communicate their strategy, prioritize their work, build roadmaps, and connect feedback to solve the right problems. Designed with flexibility in mind, airfocus allows you to quickly customize the platform to fit your needs without disrupting the way your team works.

Join thousands of global product teams who use airfocus to make better decisions and build outstanding products.

Learn more at airfocus.com and start your 14-day trial now.