The Perfect Partnership

by Greg Geracie and David Heidt

Companies often struggle to maintain a good balance between their market activities and their product development efforts. The fact is – most new products are not ready for prime time. This circumstance leads to products that deliver less value than anticipated or fail altogether. This inability of organizations to effectively bring products to market often creates a significant drag on companies' ability to innovate and compete in today's rapidly changing marketplaces.

There are a significant number of reasons why it's so challenging to effectively bring products to market. Some are external, such as changing market conditions or shifting customer needs. However, many problems result from *internal* challenges such as overstretched contributors, the wrong mix of skills, poorly understood processes, and misalignment between the core team members in the value creation process.

Professions such as business analysis and project management have boundaries and roles that are well understood. Both have their bodies of knowledge, process groups, and foundational knowledge areas. In contrast and ironically, the product management profession spans 70 years but has yet to fully codify its body of knowledge. The resulting lack of clarity on the responsibilities and boundaries of a product manager often contributes to many of the internal inefficiencies and missed opportunities we see within today's organizations.

There is often tremendous internal confusion regarding the role, span, and scope of a product manager. Ambiguity in the responsibilities of this role leads to dissonance and tension as the key stakeholders in the value creation process – project managers, business analysts, and lead engineers – struggle to understand what to expect from product management. Given the profession's historical fragmentation and lack of a solidified standard, where does one look? What *are* the boundaries of the role and how can we work together more effectively?

Perhaps the best way to start is by defining the role of a product manager and illustrating the product management life cycle. Product managers are responsible *for creating and sustaining value throughout the entire life cycle of a product*. The focus on creating and sustaining value is what makes product management unique.

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The product management life cycle is composed of both stages and phases that chart the course of a product from its conception, the Conceive phase, to its ultimate withdrawal in the Retire phase. The stages and phases are concurrent activities. This framework is universal; it applies equally well to products or services.

Now that we've defined the role of a product manager and illustrated the life cycle, we can drill down a bit further and examine *why* business analysts and product managers are perfect partners.

Effective product managers spend a significant amount of time in the market gathering requirements, monitoring trends, examining competitive activity, and evangelizing their product. Product managers are also expected to distill market information into actionable requirements and channel these requirements to the team developing the product. A product manager's job increases in complexity as the organization grows. Product managers get stretched thinner and thinner by the ever-increasing volume of internal and external demands.

When this happens, product managers naturally turn their efforts toward either market-facing or product development activities. Although product managers are skilled at both, they typically prefer one over the other and allocate their time accordingly. Many pick market-facing activities. This bias toward one or the other, and the demands that company growth place on a product manager, ultimately causes the organization to feel the need to add a business analyst, or someone with similar skills, to the team. The new team member is tasked with helping facilitate, communicate, analyze, and recommend business solutions as well as translating high-level requirements created by the product manager into implementable requirements. This need for translation necessitates a collaborative partnership between a product manager and business analyst.

The pairing of a strong business analyst with a market-facing product manager can result in a perfect partnership. The product manager assumes responsibility for guiding the product successfully through its life cycle and interfacing with the market. In concert with the product manager, the business analyst drives the effort to turn high-level market requirements into requirements that are implementable within the constraints and capabilities of the organization. Factors such as people, processes, and technology are all key considerations for success.

This division of labor leads to improved harmony with the principles on the core team of product managers, project managers, business analysts, and lead engineers. Most importantly, it places the right people in the right roles to create value for the organization, customers, and stakeholders.

The reality is that product managers are often faced with the nearly impossible challenge of spanning the market and the multitude of development activities. And like project managers who steer complex and interdependent initiatives, product managers who want to succeed must rely heavily on influence and shared organizational objectives while interfacing with customers and coordinating the activities of a myriad of internal stakeholders. Many product managers get stretched to the breaking point trying to be jacks of all trades and end up struggling against unrealistic expectations.

By pairing business analysts with product managers at key points throughout the life cycle of a product's development, organizations can optimize bandwidth, expertise, and interest-related challenges that allow both roles to do what they do best – create value.

About Our Authors

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